Relatively few people, black or white, who know anything about the reality of race relations in America during the 1950s would contest the revolutionary nature of the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. However, 50 years later, scholars are asking whether *Brown* has done more harm than good. The answer is no . . . but with qualifications.

There is no denying *Brown*’s contribution to ending the evil system of legal segregation and racial oppression in the United States. As Richard Kluger, author of *Simple Justice*, pointed out, “The Supreme Court had taken pains to limit the language of *Brown* to segregation in public schools only . . . . But it became almost immediately clear that *Brown* in effect wiped out all forms of state-sanctioned segregation.”

Until 1954 the “separate but equal” doctrine enshrined in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision defined the national norm. In the South, racial oppression was unrelenting, backed by the legal system and nurtured by the mores that could be traced back to our country’s slave era. In the North, de facto segregation and covert discrimination were commonplace. Everywhere, black people were expected to stay in “their place.”

These various forms of prejudice and discrimination had devastating consequences for black people. Consider that in 1954 the neonatal mortality rate per 1,000 live births was 17.8 for whites and 27.0 for “Negro and other.” Maternal mortality rates per 10,000 live births were 3.7 for whites, 14.6 for “Negro and other.” The average black household income in 1955 ($2,890) was 55 percent of that of white households ($5,228). In 1952, the illiteracy rate for blacks 14 years of age or older (10.2 percent) was more than five times that of whites (1.8 percent). More than a quarter of black males (28 percent) completed no more than four
years of schooling, compared with less than 9 percent of white males (see Figures 1 & 2).

Beyond the obvious, demeaning and oppressive rules and social customs that served as daily reminders of black people’s second-class status. There were the “rules of separation”—the colored and white bathrooms, water fountains, and waiting rooms; the fact that black people were forced to sit in the back of the bus and to step off the sidewalks when white people approached. There was the indignity of still being called “boy” at the age of 65.

Lifting the Veil of Oppression

For many people, Brown marked a critical turning point in addressing these inequities. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot remembers its impact vividly, writing:

Through a child’s eyes, I could see the veil of oppression lift from my parents’ shoulders. It seemed they were standing taller. And for the first time in my life, I saw tears in my father’s eyes. “This is a great and important day,” he said reverently to his children. And although we had not lived the pain and struggle of his life, nor did we understand the meaning of his words, the emotion and drama of that moment still survives in my soul today.

It seemed to her father and to many others that the United States was finally beginning to see a society where discrimination based on race was unacceptable. The decision was certainly one of the sparks that stoked the flame of the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and 1960s. It gave hope to tens of thousands of black people and their allies, who moved forward with courage and determination to transform American society.

In no small measure, these struggles changed America for black people. African Americans may now hold high-level positions in the government and private sector. Black hip-hop performers are a major force in defining the nation’s youth culture. The University of Kentucky now starts five black basketball players coached by a black man.

The idea that desegregating schools was achieving equality

Kenneth Clark’s famous doll experiment, which claimed to uncover self-hatred among black children and attributed it to the degrading effects of being taught in segregated schools. The court also quoted Gunnar Myrdal, who wrote in An American Dilemma, “[American Negro] culture is a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture.”

Substantial Differences in Graduation Rates Remain (Figure 1)

Given these views, it followed that the only hope for black students to get a good education was to be rescued from their inferior institutions and pathways and placed in integrated schools. And an integrated school was defined as one that was predominantly white. This ideology masked the inequalities that existed in many so-called integrated schools.

Unfinished Business

Moreover, these educational inequalities help to explain enduring economic inequalities. For example, in 1998, 48 percent of black children age six and younger lived in families that were below 125 percent of the poverty line, compared with 24 percent of white children. The median household income for black families in 2001 was $31,600, while it was $54,100 for whites. A difference that can be attributed in part to the large number of black families headed by a single parent (see Figure 2). Although these conditions represent vast improvements from those of the 1950s, the differences in well-being between whites and blacks remain a stain on the nation.

So the struggle continues to make America a place where black people and black institutions are respected; where integration is viewed through the prism of pluralist acceptance; and where low-income and working-class black families have the power to secure the kind of education they desire for their children. The Brown decision sent a powerful message by tearing down the legal structures of oppression, but there remains plenty of unfinished business.

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