

But What About the Teachers? The Forgotten Narratives of Black Teachers in the Midst of *Brown*

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This year, 2024, marks the 70th Anniversary of the landmark court decision in education which sought to end legal segregation, *Brown v. Board of Education*. At the time, the hope was that ending segregation would address the vast and deep inequities in educational resources by race that had long been the legacy of schooling in the United States. Getting to the *Brown* decision was a long, hard battle, fought by civil rights attorneys, but also by educators, social psychologists, and members of the Black community—parents and students. And yet, despite the hopes for resource equity and higher quality education for Black students, inequities by race still plague our education system, and the promises of *Brown* remain substantially unfulfilled.

This paper is a part of a series, titled *Brown at 70: Reflections and The Road Forward*. The series consists of nine papers by leading scholars of educational equity, and each takes an honest look at the progress since *Brown*, documenting the shifts over time on key aspects of education including segregation levels of schools across the country, achievement trends in relation to policies and practices over time, the diversity of the teaching force, access to resources, the role of Black scholars and community activism, and the relationship between democracy and education. Taken together, the set of papers offers both an historical look at the impacts of the *Brown* decision, and, importantly, also offers guidance for the road ahead—promising policies, practices, and directions for the schools we need.

The cover art for this series is a reproduction of the Jacob Lawrence painting from 1960, *The Library*, which depicts the library as a vibrant learning setting for Black community members, and signifies the important of reading, learning, and education in the Black tradition.

— Na'ilah Suad Nasir, Spencer Foundation President
Linda Darling-Hammond, Learning Policy Institute President

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Abstract

Much of the discussion concerning the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision rightly focuses on the decision's impact on students. The vivid and sometimes horrifying images of Black children being harassed by White adults are seared into the nation's consciousness. The stories of the nine valiant students who desegregated Little Rock, Arkansas' Central High School; little Ruby Bridges, the brave first grader who desegregated New Orleans Parish Schools; and the countless students who were bused across the city of Boston amid jeers and violence, are examples of the images that reflect the difficult work of school desegregation. But what about the Black teachers? Edgar Epps (2002) indicated that some 35,000 Black teachers lost their jobs in the US South for the cause of school desegregation. Countless others were demoted, especially administrators. But their stories are rarely told. This chapter is designed to explore the cost of the *Brown* decision for Black teachers and other educators and to link the elimination of their jobs with the current Black teacher shortage. Each section of the paper will include a narrative about a Black teacher that illustrates elements of the section.

Introduction

In 1960 Ruby Bridges was one of six Black students who passed a test to determine if they could attend an all-White school in New Orleans. Six-year-old Ruby entered the William Frantz Elementary School and was met by an angry mob of Whites who decried the school district's implementation of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. So unsafe was the environment that Ruby was escorted to school each day by federal marshals. This daily parade was fixed in the American mind by Norman Rockwell's much-reproduced image, *The Problem We All Live With*, in which the young girl, dressed in white, is surrounded by marshals in suits, ensuring her right to go to first grade. Initially, no White parents permitted their students to attend the school. Gradually, a few parents enrolled their students, though none of the students would sit in a classroom with Ruby. No White teacher was willing to teach Ruby except Barbara Henry from Boston, Massachusetts. While we commend Ms. Henry for her courage and ethical commitment, how might things have been different for Ruby and the nine youth who desegregated Central High School in Little Rock (Bennett, 2020) if they had been accompanied to their new school settings by a group of caring, dedicated Black teachers?

In truth, we can expect that Black teachers attempting to desegregate a school would have faced harsher vitriol during this period in the US even than children did. But it is important to consider the role of Black teachers during these early attempts at school desegregation. I am prompted to think about this because of a school desegregation conference I attended at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill in the 1990s. During that conference, members of the first group of Black students who desegregated Chapel Hill-Carrboro Schools discussed their experiences. The people appeared to be in their 50s to early 60s. They had completed their formal education, begun their work lives, married, raised children, and some were enjoying the benefits of grandparenting. However, during their retelling of their first year entering Chapel Hill-Carrboro High Schools, they struck a somber tone. Some began to weep as they recalled the loneliness of entering the high school where it was clear they were unwanted.

One man spoke with a quivering voice as he recounted, “We went over there by ourselves. All the trophies and medals our Black school had won over the years as football, basketball, baseball, and track champions stayed back at our old school. And our teachers did not go with us. We entered that building all by ourselves. We entered unprotected.” The idea of sending students into a hostile environment without the care or protection of adults seems unusually cruel, indeed unfathomable, but it is exactly what Black students desegregating schools post-*Brown* experienced. The stories of what happened to the students have been told and retold (Waugh, 2012), but we rarely tell the stories of the teachers who were left behind during school desegregation.

Before *Brown*: Septima Poinsetta Clark

While *Brown* was a landmark decision that marked the end of legal apartheid or state-sponsored segregation in the US, it is not where the story of Black teachers begins. From their earliest days in the US, Black people have been striving to equip themselves with education that would serve as a tool for liberation. Milla Granson (born Lilly Ann Granderson) was born in Petersburg, Virginia, ca. 1816 and is thought to have died in Natchez, Mississippi, about 1880 (Brooklyn Museum, n.d.). Soon after her birth Granson and her mother were sold to enslavers in Kentucky. As she grew, Granson developed a relationship with her captor's children who began to teach her to read. Granson was once again sold to enslavers in Mississippi where she went from a field hand to a house slave, and it was here she began her heroic mission of educating Black people.

Historian Gerda Lerner (1972) documented Granson's work in her book *Black Women in White America*. She describes what became known as Granson's "midnight" school. From 11 p.m. to about 2 a.m. Granson would take 12 enslaved Black people into an alleyway building and carry out the dangerous mission of teaching her charges to read and write. This was dangerous work because Mississippi, like many other states, made it illegal to teach Black people to read (Center for Black Educator Development, 2021). Granson's method was to teach a dozen students to read and write, "graduate" them and take on another group of 12. Her "school" lasted for more than 7 years, and it is believed more than 200 enslaved people participated in her school. Some of her students used their newly acquired literacy skills to write their own "travel passes" that allowed them to escape slavery. Surprisingly, when news of Granson's school leaked, she was not sanctioned because the Mississippi law stated that no White person or free Black person could teach an enslaved person to read. The law said nothing about enslaved Blacks teaching each other. Granson could not be sanctioned because Mississippi's law said that a White person who taught a slave to read could be penalized, even imprisoned, but (unlike the laws of some other states) it did not specifically bar such teaching among enslaved people.

By the time Union troops reached Natchez, Mississippi, they found Granson well-equipped to teach the state's formerly enslaved people. She would go on to be a teacher in the Freedmen's Schools as a member of the American Missionary Association (CBED, 2021). Today schoolchildren can read of Granson's amazing efforts in Halfmann's 2018 children's book, *Midnight Teacher: Lilly Ann Granderson and her secret school*.

But one of the most fascinating teachers I encountered as I looked for examples of teaching excellence is Septima Poinsetta Clark. Clark was known as the mother of the modern civil rights movement, but her true calling was that of teacher. Born in 1896 (two years after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision) to parents who were laborers, she was able to graduate from secondary school in Charleston in 1916 and spent more than 30 years teaching in South Carolina. McFadden (1996) described her as the "epitome of a community teacher, intuitive fighter for human rights and leader of her unlettered and disillusioned people. pg 87."

Septima Clark attended Benedict College, where she earned her bachelor's degree, and later Hampton Institute (now University), where she earned her master's degree. Both of these institutions were *historically Black colleges/universities* (HBCUs); she later took summer courses at Columbia University in New York, since the Southern White colleges and universities did not allow Black students to enroll at the undergraduate or graduate level.

In her autobiography, edited by Cynthia Stokes Brown (Clark, 1990), Clark describes her work in poorly resourced, segregated schools in South Carolina. She worked tirelessly to help her students become literate because she recognized that South Carolina used literacy tests as a form of voter suppression. In addition to her work as a public school teacher with some of the nation's poorest students, Clark became active in the local chapter of the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP). She was fired in 1956 by the Charleston Public Schools for her failure to disavow her membership in the NAACP.

Clark's dismissal led her to a new endeavor at Myles Horton's Highlander Folk School (now Highlander Research and Education Center) in Tennessee, founded in 1932 to build local leadership and by the 50s focused on racial justice (Charron, 2009). In the mid-1950s she created a citizenship training program to empower African Americans to vote and pass the racist literacy tests established by many states to thwart the Black vote. For me, three things stand out from Clark's efforts. One, she educated a cadre of some of the most brilliant minds in the movement—Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Hosea Williams, to name a few. Two, she did this work with an understanding of the power of people to liberate themselves when they possessed the right tools. And three, she developed a pedagogical model that was organic and not dependent on mainstream guides and texts.

Clark's work at Highlander laid the tactical strategy for civil rights leaders. The story of Rosa Parks as a tired seamstress acting impulsively fails in the clear light of her preparation by Clark at Highlander where she, along with Martin Luther King, Jr. learned more about non-violent resistance strategies (Morris, 1984). Clark's years as a teacher likely informed her understanding of the limitless possibilities of people who are finally given a chance to acquire knowledge and skills that can empower them. Some years ago, I wrote a manuscript describing Clark as the forerunner to Paulo Freire and the journal editor dismissed my premise out of hand and rejected it. However, I contend the evidence is there. Clark was working with the poorest of the poor to move them to political, economic, social, and cultural power through an emancipatory literacy. Given that Clark was a leader in adult literacy for liberation decades before Freire did similar work. And yet Freire is a keystone originating figure for discussions of teaching for social justice, while Clark is known, yes, but far less celebrated.

The third aspect of Clark's work that warrants inspection is her methodology. Where former adult literacy programs failed, Clark's thrived. She did not try to teach adults to read the way one might teach children. Instead of reading primers with their basic, childish vocabulary, Clark began by asking her students why they wanted to read and write. Their motivations for becoming literate ranged from being able to get a better job to being able to read to children or grandchildren or to read the Bible for themselves, and of course, becoming able to vote in a time of literacy tests for voter registration. Clark then asked her students to develop vocabulary words from their area of interest. The students did not read things like, "A is for apple, B is for ball." Rather, they brought her words like "personnel office," "tabernacle," and "registration." As her citizenship schools grew, Clark recruited teachers from the community. She was adamant that she did not want "trained" (i.e., state certified) teachers because they would likely talk down to the adults (Clark, 1990). Clark employed barbers and beauticians, bus drivers, cooks and maids—people just like the students—to teach in churches, community centers, beauty salons, and barber shops. Clark understood that students needed to feel comfortable and welcome in the learning environment.

When teachers like Septima Clark disappeared from students' lives, what did we lose collectively? How were the annals of Black education irreparably destroyed? How could Black (and other) students have experienced a different and enriched schooling experience?

What the Numbers Say

Edgar Epps (2002) asserts that about 38,000 teachers and principals in 17 Southern states lost their jobs between 1954 and 1965. Hudson and Holmes (1994) also suggest that it is possible to document the decline of Black teachers after 1954, claiming that before the landmark decision there were approximately 82,000 Black teachers responsible for educating the nation's 2 million African American public-school students. Fultz (2004) describes both job loss and demotion among Black teachers. These losses and demotions are well documented. Thus, this chapter does not dwell on these obvious data. Instead, I offer narratives about Black teachers that demonstrate what those losses may have meant to generations of Black and other students. The chapter attempts to put flesh on the stark bones of the disturbing statistics. We know that there are approximately 228,000 Black teachers in the US and the Black student population numbers about 7,400,000. That is just three Black teachers for every 100 Black students (NCES, 2023a, 2023b). Because teachers are not assigned by race, it is very likely that many Black students never experience a Black teacher.

What *Brown* Meant for the Black Teacher: Pauline Dupree

Pauline Dupree's classroom felt like the calm in the midst of a raging storm. Her school was riddled with disruptions, conflicts, and fights. The principal was relatively new, as were a number of the teachers, and the students sensed the inexperience. But in Pauline's room there was no such chaos. Pauline was impeccably dressed and soft-spoken. She began her day in high heels but shifted to comfortable flats shortly after the students arrived. "Miss Dupree, why you always come here so dressed up?" a student asked. "Because I am going to work and I work with very important people," she responded. A puzzled look came over the student's face and then she blurted out, "Who?" "You," came the reply. "Each and every one of you is important and I don't intend to show up in less than my best for you" (Ladson-Billings, 2022, p 38). That simple act of affirmation made Mrs. Dupree's classroom decidedly different from those of her younger, inexperienced, mostly White colleagues.

Pauline Dupree (a pseudonym) is a teacher I had the pleasure of working with during my 2022 study of successful teachers of African American children. Listening to her describe her upbringing in rural Mississippi during the 1950s gave me some sense of what Black teachers experienced post-*Brown*. Dupree was a graduate of Rust College, a historically Black college in Holly Springs, Mississippi. Holly Springs is a small town that today is home to less than 8,000 people, the majority (77%) of whom are Black (US Census, 2023).

Rust College was founded shortly after the Civil War in 1866 by the Freedmen's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Northern missionaries opened a school in the Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church that accepted Blacks of all ages—children, youth, and adults—to teach them to read and to do elementary mathematics (see www.rustcollege.edu/about-rust-college/history/). For many years Rust was the only place in the region where Black people could access formal education. The educational mission expanded into higher grades and, even into a college level program from which the first two students graduated in 1878. Rust's elementary school continued until 1930 and the institution maintained a high school until 1953 when public education became more widely available for Black students.

When the *Brown* decision was handed down it was met by massive resistance among Mississippi's White residents (Bolton, 2007). The state's powerful US Senator, James Eastland, vowed that Mississippi would never obey the Court's ruling, which applied not only to school desegregation, but also to public accommodations. To thwart the decision, Mississippi enacted a variety of laws aimed at suppressing the Black vote in order to reinforce the power of White citizens and elected officials. These measures included purging Blacks from the voter rolls through instituting a literacy test that required Blacks to be able to read and to provide a "reasonable" interpretation of portions of the state constitution (Bolton, 2007). Additionally, the Sunflower Plantation owner, Robert B. Patterson, helped to institute the White Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan terrorized and murdered Blacks who attempted to get Mississippi schools to desegregate. In 1955, Rev. George Lee, Gus Courts, and Lamar Smith, three Black leaders who championed school desegregation, were murdered by the Klan (Bolton, 2007). Later that year, 14-year-old Emmett Till from Chicago was murdered while visiting his relatives in Money, Mississippi, for allegedly speaking to (or whistling at) a White woman. His murderers were acquitted of what was one of the more brutal incidents of the post-Civil War South and his death became a catalyst of the modern civil rights movement.

Pauline Dupree entered school almost a decade before the *Brown* decision was handed down. It had no impact on the life she led in Mississippi. She attended all-Black schools before *Brown* and she would continue to attend those schools after it, kindergarten through college. What she does recall is that Black teachers were among the most respected members of her community. They were among the few Black professionals she saw growing up. Unlike the domestics and laborers who made up the majority of the Black workers in her community, teachers dressed well; they wore tailored skirts or dresses, nylon hosiery, and high heels. For Pauline, Black teachers were not just the people who taught in her schools. Segregation, both of schools and of real estate, meant that despite having "middle class" jobs that would have allowed their White peers to move up and out of their home neighborhoods and perhaps into new suburbs, Black teachers remained in the neighborhoods they grew up in and worked in. She and classmates encountered their teachers in the local stores and at church. Her parents saw her teachers in beauty salons and barbershops, and when they needed help reading and understanding documents—contracts, legal notices, or employment rules—the Black community sought out those teachers for assistance. *Brown* did not diminish this vision of who Black teachers were. Pauline Dupree saw these teachers as people on the forefront of racial uplift (Moore, 2003). Her understanding of what it meant to be a teacher went beyond academics and extended into the responsibility to serve the community. Teachers, preachers, and nurses were the "chosen ones" in communities like Holly Springs, Mississippi (as well as in segregated communities across the US).

Ms. Dupree took that same spirit of "community" or "racial uplift" (to use the terms introduced by Black leaders) with her when she moved to the West Coast to become a teacher. The earlier description of "dressing up" clearly is a remnant of her perception of self-presentation that she learned in rural Mississippi. She emulated the Black teachers she experienced growing up in rural Mississippi and was determined to impress upon her young charges that they were valuable and worthy of the very best. Despite the fact that her younger, White colleagues came to work dressed in jeans and T-shirts, Ms. Dupree thought it was important that her students see themselves as worthy of respect through her style of dress. While this might seem a minor detail, it is reminiscent of the lawyers who volunteered to represent civil rights workers. These young, energetic White attorneys eagerly accepted civil rights cases (e.g., freedom riders, lunch counter protesters and others who violated Jim Crow laws) but they resisted the protocols of dressing in a suit and tie. In an early case a Black defendant insisted that his lawyer wear a suit and tie. When the young lawyer objected, the Black client reportedly said, "Look, you're fighting for MY life in that courtroom. The state's attorney will be wearing a suit and tie and under that robe the judge will have on suit pants, a shirt, and a tie. I will be the only one with a raggedy dressed lawyer. What do you think that tells the jury?"

Mrs. Dupree was about 50 years old when I began observing her classroom. She pulled heavily from her Black students' lives. For example, in one lesson she began, "Who knows what a proverb is?" One student said, "I think it's something in the Bible." "Yes," responded Ms. Dupree, "there is a book in the Bible called *Proverbs*, but what is a proverb?" The students sat silent and puzzled. "Have you ever heard someone say, 'A hard head makes a soft behind?'" Ms. Dupree asked. Several students giggled as they nodded their heads. "My mama says that all the time," came a response. "Well," Ms. Dupree replied, "Your mother is using a proverb. We think of proverbs as wise sayings that use word pictures to convey a deeper meaning." She wrote the words, "word picture" and "deeper meaning" on the chalkboard. "Can you think of some other things your parents, grandparents, aunties, or neighbors say that remind you of the expression I shared?" After a few minutes students began offering what they thought were proverbs. "Every shut eye ain't sleep." "That's the pot calling the kettle black." "You move you lose—barbershop rules." "Spare the rod and spoil the child." As she wrote down the students' responses, she helped them to examine the deeper meaning associated with them. She told the students that they were going to gather as many proverbs as they could, starting with their family members. Ultimately, each student would select a favorite proverb, write a short description of what the proverb was trying to convey, and create an illustration to accompany their proverb.

When I talked to Mrs. Dupree about this lesson, she informed me that what she was teaching was not a part of the district's mandated curriculum. "When the state test comes, my students will have to understand things like metaphors and similes. The curriculum they require doesn't cover that. I know what skills the students will need to be able to perform well on the test but I'm not going to get up in my principal's face demanding my way. I just close my door and do what's right for my students." Dupree's response reminds me of Givens's (2021) notion of "fugitive pedagogy." Teachers like Dupree who had lived through segregated schooling and resistance to the *Brown* decision understood that Black teachers were expected to be subversive in their work to ensure that their students received the education to which they were entitled.

While Septima Clark found a new career beyond traditional teaching, we know little about those Black teachers who remained in public education in the South after the *Brown* decision. To comply with the decision, many states and localities in the South began shuttering the doors of schools located in Black communities on the presumption that those schools were inferior. Siddle Walker (1996) argues that empirical evidence shows that there were Black community schools that offered a superior education for Black children despite their fiscal and material shortcomings. Fenwick (2022) describes that *en masse* displacement of Black teachers and principals in the South subsequent to the *Brown* decision. Although the Court declared school segregation of students illegal, it never suggested that the remedy was to close schools in Black communities and dismiss Black teachers and principals. One can only speculate that these dismissals were a form of retaliation designed to hurt Black teachers and by implication the Black community.

Black teachers were trained to do one thing—teach. Losing a teaching job did not open up other comparable professional opportunities. Thus, some Black teachers in the South ended up moving North or West to seek other teaching jobs. Those who remained in the South likely ended up in jobs that were beneath their previous status. They became domestic workers, clerks, factory workers, postal workers, and other lower-skilled employees. At the same time that Black teachers were being forced from classrooms in the South, White teachers were leaving public schools that were desegregating. But this exodus of White teachers from a changing public-school landscape did not provide opportunities for Black teachers.

The *Brown* decision brought on what became known as "segregation academies."¹ These academies were founded in direct opposition to the Supreme Court's mandate to desegregate public schools. By 1971, about half a million White students attended segregated private schools. These schools or academies were low-cost, all-White schools that received passive or indirect financial and community support.

For example, in Smallville, Louisiana, White parents organized an all-White private school that the local public school supported by "donating" all of the school's desks and library books. The fiscal burden was mitigated by a supplemental payment to the teachers from the State of Louisiana. Later when the State Supreme Court found those payments to be unconstitutional, the White teachers "retired" from their previous positions as public-school teachers and received pensions that were, in effect, salary supplements (Champagne, 1973; Ladson-Billings, 2004). The very name of some of these academies evokes a glorification of the Confederacy—Andrew Jackson Academy, Jefferson Davis Academy, and Robert E. Lee Academy, to name a few.

Northern Black Teachers and the Need to Be Better: Ethel Benn²

Ethel Benn was exactly the teacher I did NOT want. She was an "older"³ Black woman teaching 5th grade at Belmont Elementary School in West Philadelphia in about 1957. I wanted to be assigned to the other 5th grade teacher, Ms. Plunkett. Ms. Plunkett was an energetic young White teacher who seemed like she would be fun. Mrs. Benn was serious looking, never smiling, wearing floral dresses, cotton stockings, and shoes we called "old lady comforters." They were the era's version of "sensible" orthopedic shoes. Everyone in the school knew she was a strict, no-nonsense teacher. Fun was not high on her agenda.

When I made a plea at the beginning of the school year to my mother to change me from Mrs. Benn's classroom, she remarked, "You haven't even given her a chance. I have no reason to consider changing you. After all, she's Rev. Benn's wife. I'm sure she's a nice Christian woman!" A few weeks into the school year my thoughts about Mrs. Benn's strictness were confirmed. She brooked no foolishness. She insisted on working us hard. Her standards were exacting. But she was also fair. She often told us how much she expected of us. She never talked down to us. She was also the school's chorus leader, and every member of her class was expected to sing in the chorus. It did not matter if you could sing, Mrs. Benn had you standing up in that chorus learning the songs. Our school chorus sang all over the city, at places many of us had never been. We sang what were then called "Negro spirituals," show tunes, and high church sacred music. I learned the song "Dona Nobis Pacem" in her chorus. She provided transportation by having her husband's congregants carpool us to the various concerts. It was during these trips that we began to see that our city was much larger than our little neighborhood. Somehow, she knew we needed to "be better." Mrs. Benn never treated her students as if they were unworthy. Instead, she was cognizant of the standard that many Black people heard growing up in Black communities—we have to work twice as hard to get half as far!

¹ Portions of this section come from Ladson-Billings (2004). Landing on the wrong note: The price we paid for *Brown*, *Education Researcher*, 33(7), 3–13.

² I described Ethel Benn and my relationship with her in Ladson-Billings (2022).

³ I confess she was probably in her 50s, younger than this author at this writing.

Mrs. Benn was also providing what Givens (2021) called “fugitive pedagogy.” She is the person who initially introduced me to W. E. B. Du Bois. Mrs. Benn explained that Du Bois was the first Black person to earn a doctorate from Harvard. We found this information unbelievable, since we could not imagine Harvard as a place where Black people could attend school. But more than the information about Du Bois, Ethel Benn provided us with an extensive knowledge of Black history. She taught us about the kingdoms of Mali, Songhay, and Ghana. She taught us about the liberation struggles of Black people who included Denmark Vesey, Harriet Tubman, Robert Smalls, Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, and others. She regularly urged us to take pride in being Black (I’m sure she said “Negro”) and never to assume we could not achieve because of anything inherent in our racial make-up. Mrs. Benn is probably my first authority figure who made clear to us how important it was for us to be proud of being Black.

Although our school, filled to capacity with Baby Boomers, was 99.9% Black (there was one poor White family who attended the school), we were the recipients of a curriculum that rendered Black people invisible or as “slaves” (Woodson, 1933) incapable of intellectual, artistic, civic, or cultural excellence. Mrs. Benn regaled our class with stories of Black excellence and was adamant that we, too, could and should be great. It is only recently that I realized that Ethel Benn was following a model not unlike Givens’ description of Tessie McGee in 1930s Louisiana. Mrs. Benn secretly taught her all Black students from books she brought from home on what was then known as “Negro History.” While I had some degree of skepticism about what she was teaching, it did resonate with stories that were told as my parents and relatives sat around the kitchen table. My father insisted that Paul Robeson was a good and honorable man and I should not be swayed by the things being said about him as he sat before the House Sub-committee on Un-American Activities (i.e., the McCarthy Commission). I knew that the outstanding contralto Marian Anderson grew up in my neighborhood. I knew that Ralph Bunch had distinguished himself as a diplomat and of course, Joe Louis was a boxing champ who carried the hopes of Black Americans with him each time he entered the ring.

But it was Ethel Benn who introduced me to Estavanico the Moor, who was the first Black person named as an explorer of the so-called New World. She taught us about the work of Black people who built Philadelphia and the anti-slavery movement. We learned of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones as the founders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and of the many Black abolitionists who made Philadelphia a “destination city” for formerly enslaved Blacks fleeing the South. More importantly, Ethel Benn convinced me of my own capabilities. I have a vivid recollection of her asking me, “What makes you think you can’t be the best 5th grader in this class?” “I don’t know,” I shrugged my shoulders. “What makes you think you can’t be the best 5th grader in this school?” Again, I had no answer. “What makes you think you can’t be the best 5th grader in this city?” While I was uncertain that was a possibility, I had no answer for her. Her questioning continued to expand to include the state, the nation, and the world. Mrs. Benn was planting a seed of excellence in me that I could not see.

When I went on to an integrated⁴ junior high and high school, it was Mrs. Benn’s pointed questions that echoed in my head as I sat in classrooms with mostly White classmates. Indeed, I went on to win the Latin and the Chemistry awards. I worked hard and was successful at Morgan State University (an HBCU) and was equally successful at graduate studies at the University of Washington and Stanford University. I had my share of very good teachers and a few not so good ones, but it was Ethel Benn who made an important difference in spurring me on to excellence.

It’s the North, Also.

How long can a city teach its Black children that the road to success is to have a White?

— W. E. B. Du Bois, 1973/1899, p.351

I highlighted the teaching of Ethel Benn and my experience in a Northern city post-*Brown* because much of the discourse about the *Brown* decision centers on the resistance of Southern cities and on Southern states’ refusal to implement the Court’s decree. The *Brown II*⁵ decision, or consent decree, resulted in school closures, the proliferation of segregation academies (previously discussed) and outright resistance to admitting Black students into previously all-White schools. With the exception of Boston, the historical record tends to highlight Southern schools (e.g., New Orleans; Prince Edward County, Virginia; and Little Rock, Arkansas) but there is a story to be told about other Northern schools (Theoharis & Woodard, 2003).

Schools in cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago flew under the school desegregation radar because they allowed their racially segregated housing policies to do their dirty work. For years I have argued that housing policy IS education policy (Ladson-Billings, 2015). By maintaining redlining and unfair housing practices, Northern cities did not have to develop separate school systems. They declared that their schools were set up to ensure everyone could attend “neighborhood schools” without acknowledging that school district boundaries were effective tools for maintaining segregated schools. As long as Black families were denied access to housing in White communities, Black children would be cordoned off into all-Black schools. The major advantage of this segregation for Black families is that Black teachers were often assigned to teach in those communities because, like most workers, they wanted to minimize their commute and work closer to home.

⁴ I use the term “integrated” as opposed to “desegregated” here because the junior high school and high school I attended were not under court orders. The schools’ geographic boundaries included both Black and White communities. Each group was attending its neighborhood schools.

⁵ *Brown II* was handed down on May 31, 1955, a little more than a year after the *Brown* decision. *Brown II* left states and school districts with the ambiguous language of implementing school desegregation “with all deliberate speed,” which meant there were years of resistance and foot-dragging before anything changed in many school districts.

Neighborhood segregation meant that Black communities included people from various social strata. Most of the residents were working class and held jobs like tradesmen (carpenters, plumbers, etc.), sanitation workers, nurses' aides, orderlies, and janitors. Those who traveled beyond neighborhood boundaries worked as domestics (in White households and hotels), chauffeurs, and factory workers. However, Black professionals also lived in Black communities. Often their homes were more spacious and luxurious, but nonetheless they were in Black communities. Black doctors, dentists, lawyers, and pastors lived in Black communities where they served Black clients almost exclusively. Among the Black professionals in these communities were Black teachers.

The advantage of having Black teachers in the community meant that Black parents had ready access to them. They did not have to go to "Back to School nights" or progress report conferences to see their children's teachers. They saw them in the neighborhood grocery stores, in the local barbershops and beauty salons. They worshiped alongside them each Sunday in church. This proximity to teachers, these ordinary daily encounters, meant that Black parents could speak informally with their children's teachers and learn about their progress outside of formal in-school conferences.

Black teachers in segregated Northern cities were more than teachers. As a respected group within the community, Black teachers were called upon to help community members with a variety of tasks. Black teachers could help decode contracts and other legal documents such as leases, eviction notices, or tax information. Black teachers could help run interference for families with landlords, the utility company or an employer. The tacit understanding between Black families and Black teachers during the pre-*Brown* era was that the teachers were there to help the community and its children.

I was a 2nd-grader when the *Brown* decision was handed down. I do not remember it because it appeared to have no impact on my schooling experience. Nothing really changed. I attended an almost all-Black school and had mostly Black teachers. None of my classmates was sent to a school across town to attend school with White students. No White students were bused to our school. This more dramatic action would not occur in Philadelphia for more than a decade (Franklin, 1979; Phillips, 2005). Similarly, cities like Chicago (Anderson & Pickering, 1986), Milwaukee (Dougherty, 2004), and New York (Taylor, 1997), experienced a similar lack of disruption in school assignment due to *Brown*. Rather than wait for a directive from the federal government to enforce the *Brown* decision, local activists lobbied the Pennsylvania *Human Relations Commission* (HRC) (Phillips, 2005). The upshot of this local activism was a statement by the School District of Philadelphia Board of Education that endorsed a non-discrimination policy as its standing rule. However, this policy statement was not accompanied by enforcement at the local or state level. As community members pressed for school desegregation, they were met by an argument that the district had no resources to enforce the changes desegregation required.

Philadelphia, like most Northern cities in the post-World War II era, experienced a surge of migration from the South. Better-paying factory jobs and less overt racism were the draw that spurred the Great Migration (Wilkerson, 2010). Although Wilkerson documents a six-decade movement of six million Black people from the US South to the North, the postwar period was an especially active one. My own family, on both my mother's and father's sides, made their way from South Carolina to Philadelphia early in the 20th century. My mother experienced all of her schooling in the School District of Philadelphia, graduating in the midst of the Great Depression in 1934. My father arrived in Philadelphia with his older brother in 1927 to join relatives who had migrated to the city at least a decade earlier. He possessed a 3rd-grade education from the one-room, segregated rural school he attended along with his four older brothers and two older sisters. He never returned to school once he arrived in Philadelphia and he proceeded to work as a manual laborer and janitor for the next 64 years. My parents' stories were echoed across the North and reflect the changing demographics of Philadelphia and other large northern cities.

As Northern cities' populations of Black citizens grew, Whites began moving to the outer reaches and suburban communities surrounding the cities. I have argued elsewhere (Ladson-Billings, 2015) that it is no coincidence that the Interstate Highway Act (1956) came one year after *Brown II*. The ability of Whites to move away from urban city centers via a well-financed highway system made suburban living an oft-chosen option for them. Those interstate highways not only took White residents out of cities, but they also took shopping (the suburban malls) and schools with them. In the late 1960s, the School District of Philadelphia had 280 schools serving approximately 280,000 students (Royal, 2022). The district was divided into eight geographic districts that mirrored the racial/ethnic housing patterns of the city. District 1 (West Philadelphia) and 4 (North Philadelphia) were predominately Black. District 2 and 3 served working-class White ethnic communities (i.e., Irish, Italian, Polish descent families). District 5 served mostly Black and Latinx (mostly Puerto Rican) working-class families. District 6 was the "unicorn" that included a 50/50 split between poor/working-class neighborhoods and middle-class neighborhoods. District 7 represented another White ethnic working-class section with a growing number of Black and Latinx families. District 8, located in what was called "The Great Northeast," was almost exclusively White with middle to upper middle-class families.

The only feasible desegregation plan in 1968 had to include District 8; and District 8 parents were not interested in busing their children out of the Northeast. Slowly but surely Philadelphia began to resemble Detroit, where White families fled to the suburbs. White families made one of two choices: enrolling their children in private schools (mostly parochial schools) or moving outside the city limits. *Brown* would face a difficult future in Philadelphia. The 1974 *Milliken v. Bradley* case in Detroit ruled that urban school districts could not include suburban schools (schools across city or county lines) in their desegregation plan. Thus, the major metropolitan areas avoided compliance with *Brown* by creating incentives for Whites to move outside of the city limits to create Whites-only enclaves that could not be considered in urban desegregation plans.

Believing They All Can Learn: Kimya Moyo

I met Kimya Moyo a few years after I concluded my study on successful teachers of African American students. Moyo was one of the few African American teachers to pass the *National Board for Professional Standards Test* (NBPTS) in secondary mathematics. According to Leftwich (2005), Black teachers' success rate with the NBPTS is disproportionately lower than their White peers. Moyo reached out to me soon after she passed her certification exam with what I thought was a strange request. Moyo explained that she had participated in the almost year-long process of assembling her information, answering written prompts, sharing lesson plans, student work, and student assessments, and videotaping her teaching performance. But the question that plagued her was: "Were my students actually learning?" Moyo was not convinced that showcasing her teaching as a "performance" was enough to make an argument that the students were actually learning. She asked me to review her NBPTS portfolio that contained a set of her videotaped lessons, and I was amazed. She was teaching mathematics in creative and imaginative ways. But first, it is important to share a bit of her background.

Kimya Moyo began teaching in 1969. She was a part of a small group of African American students who attended Northwestern University and ultimately forced the university to confront the level of dissatisfaction and alienation Black students experienced on campus (Ulalisa, 2023). Moyo stated that when she first arrived on campus her dormitory roommate, a White woman, moved out "because she was not going to live with a Black person" (Ulalisa, 2023, p 1). Moyo remained active in Black students' politics throughout her time at Northwestern, including a takeover of the university's bursar's office.

Kimya's teaching experiences took her to Chicago, Cincinnati, and West Africa. In 1993 she began directing a Saturday school experience for Black youth in grades 8–12 in her Cincinnati home. With the help of other Black teachers who volunteer, Moyo helps students in her Sankofa Enrichment Program improve their academic performance and learn about their culture. Second year students participate in a trip to Detroit and Canadian Underground Railroad sites. Third year students get to travel to the Sea Islands, a pivotal landing point of enslaved Black people after the harrowing Middle Passage. Students who continue with Sankofa into the fourth year earn the right to go to Ghana, West Africa.

My encounter with Moyo via her NBPTS portfolio was profound. I studied her tapes, and it seemed clear to me why she was board certified. She was teaching a group of students who were *not* recommended for algebra. They were initially assigned to "general math." Moyo decided that general math would limit their post-secondary possibilities and decided to offer an algebra class for the students. In her class, Moyo taught the students practical applications for algebra. For example, her students were required to plan, design, and create an article of clothing using large plastic trash bags. The students modeled their final products in a school-wide fashion show.

In another lesson I saw Moyo write a simple equation on the board that read, " $4 + 3 = x$ " and ask, "What does this mean?" Initially, the students called out, "7!" "No," responded Moyo. I didn't ask you to solve the equation, I asked you to explain what it means." At that point you could see some puzzled looks on the students' faces. One student responded, "Well, 4 of something plus 3 of something equals an unknown something." "Pretty good," said Moyo, "but what information is missing? Again, after some hesitation a student finally chimed in, "Well, we don't know what the 'somethings' are!" "Exactly," boomed Moyo. "The 'somethings' will provide you with the context and without context mathematics doesn't make sense!" Rather than forcing students to do rote memorization of number facts or multiplication tables, Moyo wanted students who had previously not experienced success in mathematics to become more fluent in the language of mathematics.

A special touch that Ms. Moyo exhibited in her videotapes was her connection with her students' parents. Just before the end of the first progress report period, Moyo invited her students and their parents to her home. Crowded together into what looked like her living room and an adjoining 3-seasons porch, the students sat beside their parents while Moyo extolled their effort and accomplishments. She then presented the group with a decorated cake and proclaimed, "Congratulations, you are a quarter of the way through!" Next, Moyo gave each student an envelope and said, "Your first quarter grade is in the envelope. Open it up and then explain to your parent(s) why you received that grade." I watched as the students spoke with authority about what they achieved and what they still needed to improve on. Moyo stood to the side as the students took ownership of their academic progress. I was certain that her students were learning.

The *Brown* Fallout—What Has Not Changed

As we reflect upon the 70 years since *Brown*, I know that my assignment for this paper is to focus on the experiences of Black teachers before and up to the decision. However, I think it is important to consider the current conditions that make *Brown*'s goal of fair access to education difficult to achieve. Instead of focusing solely on access, *Brown* could have taken a stronger stance on equality of outcomes. Black teachers still comprise just 6.1 percent of the teaching population while White teachers make up 79.9 percent. Recruiting and retaining Black teachers are the main challenges facing many school districts. However, even if we increase the numbers of Black teachers, we must recognize the sociopolitical context of today's public schools.

In the mid-1950s, Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman insisted that public education should be subject to market forces. Friedman believed that parents should be given vouchers that would allow them to send their children to whatever schools they wanted—public or private (McGurn, 2023). Friedman believed the competition to get students and their parents to choose them would force schools to improve their educational offerings. However, his theory aided the cause of segregationists who saw vouchers as a way to avoid school desegregation. Friedman's argument seemed, in the 1950s, unlikely to be taken up. Today in 2024, there are 25 voucher programs in 16 states.⁶ Most of these voucher programs exist in communities serving poor children of color (e.g., New Orleans, Milwaukee, Washington, DC) who are already attending schools that can be described as hyper-segregated.

As challenging as voucher programs may be for maintaining public education systems, another, more widespread option for what is being called "parental choice" is charter schools. Public school charters are not universally a bad option. Charter schools started and governed by local communities often provide important educational options for poor parents of color. Parents who identify a need can create a school that better meets that need. For example, after 1998, when California voters passed Proposition 227 (the Unz Amendment), which outlawed bilingual education (Ryan, 2002), parents who wanted their children to maintain their language used the state's charter school laws to create bilingual schools. In Madison, Wisconsin, the persistent failure of Black children in the public schools prompted a community member to mobilize a group to create a preschool that has now expanded to a preK–8 school of about 400 children, mostly Black and Brown. In the fall of 2024, Appleton, Wisconsin, will open its first African-centered school, organized and chartered by a community-based nonprofit.

However, the charter school laws have allowed large *Educational Management Organizations* (EMOs) to move into urban communities and take over dozens of schools without posting any real academic improvement. One of the supposed positives of EMOs is that they hire Black teachers at a greater rate than traditional public schools (largely because they allow a greater degree of alternative certification). However, such schools are seen as primarily focusing on discipline and regimentation, and on rote learning. They have high rates of attrition when students fail to comply with school rules around wearing uniforms, sitting and standing at attention, or a vast array of regulations including things like failure to "track" the teacher or not having parent engagement. In some communities, charter schools operate on an admissions system that excludes students with special needs. Although wholly funded by public monies, some charter schools function more like private schools and dismiss students who they perceive may lower the aggregate test scores.

In 2007 I asked a provocative question of a group of education researchers and law professors (Ladson-Billings, 2007). I asked, "Can we at least have *Plessy*?" I was suggesting that it was better to have a "real *Plessy*" than a "fake *Brown*." A real *Plessy* would mean that the separate schools Black and Brown children find themselves in would be required to have equitable funding, equally qualified teachers, and equal curricular materials as their White middle-income peers. I argued that it was clear that school districts were not going to ever truly desegregate and since Black and Brown children were going to remain in segregated enclaves, why can't we do right by them in their own communities?

Finally, it is important to note how White communities have successfully used *Brown* to their advantage. In 2007 the Supreme Court heard the case of *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle Public School District 1 (PICS)*. The Court ruled that it was unconstitutional for a school district to use race to assign students to a school to achieve demographic diversity. The Seattle School District had a policy of allowing students to apply to any high school in the district. Of course, some schools were oversubscribed because of their academic reputations. The district was forced to use a variety of factors as tiebreakers to determine who would be admitted. One factor was race. The Court found the use of race to be unconstitutional and ruled in favor of the parents. The PICS decision was coupled with another case, *McFarland v. Jefferson County, KY*; White parents in both Seattle and Louisville won by claiming theirs was a victory for the *Brown* decision. This declaration reminded me of the late Derrick Bell, who insisted that there is never a civil rights decision that does not advantage White people.

⁶ Several states—Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, and Wisconsin—have multiple programs. Also, there is a voucher program in the District of Columbia.

In his classic *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992), Bell outlines the "Rules of Racial Standing." The first rule seems to apply when considering what has happened in the Supreme Court:

The law grants litigants standing to come into court based on their having sufficient personal interest and involvement in the issue to justify judicial cognizance. Black people (while they may be able to get into court) are denied such standing legitimacy in the world generally when they discuss their negative experiences with racism or even when they attempt to give a positive evaluation of another Black person or of his work. No matter what their experience or expertise, Blacks' statements involving race are deemed "special pleading" and thus not entitled to serious consideration (p. 111).

I contend that Black teachers understood that they were perceived to have no standing when it came to making decisions regarding the education of Black children. They knew their jobs were in jeopardy when *Brown* was decided, but if it meant that Black children would have better opportunities, they were willing to make the sacrifice. The role of Black teachers cannot be overstated in the history of the education of Black students. Black teachers often find themselves as advocates for Black students over issues such as special education assignment, representation in suspension and expulsion rates, and access to Advanced Placement and Honors programs and to quality co-curricular activities. But I also argue that Black teachers are important for ALL children. It is important for children of all races and ethnicities to experience expertise and skill that exists in people in every racial or ethnic group that reflects the diversity of the nation. Blazar (2024) documents the positive impact that Black teachers have on all students regardless of race or ethnicity. His study shows student improvements in reading and mathematics along with decreased absenteeism and increased student engagement and self-efficacy. The rapid disappearance of Black teachers is troubling and disheartening. When it comes to the education of Black students we must always ask, "But what about the Black teachers?"

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