

The Outcome of Relationships between Students, Parents, and School Personnel while
Desegregating Schools within Mississippi 1950s to 1970s

Delaynie Voortman

Dr. Slayton

Hist 498

18 May 2021

Introduction

The turbulence and violence of school desegregation in Mississippi left long-lasting effects on students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The memory of desegregation and integration of students led to direct social change in a variety of communities that were touched by the education system in Mississippi between the 1950s and 1970s. Through analyzing the reflections of students, parents, and teachers involved in the integration processes, this research project will examine and compare how different teacher and student relationships impacted the various futures that students went on to live, shaping their decisions on education and on life.

Before *Brown vs. Board of Education*

The *Brown vs. the Board of Education* court case was the groundbreaking 1954 decision to legally enforce the integration of public schools in the United States from that point forward; however, the push for desegregation started long before this case came to fruition. Feminist author, Rachel Devlin, describes the experience of many young women during the fight for integration in her book, *A Girl Stands at the Door*, including that of Marguerite Daisy Carr. In 1947, Carr attempted to integrate an all-white middle school as a fourteen-year-old:

“The principal, tipped off that she was on her way, met her on the steps. As she stood facing him, the white students pressed up against the windows to see what would happen. Across the street, teachers, students, janitors, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), and the principal from Carr’s black middle school, Browne Junior High, lined the sidewalk.”¹

¹ Rachel Devlin, *A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America's Schools* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thorndike Press Large Print, 2018).

In the image Devlin conveys, Marguerite Daisy Carr involved multiple communities of people within her call to action. While white students, white teachers, white school administrators, and an overall white school watched her walk up the steps of Eliot Junior High, she also had a community of Black teachers, Black school personnel and her own principal from Browne Junior High standing behind her. This was a community affair, not only an individual desire. Carr's previous school was overpopulated, causing her to receive a different quality of education than students at the under-enrolled, white only junior high school. Thus it made the most sense, since Eliot Junior High was in the same surrounding district as Browne Junior High, for students to be sent to Eliot to even out the student to teacher ratios in both schools.

For parents, students, teachers, and school personnel, the act of intentional integration represented more than a convenient local schooling option and better academic opportunities. It was the depressing reality of students of color that drove families to demand justice for their children through legal action. Marguerite Carr and her family eventually pursued a lawsuit against the junior high school in response to her exile from the premises. Even though her family lost in court, her case served as a catalyst for many more cases that would eventually push *Brown vs. the Board of Education* to a Supreme Court decision. Her lawsuit, Carr vs. Corning, was "one of almost a dozen school desegregation cases that were initiated in the immediate aftermath of World War II."²

African American troops in World War II came home to a still segregated America and were treated as second class citizens despite risking their lives for their country. The homecoming after the war for Black troops, in turn, led black communities to a greater

²Rachel Devlin, *A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America's Schools* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thorndike Press Large Print, 2018).

awareness of the radical change that needed to occur in every public and private setting on the basis of racebased discrimination. Families who were contributing to the “baby boom” became increasingly attentive to where their children were receiving their schooling. New and improved schools began to pop up all around the country to meet the needs of the increasing population. While many white schools received new government funded resources, gyms, cafeterias, books, and staff members, Black schools were left with second-hand items already used by white children. Black schools were not funded at the same level as white schools while also not receiving new schools either. Despite the state government’s full knowledge of the disparity, nothing was done to ameliorate the Black school’s condition and the gap of learning between black and white children steadily increased.

Desegregation pioneers, who fought against what the institutions of power deemed as acceptable learning conditions, set the activist tone for the rest of the century. As Rachel Devlin expresses in her book, “School desegregation could not have happened without those who were willing to put themselves forward – the ‘guinea pigs,’ as they sometimes called themselves – willing to incur the wrath of local white officials and, at times, backlash from within their own communities”.³ Without those who demanded equality both locally and nationally, the integration process would have extended over a longer time period and would not have been as successful or would have failed altogether.

There was not a united voice in the movement to desegregate education before 1954 causing different methods of integration to arise from different communities. These various attempts to integrate were established in order to curb the growing academic divide. Devlin states that, “though the desegregation of America’s public schools may seem a self-evident

³Rachel Devlin, *A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America's Schools* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thorndike Press Large Print, 2018).

objective, in the 1940s and early 1950s it remained a radical, divisive idea. There was no consensus about how best to attack educational inequality.”⁴ Students and parents alike protested the inadequate schooling options by picketing outside of Black schools, demanding equality through planned walk outs, and showing up to enroll at all-white schools. Devlin explains that physically “arriving at the schoolhouse door was the more radical approach” because it “made for good theater” and “forced white school officials and parents to face racial inequities they preferred to ignore” that they could otherwise continue ignoring.⁵

Situations like Marguerite Daisy Carr’s brought light to the ugly truth of a divided schooling system where teachers, staff, and students alike could not intermix because of their respective races. Because her parents encouraged her to step out and demand entry into an all-white school, Carr was seen as rebellious and outspoken even within her own community. Her bravery led to a lawsuit that, in conjunction with other legal action, eventually culminated into the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case that legally changed how the school systems would be allowed to operate not just in her state, but school systems across America. Young students like Carr were asserting that their right of “equal protection under the law” was disregarded when told they could not attend a school based on the color of their skin.⁶ Like the Black soldiers who came back from World War II as war heroes but ultimately second-class citizens, Black students and their communities were being denied further educational opportunity. *Brown vs. the Board of Education* stated that segregated schooling was

⁴Rachel Devlin, *A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America's Schools* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thorndike Press Large Print, 2018).

⁵Rachel Devlin, *A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America's Schools* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thorndike Press Large Print, 2018).

⁶Warren, Earl, and Supreme Court Of The United States. U.S. Reports: *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483. 1953. Periodical.

unconstitutional and violated the Fourteenth Amendment. This ruling, backed by years of students who confronted racial discrimination, would change how students, parents, teachers, and administrators interacted with one another.

Government Involvement

These actors – students, parents, educators, administrators – all functioned within a framework set by governments of varying levels, the legislatures, executives, and the courts. Each state approached the process of integration with a different speed and force. While many states in the deep south asked for extensions to rework their dual school systems, others were able to integrate relatively quickly. Community resistance, citizen councils and the lack of funding slowed the process further. The *Alexander et al. v Holmes County Board of Education* court case of 1969 decided that racially segregated schools in Mississippi needed to be terminated immediately and that “all deliberate speed”, as stated in *Brown v. The Board of Education*, was no longer an option for schools.⁷ In 1954, additional orders clarified what schools could no longer do, but little information was given as to how to integrate these schools, what busing would look like, or how budgeting would change. Many schools, especially those within communities that were deeply segregated, waited until they were physically forced by state officials to integrate their students. Schools did not have the adequate means to completely change their school district, or they did not have the power within their communities to enact change.

After ten years of fierce battles but little improvement, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. This legislation enforced the desegregation of schools after the decision of *Brown v. The Board of Education* and *Brown II* rulings failed to produce tangible results. The federal

⁷ Supreme Court of The United States. U.S. Reports: *Alexander et al. v Holmes County Board of Education et al.*, 396 U.S. 19. 1969. Periodical.

government regulated the desegregation process by detailing specific procedures, condemning unequal educational programs, and laying out the official plan to implement desegregation. This law mandated how attendance would take place when a student did not live within the district of their school, as well as how schools should inform parents and the press of their desegregation tactics.⁸ One direct change was the transportation of students. Policymakers sought to diminish the challenge of getting students to school by providing transportation by bus or an allowance up to nine cents per mile per family. Travel allowance guaranteed that students could attend their local school regardless of their families' financial and work situations. Another important addition was the promise to budget for in-service training that would be given to teachers and staff in the event of integration violence. School boards were able to apply for grants to pay for "employing specialists to advise in problems incident to desegregation."⁹ By creating a clear document stating where government funds would be allocated for actions against segregation, school boards were able to directly implement anti-segregation practices.

The issues that surrounded desegregation were not just apparent to the Southern states or policy makers but were also seen in newspapers, magazines, and multiple media sources easily accessible to the general public. The government knew that the speed and efficiency of desegregation was lacking due to the awareness of the average American. Herbert Block in his cartoon picture "*You one of those extremists who thinks it's time for desegregation?*" portrays a young girl carrying a briefcase with "15 years from Supreme Court Decision" scribbled on it.¹⁰ Cartoonists acknowledged the active divide between legislation and enactment. The man

⁸National Archives and Records Administration. Code of Federal Regulations: Statement of Policies for School Desegregation Plans Under Title VI of The Civil Rights Act Of 1964, 45 C.F.R. 1967. 1967. Periodical.

⁹National Archives and Records Administration. Code of Federal Regulations: Statement of Policies for School Desegregation Plans Under Title VI of The Civil Rights Act Of 1964, 45 C.F.R. 1967. 1967. Periodical.

¹⁰Block, Herbert, Artist. "*You one of those extremists who thinks it's time for desegregation?*" / Herblock., 1969. Photograph.

adjacent to the girl within the cartoon was depicted to be President Nixon who was also carrying a sign stating, “All Deliberate Delay”, referring to the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case of 1954.

Block’s cartoon suggests that years continued to go by without significant improvement, and this trend continued for years after it’s publication. Block presented President Nixon as another influential member of society that continued the apathy of previous administrations, delaying the integration of schools. For example, when the governor of South Carolina shared with Nixon that he could not comply with desegregation in the timeline given, Nixon gave the entire state an extended deadline. The legislative backbone held no weight without determined local leaders to push the written law into timely action; thus, other communities, such as student movements and community activists, would have to take action.

Community Involvement and Backlash

Government policies and the passing of legislation rarely led to the desired outcome of integrated schools. Robert L. Crain compares the North and the South in his book *The Politics of School Desegregation: Comparative Case Studies of Community Structure and Policy-Making*. Crain’s research consists of interviews with various school superintendents, civil rights leaders, community members and school boards. From his research, he finds that integration stemmed from civil rights groups or interracial community groups rather than Black political leaders or all-Black neighborhood groups. While government legislation put the demand for integration into legal writing, it was community involvement that spurred action on such documents.

Government demands for integration were usually met with negative reactions from white members of the public as well as school superintendents. Ultimately, Crain finds that the practical application of integration originated from school boards, who held power over their

superintendent and seemed to be a fairly cohesive group among several different schools that he researched. Although Crain found that interracial community groups were able to enact policies that improved education, grassroots organization was not enough to change a segregated system. Crain explains that the cohesiveness and liberalism of school boards came directly from members' shared participation in a political party or elite group. Many of the school boards were non-competitive businessmen who all "shared the goals of general economic development, reform, importance of public welfare, and maintenance of social stability."¹¹ These social elites, acting together as a board to override bigoted superintendents, teachers, and local lawmakers played the most important role in practical implication of integration, with others either refused to do or were unable to do, according to Crain. Societal and political influence of social elites impacted the rate of which districts shifted their dual schooling systems into integration.

Community member elites were major players in the push for integration, however everyday white people did not always support desegregation measures. Footage of protests from desegregation attempts show the raging hate that surrounded integration. One video in particular shows the Ku Klux Klan lining up outside of what seems to be an elementary school to protest integration."¹² Both African American and white parents are seen bringing their students to school while schoolteachers usher the students in. Other members of the white community, whether they were parents or not, drove by the school with posters telling the school to keep their students from being integrated. People take pictures of the African American students entering the school as confederate flags fly next to the school and out of car windows.

Dan W. Dodson and Margaret E. Linders are considered some of the first social scientists to describe intergroup relations in 1959 at the peak of desegregation. They analyzed various

¹¹Crain, Robert L, *The Politics of School Desegregation: Comparative Case Studies of Community Structure and Policy-Making*, (1969), 208-10.

¹² 1960s School Integration and KKK Protests (Silent) Reel #: 9109 TC In: 001702 TC Out: 001834

violent incidents, such as protests, that took place during the time of their research. While these studies were helpful, there were little to no case studies to support their claims. Some organizations, such as Phi Delta Kappa, recorded experiences of universities desegregating but there was little professional research. Recordkeeping was taken up by the community, grassroots style, because the field was being ignored by ‘professionals.’ Dodson and Linders explored different variables that affected the course of desegregation, such as community power structures, community climate, role of school leadership, techniques of desegregating, and the function of public policy statements. The role of student numbers, as well as urbanization and interfaith relations were also discussed in their studies but were not of primary concern.

Through looking into the community power structures, Dodson and Linders were able to gather that power was consolidated to a few individuals within the community, leaving decision-making to a select few. The elite were able to make impactful decisions in the educational system because they held power. Dodson and Linders found that there was no consensus when it came to the community climate regarding integration. Some areas were populated with pure separatists while others may have had prejudice but did not necessarily act out against integration. The role of school leadership in desegregation was intended to be one of positive reinforcement for a peaceful transition. Dodson and Linders explained that “the leaders of schools [were] expected to give clear and unequivocal support to the adopted measures.”¹³ They described how some areas claimed segregation as unconstitutional where other school leaders were applauded for firm and unwavering integration policies.

From Dodson and Linders’ findings, successful desegregation had little to do with the students in the classroom and more to do with the community and school leadership. Dodson and

¹³ Dodson, Dan W., and Margaret E. Linders, *School Desegregation and Action Programs in Intergroup Relations*, (1959), 382.

Linders finalized their research by stating that “the quality of experiences of children relates to the attitudes and values of the community of which they are a part in.”¹⁴ While Dodson and Linders primarily focused on community and school leadership structures, they still saw the direct relationship of these governing bodies to their specific student bodies.

Holding to Segregation

Desegregation did little to help or hinder the quality of Black education and was driven by white voices, according to Charles C. Bolton in *Mississippi's School Equalization Program, 1945-1954: A Last Gap to Try to Maintain a Segregated Educational System*. While he claims that there was little effect on Black education, he does acknowledge the fact that there was not a genuine attempt to integrate public schools until the 1970s. Those who were against integration clung to the *Plessy* doctrine which prioritized the ‘separate but equal’ point of view before the *Brown v. The Board of Education* case.¹⁵ Bolton examined how the white majority of citizens tried to hold onto their system of education based on court rulings that had been set in place decades prior to integration. This aspect of his work spoke to the turmoil that ensued between students, parents, and teachers during the integration process.

Bolton’s research proves that integration was unsuccessful for a number of years because Black voices were not seriously acknowledged through civil activism. Through a twenty-year span, institutionalized racism allowed an outdated system to prevail despite government issued mandates, as the few white voices that were allied in the cause to desegregate schools were not enough compared to the number of white voices that were against integration.

¹⁴ Dodson, Dan W., and Margaret E. Linders, *School Desegregation and Action Programs in Intergroup Relations*, (1959), 385.

¹⁵ Bolton, Charles C. 2000. “Mississippi’s School Equalization Program, 1945-1954: ‘A Last Gap to Try to Maintain a Segregated.’” *Journal of Southern History* 66 (4): 781. doi:10.2307/2588011.

Charles T. Clotfelter analyzed the course of desegregation over an extended period of time in his book, *After Brown: The rise and retreat of school desegregation*. His analysis provides insight as to how Black and white communities were changed and refused to change due to long-lasting traditional views. Clotfelter assessed the personal contact of students between racial groups but more importantly how their communities cultivated responses to each racial group.”¹⁶ The act of white flight took white students out of public schools and into private education. Black students were left in public education with primarily white teachers and administrators who either supported integration or were against it.

With white faculty and community members involved in the fight to desegregate, integration was brought upon faster and more smoothly. Schools in segregated areas, therefore, tended to take longer to integrate because half of the community had no interest in solving the issue of segregation. As a result, it took allies within the white community to forward the cause of desegregation.

Laurence A. Bradley and Gifford Bradley were among the first to conduct extensive research on the academic achievement of Black students during desegregation. Bradley and Bradley investigated the short-term academic achievements and goals of Black students compared to white students based on the integration of schools. They found that the average African American student was a whole grade level behind average white students in “verbal ability scores” in the first grade and that the performance gap would only grow throughout years of education.¹⁷ They attribute earlier work on the topic to only three other researchers: Armor

¹⁶ Clotfelter, Charles T. *After Brown: The rise and retreat of school desegregation*. Princeton University Press, 2011.

¹⁷ Bradley, Laurence A., and Gifford W. Bradley, *The Academic Achievement of Black Students in Desegregated Schools: A Critical Review*. (1977), 402.

(1972), Hendrick, and St. John (1970), all of whom made their colleagues and students aware of the present issues within the integration of schools.

Bradley and Bradley found that by high school graduation “[Black students] were three and one-quarter years behind the white pupils.”¹⁸ Even though Black students were behind white students academically, Bradley and Bradley established that African American students still had the same or higher educational and career aspirations of those of white students. They hypothesized that African American students “were unable to transform their high aspirations into successful performance because they had, relative to white students, few concrete plans and little belief in their ability to control their environment.”¹⁹

Oral Interview Analysis

Study of student-teacher relationships illuminates the degree to which integration was successful in different parts of Mississippi as well as the various ways that parent involvement affected the change in the education system. Primary source material includes oral histories of students who experienced desegregation as well as teachers who enacted integration, including those recorded by the Library of Congress. A number of secondary sources deal specifically with the academic success and downfall of students after desegregation. Other studies examine how the roles of teachers and school administrators changed as a result of desegregation. The research will analyze the relationship between students and teachers before, during, and after the desegregation and integration process and to what degree desegregation succeeded in the 1950s through the 1970s. This research is primarily focused on public schools in relation to other private schooling options since many of these alternatives were created to maintain segregation.

¹⁸ Bradley, Laurence A., and Gifford W. Bradley, *The Academic Achievement of Black Students in Desegregated Schools: A Critical Review*. (1977), 402.

¹⁹ Bradley, Laurence A., and Gifford W. Bradley, *The Academic Achievement of Black Students in Desegregated Schools: A Critical Review*. (1977), 402.

These relationships also illustrate what role school boards played in the 1960s and 1970s regarding integration and desegregation.

Student experience within schools during the desegregation process varied based on location, district, and race of the student. The Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture conducted interviews of students and community members who were involved in the desegregation process throughout Mississippi. Matilda Burns, Robert Clark, Walter Bruce, and Rosie Head each had firsthand experiences with school districts during the integration process that affected how they furthered their education and careers.

Matilda Burns – a student, mother, teacher, and school board member during the desegregation process – offers insight regarding the way a teacher’s relationship with a student could change the outcome of that student’s life. As someone who had herself been a student in a segregated classroom, she specifically remembers a teacher that believed she could go on to higher education. Schooling was not expected for Black students after high school, so this initial empowerment from her teacher drove Burns to find a purpose after graduation. Later, as a mother, Burns’ children were some of the first to integrate their school district. Burns recalls a hostile schooling environment, as the school that her son attended was burned to the ground by upset community members within the first month of school. As a teacher instructing mostly Black students, Burns remembers children whom she believed in. Burns stayed in contact with many students with whom she had developed relationships and many grew up to be activists themselves. As a member of an integrated school board, Burns raised support for equal resources and adequate training for teachers. She often cites her tenth grade English teacher as the school

personnel that encouraged her to pursue not only a career in education, but more importantly, a life beyond what her parents and community could fathom at the time.²⁰

Robert Clark, a student during segregation and teacher during integration, went on to be the first African American to hold a seat in the House of Representatives. This is largely attributed to the support of his teachers and parents who insisted that he pursue his own education. During his teenage years, a single Black high school did not exist in the community, so Clark was required to travel sixteen miles to get an education. He stayed with one of his local teachers during the weekdays to partially alleviate the burden of the commute. Clark stated that he would not have run for a seat in the House of Representatives if he would have been given the chance to be a superintendent in the district in which he was hosting his adult school. Clark would not have gone out of state for a master's degree if the state of Mississippi allowed Black students to get a master's degree. Clark would not have pursued all of these endeavors if it were not for the commitment of his teachers who often went out of their way to provide for his needs."²¹

Another student who grew up in a segregated classroom, Bruce Walter went on to become a civil rights activist and the president of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was formed to give all people a space to vote, not just white people. It was parallel to the Democratic Party of Mississippi but encouraged Black political participation. Growing up, Walter traveled by foot to his classroom while his white community members were given rides by school-run busing programs. Because of his experience in a segregated school, which received less-than-adequate funding and resources, Walter was

²⁰Burns, Matilda Julia, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Julia Matilda Burns oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Tchula, Mississippi*. 2013. Pdf.

²¹ Clark, Robert George, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Robert G. Clark, Jr., oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Pickens, Mississippi*. 2013. Pdf.

motivated to fight for students and teachers' rights through politics and community involvement. If it was not for his parents who pushed him to get an education and for his teachers who believed that he could go on to become something great, Walter may have not had the motivation to support the educational systems in Mississippi.²²

Rosie Head's first interaction with a classroom setting was not until she was seven years old because the Black school was across a creek and her parents did not want her crossing it by herself. When she was able to start her education, both she and her siblings, much like Bruce Walter, had to walk five miles to school. Even when busing was available, they had to walk three miles to the bus stop. In her segregated school, Head was taught by one teacher for every grade she attended, while white schools in the area had more than one teacher. While she remembers enjoying reading, her education did little for her future. In her interview, Head remembered when Emmitt Till was brutally murdered. He was around her age and the incident took place across the street from her school. Till supposedly whistled at white women while in town, was later traced back to his grandfather's house, kidnapped, killed and dumped into the local river. Her community members' fear grew for their children's safety and Head's family discussed their place within society at the dinner table. While her father worked as a sharecropper and her mother as a maid to the plantation owner, there was little room for upward mobility in the industry. Growing up in the midst of constant struggle, Head vowed to fight for the rights of students and community members alike. At the age of seventeen, right out of high school, Rosie Head signed up to help register Black community members to vote.

The relationships between students, teachers, parents, and school boards created varied degrees of success throughout the process of desegregation in Mississippi between 1950 and

²² Bruce, Walter, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Walter Bruce oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

1970. Teacher and staff perceptions of integration impacted the lived experiences with students, administration, and state-mandated legislation. Social interaction played a large role in school board decisions, parental activities, and community reactions. Due to the lack of staff who were willing to teach students of color, the distance to and from school, and students' commitments to help their families work, many students did not receive adequate instruction needed to push them past the high school curriculum to get college degrees. A valued teacher could make or break a student's experience within school

Matilda Burns

Matilda Julia Burns presents her life in an oral history format by describing her role as a student before desegregation, as a teacher and mother during integration, as a member on an integrated school board and her assistance with sociological research about family relations during desegregation. In analyzing her oral history, one can recognize the challenges of being a teacher during desegregation and the ineffective role of governmental legislation during integration.

Matilda Burns was born in 1938 in Greenwood, Mississippi into a farming family. Her brother and two sisters grew up in a segregated school district in a single room classroom where first through eighth grades were all taught by two teachers. Her mother was a teacher by occupation and was able to teach her children to read and write at home. Because of this Burns started school early and eventually caught up to her brother who was two years older than her. When asked about the 1954 *Brown v. Board* case, Burns, then a senior in high school, said she had not heard about it. Burns felt that "News is news. If it doesn't affect anyone you know, it

doesn't affect you."²³ Later on in life, Burns explained that she began to understand the significance of this case but at the time, "nothing happened in Mississippi."²⁴

When asked what influences Burns had during her childhood, she was quick to cite her 10th grade English teacher. She took "a liking for people who wanted to do something, She could see something in me that I could not see in myself."²⁵ This teacher encouraged Burns to go to college and major in English. Her teachers were interested in their students, they wanted to see their students succeed and to leave the community to become something but not to the same degree that Burns' English teacher did. Burns was later accepted into Mississippi Valley School and rode the bus to college because she could not afford to stay on campus. Her father, who had become a widower when Burns was only 13, made sure that Burns was financially supported in following her dreams of becoming a teacher.

In 1965, ten years after Burns graduated from high school and the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case took place, Burns' son integrated into an all-white school for the first grade. During the first month of instruction that September, the school was burned down by members of the community who were furious with Black students attending the school. The group of sixteen Black students who integrated that year all stayed even after portions of the school were destroyed. By the end of the first term, all white students had left the school because of integration. De facto segregation, kept in place by economic disparities and intimidation,

²³ Burns, Matilda Julia, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Julia Matilda Burns oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Tchula, Mississippi*. 2013. Pdf.

²⁴ Burns, Matilda Julia, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Julia Matilda Burns oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Tchula, Mississippi*. 2013. Pdf.

²⁵ Burns, Matilda Julia, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Julia Matilda Burns oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Tchula, Mississippi*. 2013. Pdf.

happened quickly and academies were developed for white students, so they did not need to attend an integrated school.

Student Life in Schools: Robert George Clark

Robert George Clark described his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, his role as an educator, and his introduction into politics during his oral history interview. Clark shared detailed information about his experience in Mississippi as an African American student throughout his education, including his undergraduate degree, and then ultimately leaving the state to obtain a master's degree. He was an anomaly compared to his fellow classmates and siblings. He exceeded the low academic and career expectations that were placed on him from a young age by his community, encouraged by his teachers and his parents.

Robert George Clark grew up on the same property that his great-grandparents worked as slaves. The former slave master sold his great grandparents a portion of the property and his family had farmed the land ever since. Growing up, Clark attended the local elementary school where two teachers taught students from first to eighth grade in a one room schoolhouse. This school was a three mile walk from Clark's house if he cut through a field. Clark remembers that his mother would not allow her children to cut through the field when it was raining which added another half mile to the journey to school. On their walk to school, Clark recalled that "the white children would be riding buses past us as we walked and throwing spitballs at us" but Clark would "get a pocket of gravel and throw it right back at them."²⁶ His mother always told him that "you are just as much as those white boys, but you can't do this or that. It is not right but it is the law."²⁷ This was Clark's limited interaction with white students his age. His community circle

²⁶Clark, Robert George, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Robert G. Clark, Jr., oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Pickens, Mississippi.* 2013. Pdf.

²⁷Clark, Robert George, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Robert G. Clark, Jr., oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Pickens, Mississippi.*

was based on his family, his local congregation, his classmates, and extended family, who were all Black. Because his family owned the land that they lived on, they were looked at with envy in his community. Clark expressed his pride that he “never worked in a white man’s cotton field a day in my life.”²⁸ The other students in his school were not as privileged as Clark’s family. Due to many of the students having to pick cotton or work the fields, their school year only lasted four to five months. For this reason, most children in his community did not go to high school, but Clark’s family insisted that he did.

Since there was not an African American high school in their hometown, Clark’s older brother went to Memphis and stayed with an uncle in order to attend Booker T. Washington High School. Even though the closest African American high school was sixteen miles away from Clark’s house, his family was not allotted busing because they were Black. However, they were still required by federal law to attend high school, so they had to travel to where they could get an education. While Clark’s education was anything but easy, he “never missed a day of school.”²⁹ By the time he reached high school, he knew that he “was determined to get an education.”³⁰ During high school, Clark stayed with one of his teachers during the weekdays, so he did not have to travel the sixteen miles to class every day. The dedication from his parents and teachers played a significant role in him going on to attend college at Jackson State.

After high school, with less than \$1.25 in his possession, Clark paid for a bus ticket to Jackson State, an all-Black university. He did not have any tuition money, but the president told

2013. Pdf.

²⁸Clark, Robert George, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Robert G. Clark, Jr., oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Pickens, Mississippi*. 2013. Pdf.

²⁹Clark, Robert George, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Robert G. Clark, Jr., oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Pickens, Mississippi*. 2013. Pdf.

³⁰Clark, Robert George, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Robert G. Clark, Jr., oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Pickens, Mississippi*. 2013. Pdf.

him that he could work with the custodians at the college for 25 cents per hour, which would cover half of his tuition. The other half of his tuition would come from taking out the women's laboratories trash cans every day and emptying them. Knowing that he could now stay at college, Clark tried out for the basketball team and track. In his second year, Clark would become the first person at Jackson State to get a full track scholarship. In his studies, Clark knew he wanted to become a lawyer but the only viable option for him as a black man with an education was to become a teacher, so he studied education.

After graduating, Clark taught in a segregated local school district before obtaining his master's degree at Michigan State. He went to Michigan because he could not get a master's degree in the state of Mississippi due to his race and wanted to see if he would measure up to the white students. Clark explained that he was taught all of his life that "ability is not given to race, creed or color" but he had to see for himself if this was true."³¹ Clark was the only African American in his class and was nervous to speak up. He described that once in a lecture he knew the answer to a professor's question but held back from raising his hand because he was unsure of how his class would respond. After two students answered the question incorrectly, he reluctantly raised his hand. When he answered the question correctly, he knew that he did measure up to the other students and his race did not prevent him from the intelligence that he knew he possessed.

After graduating with his master's degree, a school principal asked Clark to stay in Michigan to help integrate a local school. He turned down the offer and decided to go home to Mississippi because he saw the task as too daunting right out of college. He started working at Lexington High School where he saw his students actively engage in the Civil Rights Movement,

³¹ Clark, Robert George, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Robert G. Clark, Jr., oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Pickens, Mississippi*. 2013. Pdf.

particularly the Freedom Summer of 1964. After learning from his students that many of their parents were illiterate, Clark decided to [try to] establish an adult education program in his area. Clark demanded that his superintendent permit him to start an adult education program, but his contract was not renewed for the following year assumingly due to his radical ideas. Due to his unemployment and rage regarding the situation, Clark ran for Superintendent of Education. White community members blocked Clark's eligibility to run by making Superintendent an appointed, rather than elected, position. He instead ran for the Mississippi House of Representatives. Clark would go on to be the first African American voted into the Mississippi House of Representatives because he ran on the basis of having a strong connection to the Civil Rights Movement in Holmes County, having a strong connection to the African American adults in the area, and the fact that he ran on the idea that "I am one of you."³²

Robert Clark beat the odds in his community by first attending and finishing high school and then pursuing a college education at the undergraduate level and graduate level. While Clark possessed the required willpower to accomplish his goals, he would have had a more difficult time achieving what he did if it wasn't for the teachers who opened their homes, the community that encouraged him, and his family who pushed him to want more from life than what they had. Clark went on to accomplish many 'firsts' in the state of Mississippi, but his circumstances may have been different if it were not for the relationships that he made within his community.

Community Involvement: Walter Bruce

Walter Bruce was a civil rights activist who specifically empowered the Black community in Holmes County, Mississippi. Being the youngest of thirteen children, Bruce had

³² Clark, Robert George, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. *Robert G. Clark, Jr., oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Pickens, Mississippi*. 2013. Pdf.

plenty of older siblings to look up to and nieces and nephews to play with. He attended a local Methodist church, which played an important role in shaping his social group and singing career. In his interview, he discussed that he finished high school which was unusual for Black students in his time. He participated in Freedom Summer, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, sit-ins, and marches. He ended his interview by discussing how the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party chose and supported Black candidates for political office in the 1960s.

Bruce was born in 1928 and raised in Holmes County where his parents were sharecroppers. He lived on approximately three acres that were farmed by his family but owned by a white community member. He was educated in a small, one-room schoolhouse with other Black children and went to live with his sister in Lexington to attend high school. Bruce was only expected to finish the eighth grade, so when he went on to high school, he beat the odds of his local community. He fondly remembers forming and being on the Black Little League baseball team growing up and singing in the church choir. One particular incident stuck out to Bruce from his childhood when asked about his interaction with white people. He remembered being around seven or eight years old when his father's stock got loose. The cows wandered up the street to a white man's farm and the white man put Bruce's father's stock in his pasture. When his father went to retrieve the stock, the farmer said he would have to pay him one dollar per cow in order to take them home. Bruce's father came home that day defeated. While his father was busy, Bruce snuck up to the white man's farm and demanded to have him release the stock. The white man told Bruce the same thing that he told his father, but Bruce told him, "if you don't let them out, I'm gonna let them out myself."³³ Even at the age of seven, Bruce would not be pushed around by someone who held power over him.

³³Bruce, Walter, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Walter Bruce oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

The particular incident involving Bruce's neighbor would be one of Bruce's few experiences with white people while growing up, as there were "more whites in the city but mostly blacks in the country."³⁴ Jim Crow laws forced Bruce to have limited contact with white people and because he lived in the country, he only interacted with white farmers around his family's farm. His education, social groups, spiritual upbringing, baseball games, and family time were all centered around his Black community. While he had very little interaction with white people, Bruce "didn't have a whole lot of trouble with them growing up."³⁵ It was not until he got involved with the Civil Rights movement that he began to develop problems with white community members and law enforcement.

In the early 1960's, Bruce moved to Durant, Mississippi for work. He worked as a carpenter and built houses for "some white and black" people.³⁶ Bruce was not directly involved with the Civil Rights movement at this point because he was concerned with not being able to find work if he was connected to a controversial group: he was nervous that his involvement would affect his business. Bruce came to the realization that "what's the good of a job if you have no friends" upon watching his social group join the movement for justice.³⁷

In the mid to late 1960's, Bruce became a lead activist in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party within Holmes County. Early on, some local teachers and ministers were involved but many avoided the party because they were afraid of being targeted by community members or losing their jobs. In his interview, Bruce recalled that during this period, one black teacher was fired by a white superintendent for being involved in the party. The teachers within

³⁴Bruce, Walter, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Walter Bruce oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

³⁵Bruce, Walter, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Walter Bruce oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

³⁶Bruce, Walter, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Walter Bruce oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

³⁷Bruce, Walter, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Walter Bruce oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

the county all gathered together to listen to Bruce speak about the movement. He stated that “if you’ve got a job and ain’t got your freedom, you don’t have too much.”³⁸ The school personnel rallied together to support the unemployed teacher. Bruce then called the white superintendent and threatened a boycott of the school if the teacher was not given their job back, and the teacher was able to go back to work the next day. While Bruce could have taken the credit for making this injustice right, he instead explained that “when you are together, you can get things done, when you are divided, it won’t work.”³⁹ Community involvement not only spurred the Civil Rights movement but kept the movement in smaller counties afloat by pushing communal support.

The Freedom Democratic Party, according to Bruce, pushed school integration. Bruce and his committees tried to persuade the city of Durant schools to merge with the county schools. The Durant school system, controlled by a white school board, was afraid that if they merged with the county that they would lose control of their district. To combat integration and the changing school policies, white children were pulled out of school by their parents and placed into private Christian schools in Lexington. By 1969, desegregation with deliberate speed was no longer an option in Holmes county, so the public schools served Black children exclusively.

In *Legislating Morality: Attitude Change and Desegregation in Mississippi*, Glenn Abney describes the struggle school districts had complying with integration legislation due to social relations. While Mississippi schools were desegregated by 1971, “most of the classes in elementary schools remained all white as a result of residential patterns.”⁴⁰ Busing became a way for students to integrate into public schools outside of their immediate area. Abney’s study

³⁸Bruce, Walter, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Walter Bruce oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

³⁹Bruce, Walter, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Walter Bruce oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

⁴⁰Abney, Glenn, *Legislating Morality: Attitude Change and Desegregation in Mississippi*. (1976), 333

specifically reviews the attitudes of white parents and black parents in regard to the busing strategies. By bringing students in from other neighborhoods, the school looked on paper to be complying with integration legislation, but students who had to be bussed in from other areas found themselves struggling within their new environment. Due to white flight and mandated busing, Bruce acknowledged that “schools are segregated again today, with Black students in the public schools, with black superintendents and teachers.”⁴¹

Rosie Head

Rosie Head, a prominent civil rights activist, was born and raised in Holmes County alongside her two brothers and seven sisters. At the age of six, Head and her family moved from Lexington to Greenwood where her father had a position as a sharecropper. Because her family did not make enough money as sharecroppers, her father was also a carpenter. Their family lived on the plantation and Head’s mother cooked for the plantation owners’ family. In her interview, when asked about segregation in her early years, Head recalled that when her mother would cook for the plantation owner’s family, she was not allowed to play indoors. If Head wanted to play with the daughter of the plantation owner, she had to do so outside.

Once Head was old enough to work in the fields, she was no longer considered the ‘babysitter’ of the house. The children who could prove that they were able to work, did not need to watch the rest of the siblings at home. At seven years old, Head was picking and planting cotton on the plantation alongside her brothers, sisters, and father. When asked about her family’s treatment by the plantation owner, Head expressed that her family was not paid adequately and there was little they could do to demand justice. The obvious divide between the

⁴¹Bruce, Walter, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Walter Bruce oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

plantation owner and the plantation workers lead to conversations within Head's household. According to Head, "our family was the type of family that talked about what was going on at home."⁴² Head stated that "we were told our place" and "we knew what we could and couldn't do" around those who were white.⁴³ Even though her father was not given proper pay for the work that he did and Head was not allowed to come into the plantation owners' house, her family were forced to do nothing about it, because they knew that their children were in danger if they resisted the system in place.

When asked about her schooling, Rosie remembered that she was not allowed to go to Hickory Springs school in Lexington at the age of six because she had to walk across a creek and was "too little" to take that journey on her own according to her mother.⁴⁴ After her family moved to Greenwood, Rosie started school halfway through the year, in January, at the age of seven. She and her siblings had to walk five miles to school every day from the plantation until, at the age of ten, her school was granted a bus, so she only had to walk two to three miles to the bus stop before the bus took her to school. Her school was held in a single room church where all grades were taught by one teacher. While she does not recall much of her schooling, she stated that all of the children in her segregated school were from the same rural area and that her favorite subject in school was reading.

Rosie Head's school was in town, and she would sometimes go to the local store after her school day to spend her nickels and pennies. This store was the same store where Emmett Till was accused of whistling at a white woman. Emmett was around Rosie's age and visiting for the summer when he was brutally killed by members of the local Ku Klux Klan. Rosie remembered

⁴²Head, Rosie, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Rosie Head oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

⁴³Head, Rosie, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Rosie Head oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

⁴⁴Head, Rosie, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Rosie Head oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

that when her mother heard about the killing on the radio, she “called everyone that they knew to notify them.”⁴⁵ Rosie’s family knew the white woman who accused Emmett Till and had their own encounters with her in the store upon going into town. Head’s family sat the children down after learning about Emmett’s murder and reminded them what they could and could not do while they were in the presence of white people. Rosie’s father explained that “if they stayed in their place, God would take care of them.”⁴⁶ After this encounter, Rosie knew that something had to change. Between her father being treated unfairly while sharecropping and the death of a boy her age, Head decided that radical change needed to happen in her city and beyond.

As John Dittmer, the interviewer, expressed, Rosie Head “stayed out of trouble until she started causing trouble.”⁴⁷ After moving off the plantation to Tchula with her family, Rosie became involved in the local movement to support voting rights at the age of seventeen. She attended meetings in Greenwood and eventually in Tchula when they created a Freedom School in a church. During these meetings in 1963 and 1964, their group of activists talked about segregated schooling, voting rights, and unequal access to education. Finally, Head had “found something that could help and [the movement organizers] could tell them all about it.”⁴⁸ She had not had clear access to education, and even at the young age of seventeen, Head did not want future generations to also have to struggle with what she went through. Being one of the first people in her city to believe in the cause, she was considered a radicalist to many, but Head knew that there was something that needed to be done. By being a part of a group that was able to talk

⁴⁵Head, Rosie, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Rosie Head oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

⁴⁶Head, Rosie, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Rosie Head oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

⁴⁷Head, Rosie, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Rosie Head oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

⁴⁸Head, Rosie, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Rosie Head oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Durant, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf.

about the injustices that she was facing in her education, social life, and basic human rights, Rosie was empowered to bring others into the movement. She began recruiting community members to talk to people about registering to vote and encouraged those who were not represented to take their representation into their own hands. Head pushed for civil rights that were supposed to be granted to her, in order for these rights to be guaranteed for future generations with less of a struggle .

Conclusion

Desegregating schools within Mississippi between the early 1950s and late 1970s was a community affair that depended on internal and external relationships between students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The student-teacher relationship directly affected the future outcomes of students. Even before *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, students and parents were advocating for better schools, more resources, and integrated classrooms. Government involvement in the integration process determined the speed and success of schools becoming fully integrated. While government aid and support provided direct resources for integration, community involvement drove the action behind getting government assistance. Some white communities pushed for segregation in the classroom after the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case that stated that segregation was a violation of the 14th amendment. Desegregation was found to be more successful in areas where interracial activism was prevalent.

Students who developed positive relationships with their teachers, such as Matilda Burns, often furthered their education through high school and went on to become successful after educational careers. Burns remembers having close relationships with specific teachers who encouraged her to exceed expectations. Likewise, she noted the close relationships she cherished with students she taught during her teaching career. While she taught both integrated and

segregated classrooms, she explained that segregation lasted years after the 1954 *Brown vs. the Board of Education* court case and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Robert George Clark recalled the lack of buses in his district as well as going to a one room schoolhouse where grades 1-8 were all taught by two teachers. While he was able to go out of state for a master's degree, he would likely not have had the means to go to college if it wasn't for his teacher who housed him during the week so that he could attend high school. Because the educational staff in his segregated school supported him through his learning career, he, in turn, was able to become an educator himself and later become the first African American to successfully enter the Mississippi House of Representatives.

Walter Bruce remembered his educational experience as one surrounded by his Black community. There was little interaction with white people in his early life. His school experience prepared him to join the workforce and successfully lead the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party where he fought for local teachers, educated his community, and pushed for integration. If it wasn't for his educational experiences, he would not have gone on to change the way that teachers and administrators interacted within integrated schools.

Rosie Head went to a segregated school where she had to walk five miles to school every day with her siblings. Her schooling experience, and the unfair interactions with her father's employer, led her to become a young activist who demanded voting rights for her community. She understood the struggle of growing up in a segregated school and city, and she did not want to see that experience repeat itself in future generations.

Each oral history describes how their future success was directly related to a relationship with teachers or faculty. While many of these students did not see government resources until their children were in school, they each individually fought for desegregation through legislation, activism, parent involvement, and community engagement based on their schooling experiences.

Through the work of interracial school boards, intentionally sending their children to integrate schools, and demanding rights, these oral history stories bond both the personal experiences with the legal developments throughout the 1950s and 1970s.

Bibliography

- Abney, Glenn. 1976. "“Legislating Morality: Attitude Change and Desegregation in Mississippi,”” *Urban Education* 11 (3): 333.
<https://search-ebshost-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=p,uid&db=edb&AN=27323193&site=eds-live>.
- Bolton, Charles C. 2000. "Mississippi’s School Equalization Program, 1945-1954: A Last Gap to Try to Maintain a Segregated.." *Journal of Southern History* 66 (4): 781.
 doi:10.2307/2588011.
- Burns, Julia Matilda, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Julia Matilda Burns oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Tchula, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015669172/>.
- Bradley, Laurence A., and Gifford W. Bradley. "The Academic Achievement of Black Students in Desegregated Schools: A Critical Review." *Review of Educational Research* 47, no. 3 (1977): 399–449. <http://doi:10.3102/00346543047003399>.
- Clark, Robert George, Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Robert G. Clark, Jr., oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Pickens, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015669174/>.
- Clotfelter, Charles T. *After Brown: The rise and retreat of school desegregation*. Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Crain, Robert L. "The Politics of School Desegregation: Comparative Case Studies of Community Structure and Policy-Making." (1969).
- Devlin, Rachel. *A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America's Schools*. Farmington Hills, MI: Thorndike Press Large Print, 2018.

- Dodson, Dan W., and Margaret E. Linders. "Chapter VI: School Desegregation and Action Programs in Intergroup Relations." *Review of Educational Research* 29, no. 4 (1959): 378–87. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543029004378>.
- Head, Rosie M., Interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project. Rosie Head oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Tchula, Mississippi. 2013. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015669173/>.
- Warren, Earl, and Supreme Court of The United States. U.S. Reports: Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483. 1953. Periodical. <https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep347483/>.
- Wells, Amy Stuart, and Robert L. Crain. "Perpetuation Theory and the Long-Term Effects of School Desegregation." *Review of Educational Research* 64, no. 4 (1994): 531–55.