

20 Years After 'Brown'—the Unresolved Dilemma

By Kenneth B. Clark

Twenty years ago, Chief Justice Earl Warren, writing for all of his colleagues on the United States Supreme Court, asked the following key question: "Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other 'tangible' factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities?"

In its answer to this question, the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision established its claim to historic compassion and revealed a fundamental concern with the quality and requirements of humanity, not frequently found in legal discourses and decisions, by a simple, eloquent answer.

It was: "To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone."

Chief Justice Warren then quoted from the findings in the Kansas case: "Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. . . the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn."

The decision then concludes: "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

These findings are as true today as they were in May, 1954. They will remain true as long as American children are required to attend racially segregated schools anywhere in this nation—the rural or urban South or the urban and suburban North—wherever there exists a recognizable proportion of children of different racial, ethnic or nationality backgrounds who are required to attend public schools.

But today the context of the truth of the *Brown* decision has been changed.

The initial resistance to the demand for the desegregation of the public schools in the Southern states has finally given way to accelerated compliance within the last six years.

This year, more than half of the minority students in the public schools of the 17 states of the South now attend nonsegregated public schools. By contrast, as late as 1969 less than 20 per cent of these children were in nonsegregated schools.



Romare Bearden/From "The Art of Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual"

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On the other hand—mockingly—the resistance to the desegregation of the public schools in such Northern "liberal" cities as New York, Boston, Detroit, Chicago and Los Angeles has increased. The percentage of children—black, Puerto Rican, Mexican-American, and white—in segregated public schools is greater today than in 1954.

Northern cities have found the formula for successful defiance of the letter and spirit of the *Brown* decision. So far, they have been able to extend the pattern of racial segregation in their public schools with impunity.

In doing so, they must understand that they are inflicting irreparable damage upon human beings.

They are dehumanizing black and all minority-group children by rejecting and stigmatizing them.

They are imposing upon white children an unbearable, immobilizing burden of ethical anxieties, conflicts

and guilt. They are making their children inescapable accessories to cruelties being inflicted upon other human beings and thereby are inflicting upon them the socially debilitating disease of moral schizophrenia.

The insistence upon the continuation of segregated schools is a betrayal and verifies the damage done to those who have been the products of segregated schools.

White parents who demand that their children attend segregated schools and those whites who use their political power to block any effective desegregation of the schools reveal by their actions the deep erosion of the human soul that causes and results from racism and segregation.

Blacks who now demand or accept segregated schools for their children betray even more pathetically the internalization of damage stemming from past rejection and segregation. They accept the damage imposed upon their

children because they themselves have been so deeply damaged.

They do not understand—or cannot permit themselves to understand—that segregated schools "voluntarily requested" by blacks also damage their children. The victims of racism and segregation have no genuine choice.

The inhumanity inherent in racially segregated schools cannot be obscured by the rationalizations of the sanctity of neighborhood schools, or some overriding virtue of community control, or the wishfulness of black power and black pride.

There are no peculiar disadvantages to the transportation of children for purposes of desegregation that are transformed by magic into advantages when they are being transported for attendance at private, parochial and rural schools.

One cannot therefore accept the transparent hypocrisies that "blacks want their own schools," that "they

are more comfortable with their own people," and that it is therefore democratic and liberal for whites to respect and grant their desires for separate schools, separate dormitories and indeed a separate humanity.

The symptoms of inhumanity cannot be accepted as justification for its perpetuation—except in a barbaric society that pretends to be civilized.

After May 17, 1954, Americans who argue for the perpetuation of racially segregated public schools must know, if we did not know before, that we are demanding the continued dehumanization, if not the destruction, of human beings.

We must know that we are demanding that the power of the state be used to continue to inflict this flagrant form of institutionalized cruelty solely because of race and color.

We must know what Gunnar Myrdal stated thirty years ago—ten years before the *Brown* decision: "Segregation makes discrimination possible," and efficient. Racially segregated schools, "voluntary" or "involuntary," cannot be equal in a racist society—and there is no need for racially segregated schools except in a racist society.

We must know that this is not only a violation of the Constitution but that it is also a violation of the Judeo-Christian principles of man's responsibility for his fellow man—and that it is a violation of the elementary requirements for human dignity.

Knowing this and continuing to insist upon racial segregation in our schools in 1974 can only bespeak that moral dry-rot, that atrophy of conscience that are symptoms of the severity of the contagious moral infection imposed upon us as vulnerable, defenseless children.

The simple, direct, humanistic language of the *Brown* decision removed the masks, left the American conscience exposed, and made rationalizations and denial difficult.

The American people, unlike the Germans who said after the war that they did not know of the Jews' fate, cannot assert without subjecting themselves to tragic ridicule that they did not know that in consigning their children to the dungheap of segregated schools they were relentlessly destroying them.

This stark problem involving the quality and character of the American people—the need to resolve this moral dilemma—is the inescapable reality of the twentieth anniversary of the *Brown* decision.

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