

## **Ethics and Principles by Kirk Widra M.Ed.**

### **Introduction**

The following paper offers an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the case *Brown v. Board of Education*, and that strives to distinguish between fact and opinion, explore the reliability of source, compare and contrast the source's points of views of others, and ethical implications stemming from those issues. *Brown v. Board of Education* was brought to the forefront in 1954 as black children were denied admission to public schools attended by white children under laws requiring or permitting segregation according to the races. The white and black schools were comparable in terms of buildings, curricula, qualifications, and teacher salaries (<http://www.oyez.org/cases>). This issue posed important questions that strike at the very foundations of American society. Does segregation on the basis of race in public schools deprive minority children of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the 14th Amendment and if so isn't that unconstitutional and by extension unethical? Has this landmark case helped our education system to grow and address the issues of racism or has the veneer of civility merely covered over this important issue with the emerging socioeconomic racism?

### **Jonathan Kozol and *Brown v. Board of Education***

In his critically acclaimed book, *The Shame of the Nation*, educator and author Jonathan Kozol describes how, in the United States, black and Hispanic students tend to be concentrated in schools where they make up almost the entire student body. Kozol visited nearly 60 public schools in preparation for writing the book. He found that conditions had grown worse for inner-city children in the 50 years since the Supreme Court in the landmark ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (Wikipedia, 2008). Further Kozol asserts that due to the migration of wealthier white families to the suburbs, leaving mainly minority families in the inner city public schools, the process of re-segregation continues to reinforce the idea of inequality even further along socioeconomic lines. This of course in part has spurred on the movement for educational reform.

In the book *Amazing Grace*, Kozol attacks the disparity in expenditures on education between central cities and well-to-do suburbs, and the system of property taxes which most school systems and states rely on for funding. He expresses outrage at...inequities in expenditure, pointing out that New York City in 2002-3 spent \$11,627 on the education of each child, while in Nassau County, the town of Manhasset spent \$22,311, and Great Neck \$19,705. He found that there are comparable disparities in other metropolitan areas, since most funding is locally based. Kozol describes schools that are separated by a 15-minute drive but that offer vastly different educational opportunities. In one example, a primarily white school offers drama club and AP classes, and the nearby primarily black school requires classes like hairdressing. (Kozol, J. 2005)

Perhaps the more pressing question is what is this doing to our children and their view of themselves and their self-concept? Despite the equalization of the schools by "objective" factors, intangible issues are the most direct factor that foster and maintain inequality. Racial segregation in public education has a detrimental effect on minority children because it is interpreted as a sign of inferiority that is further enforced by the implicit and explicit behaviors and attitudes framed by the socioeconomic status of all stakeholders. The concern here is that very little has truly changed since *Brown v. Board of Education*. In many ways it has just been a reordering of society not the promise of true cultural change. The greater fear is how do we evaluate if multiculturalism is enriching or eroding the culture? The promise of education-- or perhaps the myth of education-- in American is based on the assumption that we are in fact a meritocracy of sorts. The belief is you can make it based on your own merit, ability, and talent rather than on class privilege or wealth. Students are continually told they can make it if they simply do what is expected of them, sadly this is simply not true. In an effort to find identity and in reaction to the apparent inequities, subcultures complete with the own way of speaking and moving through the world, continue

to emerge and reshape public policy and subsequently the public education system.

The most notable perhaps is the issue of Ebonics brought to the forefront in Oakland California. The term Ebonics remained virtually unknown until 1996. In 1996, the term became widely known in the U.S. due to its use by the Oakland School Board to denote and recognize the primary language (or sociolect or ethnolect) of African American children attending school. The issue of the controversy was whether or not an alternative form of African American Vernacular English should be considered a language of an emerging subculture and thus subject to the provisions in place to accommodate and address that or was it a matter of choice to adopt a decidedly ethnic form of expression. In the end this issue provided little if any movement toward an understanding of the multicultural issues of language but rather served to further polarize all parties concerned.

Multicultural education needs to incorporate the idea that all students—regardless of their gender and social class and their ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics—“should have and equal opportunity to learn in school” (Banks, 2007, p.3). The only way we can truly affect change is to challenge our collective human cultural to change and practice inviting techniques that foster equality, even initially if only by inference. “One of the most disheartening experiences for those who grew up in the years when Martin Luther King and Thurgood Marshall were alive is to visit public schools today that bear their names...and to find how many of these schools are bastions of contemporary segregation,” (Kozol, J. 2005)

Brown v. Board of Education was not simply about children and education. The laws and policies struck down by this court decision were products of the human tendencies to prejudge, discriminate against, and stereotype other people by their ethnic, religious, physical, or cultural characteristics. “Ending this behavior as a legal practice caused far reaching social and ideological implications, which continue to be felt throughout our country” (Brown Foundation, 2004), but did it truly affect the way we think? Many fear not, “A great many people think they are thinking when they are really rearranging their prejudices.” - William James

### **Summary**

One thing is clear, despite all of our confabulations, America is not a democracy it is a pseudo socialistic plutocracy, which maintains an educational system that does little to equal the playing field. The question arises how can we as a society profess to be a democracy when we don't practice what we preach and engage in these unethical and often demoralizing practices that only serve to divisively separate us. Education is at a pivotal junction in its evolution, the world is growing smaller and the socioeconomic gap is widening, we as collective must find the strength to change. We must attempt to redefine our relationship to education and ourselves.

As America has become a more pluralistic society, it is harder to come up with a shared notion of good, ethical, or moral behavior however. Given the lack of agreement, the idea of moral or ethical education, it is argued, is best left to the individual child's family and religious institution, however when you have a large segment of the population that feels disenfranchised coupled with a system that reinforces that, the challenge is obvious. Factor in the influence of peers and the mass media that are competing to be the moral authority in student's lives; and all too often young people are lead in troubling directions. Schools have become necessary partners with parents in the race for a balancing influence moral, ethical, and otherwise.

In light of the many tensions present between schools, teachers, parents, students, and communities in general the idea of addressing issues of ethical and moral conduct, especially given all the things we are already asking schools to do, seems too difficult. Yet that is precisely where we need to start, if we hope to see any substantive change in the world, we need to start with what would best be described as character education. Governments,

teachers, and parents must not only hold high ethical standards but also must demonstrate the kind of thoughtfulness that reflects the belief that ethical and moral conduct in education is far more than the human version of obedience school. True secular character education cultivates an appreciation for the power of story, reflection, personal value, and the essential tools of habit and reason in dealing with the complexities of daily life but perhaps more importantly it develops a culture around education that values diversity and the enrichment it offers and levels the playing field for us all. In the final analysis the work of character education in schools and homes always starts with the adults. When we talk about the moral decline of our youth and the troubles with education, we are often just observing our own reflection in the children who learned what we modeled. Though perhaps trite, but nonetheless true, "We must become the change we want to see in the world" (Brainy Quote, 2010).

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### **\*Reflections on Ethics/Principles**

The preceding paper was provided to demonstrate the ability on the part of the author to look closely at an issue that has far reaching implications and their connection to ethical and moral issues. The idea of ethics and morality has been long abandoned by education for fear of presenting a bias stance. In fact many of the early educational institutions, being offshoots of religious groups, often were built upon moral and ethical codes that were bias in the extreme and to a large extent exclusionary. However with the inevitable separation of church and state and the need to educate diverse segments of the population became necessary to ensure the economic prosperity those notions in the instruction of ethics and morality were abandoned. To some degree it could be argued, this has led us to the alarming state of affairs seen across the spectrum of institutions in this country.

It is important to note that the work presented here does not wish to imply any religious overtones but rather the need for a secular approach to self government based on an agreed upon system of conduct and accountability designed to at first enforce conduct and later to foster a sense of empowerment in working toward the common good. It is really about fostering a sense of innate responsibility to oneself and those around them through the building of community. The idea that education can aid in this process is not a new concept in fact it was part of the founding fathers original plan to develop ethical and informed citizens.

In a modern context schools need to start with a questions: Who are we when we are at our best? Who do we want to be? What do we want to achieve? Based on that discussion, schools community can begin to agree on a set of core virtues for the school and a code of conduct to support them. The virtues and the code then can be explicitly taught.

Faculty and department heads can work together to identify elements of the curriculum that support the virtues and add other materials on ethics. Ethical decision-making is taught and practiced throughout the school, but it is supplemented by training in reflection, coping skills, and cooperation as well. In the class room...faculty work at being available, credible role models of the virtues. In this, they are joined by parents, who can receive help through the school in strategies for raising ethical children. These can include such important skills as maintaining a daily dialogue with a child; connecting with his or her friends; effective, consistent reinforcement of desired behaviors; and skillful reduction of undesired behaviors. (Johnson, S. 2010)

It is hoped this paper could be used as a starting point to starting an important dialogue regarding ethics and the building of community as an extension of education. As mentioned in the body of the paper, the work of character education in schools and homes always starts with the educators who are committed to educating communities on the value of working together to fostering fully realized citizens. It is the sincere hope that education will fulfill its promise to allow us all to become truly equal and in doing so engender the democratic ethos in us all.

## **Reference**

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