could we display the narratives of selected participants, but also we could contextualize these individual narratives within the broader history of the university.

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23. See Heard & Associates Ltd. Web site, http://www.halrktec.com/index.htm (accessed April 10, 2008).

24. Paul and Emily Douglas Library, Chicago State University, http://library.csu.edu/news/newlib.htm (accessed October 21, 2004).

25. Stull and Lee, Inc.—Architecture and Planning, http://stullandlee.com (accessed April 10, 2008).

26. John Gallagher, "45-Degree Angle: Detroit Architect's First Home Turns Corner on Modern Design," *Detroit Free Press,* November 11, 2007. See also the Urban Design Perspectives Web site at http://www.urbandesignperspectives.com (accessed February 12, 2009).

27. Jack Travis, ed., *African American Architects in Current Practice* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991).

21

Reflections on the *Brown* Commemoration from a Champaign Native

Nathaniel C. Banks

For many years now, I have been ambivalent regarding the lofty notion of desegregation and integration. Because of this, I find that the *Brown v. Board of Education* commemoration helped me to clarify the reasons for that ambivalence and to solidify the origin of some of those jangling thoughts. First, I must admit that I had never given much serious reflection to the 1954 Supreme Court decision regarding desegregation. I was six years old when the decision was handed down. Although I spent part of my kindergarten year in a segregated school, the entire rest of my academic life was spent in "integrated" educational institutions. This experience provided me with a schema that was rather unusual in the 1950s and '60s.

My experiences in those desegregated environments profoundly affected my thinking when it comes to race and education. The *Brown* commemoration activities allowed me to reflect on those experiences. As I listened to the individuals my age and the age of my parents speak of their contributions to and struggles with the notion of desegregation on local and national levels, I was able to identify with their stories and to put my own into a much larger context. I could see how all of those individual and local stories contributed to the tapestry of racial justice on a national level. I was also able to see how my experiences in Champaign-Urbana mirrored those of families at the head of the struggle. Additionally, the commemoration allowed me to see more clearly the thinking that drove the decisions made by my own community leaders: decisions that I have often criticized, because of what I perceived as negative outcomes of desegregation and integration in the Champaign schools.

Now that I am in my sixties, and I am much more reflective, this seems a fitting time to place the notions of integration and desegregation in proper perspective. As a child growing up in the 1950s, I remember hearing adults talking about square pegs and round holes. When I think of my experiences in our local schools, it seems that this analogy is an apt description of my experi-

ences as well as those of other African American children. Based on national achievement statistics, our local struggles mirror those nationally. To slightly modify the metaphor regarding integration and desegregation, our current public educational system is a square hole, and black students are round pegs that we are striving to fit into that hole. With that analogy as a starting point, I offer the following reflections on the impact of *Brown* on my life.

To begin with the positive, I believe that *Brown* helped facilitate significant increases in the numbers of blacks receiving the benefits of public education, thus enabling larger numbers to utilize their education to rise into higher income brackets. I believe that people from low-income working-class families like mine were the primary beneficiaries of the *Brown* decision, and it has allowed us to develop personally and professionally because of the organizing and work that culminated in the *Brown* decision. I also believe that our community leaders had our welfare in mind when they pushed so diligently for desegregation and integration.

Brown, however, was not able to neutralize the underlying problem that made it a necessity. This brings us back to the square hole/round peg metaphor. White supremacy has and will be, at least through my lifetime, the undercurrent that caused the need for *Brown* and that also neutralized much of its intent. Unfortunately, it extends into present-day society. The desire of many whites to be superior and preeminent permeates every aspect of our society, including the educational system. The superiority of one group always comes at the expense of another group. In this country the other group has been and always will be black people. Much of the policy-making in this nation has been and is driven by the shortsighted notion that white supremacy cannot survive if black people are allowed to compete equally in society. The school system has suffered from this way of thinking.

In the Champaign community, or "up south" as we in the black community call it, the promotion of white supremacy has always been accompanied with a smile and is best described as systemic, institutional racism. It is this infrastructure that has produced the Champaign schools' millennium version of *Brown* called the Consent Decree. Regardless of how often and how long we work on the "problem" of a gap in achievement, the underlying assumption is that black children and their families are primarily at fault for their inability to fit into the system. Thus, again the square hole/round peg syndrome. Square and round imply two different cultures and value systems. As long as the round pegs must be forced into the square holes, there will be perpetual conflict.

My experiences in integrated schools led me to hate myself, fear success, eschew challenges, and run from responsibility. In the "integrated" educational system from first grade through a master's degree in college, I have had to learn and live as an outsider. The institutional racism that I and most other black

people experienced affected us in different ways. Three stand out for me. For some, it strengthened the inner desire to succeed. For others, it created a desire to do just the opposite of the goals and purposes of our educational institutions. So if the institutions valued success, we embraced failure. If the institution rewarded hard work, we valued not working at all. If the institutions valued participation, we valued disconnectedness. A third reaction to white supremacy and institutional racism includes a combination of the first two.

That is the reaction that I and many of my peers took. We were the ones who were told by our parents "you have to be twice as good to get half as far." Some of us embraced that notion and became twice as good. Many of us decided that the burden of constantly striving to meet unattainable standards was a burden not worth bearing. We wondered to ourselves, Why can't I just be who I am: an average person wanting to live a decent life? Why do I have to work to please people that could care less about me in the first place? Many of us with this reaction went on to have children and grandchildren. Our progeny inherited those deep-seated feelings and frustrations.

One of the by-products is what we now describe as the "achievement gap."[1] The phenomenon, however, is not new, nor has it been overlooked by scholars. My experiences and the experiences of many African American children are well known to scholars and have been described by many writers. Recently Janice E. Hale summarized the views of a number of scholars whose findings echo my own experience: "Ray McDermott defines African Americans as being a pariah group in American society. F. Barth says that they are actively rejected by the host population because of behavior or characteristics positively condemned by group standards. V. P. Franklin has noted that African Americans are considered pariahs because whites no longer need their labor. McDermott's structural inequality thesis holds that the host population works to defeat the efforts of the pariah child to beat the cycle of degradation that is his birthright."[2] Collectively, these authors indicate that the square hole/round peg paradigm is deliberate and an integral part of the American society.

Because our society operates in a square hole/round peg way, one might ask whether the lot of black people is hopeless. I would contend that the answer is no. It does, however, mean that institutional racism must be taken into account in order to understand our ability to embrace and succeed within the educational system. We need to be diligent in imagining and building social structures and institutions free of racism in order for us to live productive and meaningful lives. Many African Americans have unrealistically concluded that the *Brown* decision and other civil rights initiatives would lead to general social acceptance, as if we would just be able to force our round pegs into the square holes of integration and desegregation. We have mistakenly reasoned that we would be accepted and valued if we could just sit in physical proximity to white students. So, whether

we are looking at the issue of busing, neighborhood schools, reading programs, parental involvement, or other issues, we as black people have been viewing our success or lack thereof from a round peg perspective. I am not suggesting that all of our issues stem from unrealistic expectations of desegregation and integration. I am, however, saying that we in the black community need to do a major readjustment in our thinking and reevaluate our focus if we want to benefit in meaningful ways from the legacy of *Brown*.

As a Christian, an artist, a parent, and an educator, issues of justice, kindness, love, and respect for human life have guided and directed my personal and social development. I have learned that those issues also play a huge role in the development of our children into citizens of this society. In order for children to become productive adults, certain things need to happen during their formative years. For instance, I believe that in order for children to develop properly, it is essential for them to be and feel nurtured. When we as adults create positive, nurturing learning environments, it is more possible to educate our youth and more likely that they will succeed.

I would not use the word "nurturing" to describe my own personal experiences with the integrated public schools. My experience was closer to alienation. This was especially true once I was of middle and high school age. As a result, my potential as a student in that system was limited to the confines of that environment. Fortunately for me, I had a strong family and community background from which to draw my sense of self and well-being. To be fair, there was also a handful of teachers who took educating all of their students seriously. In my eighteen years of educational experiences, I can think of approximately four people that fit the description. I responded to the positive environments in their individual classrooms. Most of the time, however, I found very little support in the school system.

My negative experiences in the public schools had a lasting affect on my outlook toward educational systems in general and our local schools in particular. Those experiences have affected me socially. For instance, I have never been to a high school reunion and have no desire to ever attend one. My reasoning was and is simple: why would one want to reunite with bad experiences? That same mindset stayed with me through my college interactions as well: I would never think of attending a reunion of my college. I have, however, attended reunions sponsored by former college classmates who, like me, felt alienated from the larger university. These negative experiences with public education usually happen to African Americans in integrated or desegregated environments. I can remember conversations with students who attended predominately black primary and secondary schools and colleges where they expressed fond memories of their school days, their teachers, and their classmates. In general, those former students seemed to be more satisfied with their lives and more able to create and develop a purpose for themselves than many students like myself who attended integrated schools.

Rather than let these negative feelings fester, I chose to run for a seat on the local school board to help address this issue of alienation from a policy and systems perspective. Even today, as a public school board member, I see regularly how disconnected the black students are in our system. Although I am deeply saddened by this, I fully understand why our students feel as they do. I am committed to promoting policies that will change the culture of alienation with which so many of our students struggle.

The children of today are the grandchildren of those who were in school when *Brown v. Board of Education* was delivered. It is apparent to me that the contemporary responses of African American children to their educational environment, although more extreme than ours, are still rooted in the same sense of alienation from a culture that is hostile to their educational achievement. The system of education, regardless of all of the rhetoric and outward changes, has not changed the square hole/round peg culture. It shows no real inclination to change in the foreseeable future. The "square hole" of white supremacy and institutional racism is still alive and well. One can't help but wonder how much further we or our offspring might have gone if most us had been educated in an educational system where love, nurturing, and high expectations were the rule rather than the exception.

So what should be done? Unfortunately, we cannot look merely to national leadership to facilitate the kind of change needed. When it comes to equity and achievement, the national solutions seem to be focused on punishing round pegs for being round. We are, however, still blessed with the notion that the education of our children needs to happen primarily on the local level. I submit that our local community needs to change itself radically on the preschool and elementary level. We must work to establish nurturing and supportive environments that increase the numbers of children in that first category. We should make the school systems flexible enough to allow for the creation of smaller, nurturing schools. Those schools should be controlled by the community they serve. The educational research clearly indicates that schools showing success with black children are small and nurturing. They have teachers who are able to identify with the students, and the students are able to identify with them. They have strong support from families. And finally, they utilize the surrounding community as a resource.

Locally, we are not without positive models. Several notable examples give me hope that there are modest gains being made in changing the culture of indifference toward children of color. Two are from the local public schools and two from private environments. In each case, the keys to success lie in the quality and commitment of the staff, the vision and competence of the leadership, and

the attitude of staff toward the children's families. One exemplary program can be found at Canaan Academy. At Canaan children at the preschool level are learning to count to a hundred in at least four languages. They also learn logic and ethical behavior. At Stratton and Booker T. Washington Elementary Schools in Champaign, children are being taught in an environment that respects bilingual and foreign language backgrounds. At the Nia Nation Freedom School Summer Program, students are encouraged to have deep discussions about their reading materials. Their reading materials also reflect their own cultural frames of reference. All of these educational environments have teachers who know their students' learning styles and their families. These few local programs can serve as examples to others schools in our local public school systems. They give me hope that ultimately *Brown* was, in fact, more positive than negative in addressing needs of access to the benefits of the educational system. In the fifty years since *Brown v. Board of Education,* would I have preferred to see more progress in Champaign-Urbana? I would have to answer yes to that question. One thing is certain: those families and social institutions responsible for *Brown v. Board of Education* exhibited a determined and focused commitment to justice for African American families. In our current multicultural world, those same qualities are still needed. Their diligence inspires me to continue their legacy by remembering and acting on it within my own context, and to encourage as many young people as will listen that they must do the same.

Notes

1. Douglas N. Harris and Carolyn D. Herrington, "Accountability, Standards, and the Growing Achievement Gap: Lessons from the Past Half-Century," *American Journal of Education* 112, no. 2 (2006): 209–38; Jaekyung Lee, "Racial and Ethnic Achievement Gap Trends: Reversing the Progress toward Equity," *Educational Researcher* 31, no. 1 (2002): 3–12; Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2004).

2. Janice E. Hale, *Unbank the Fire: Visions for the Education of African American Children* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 155.

22

Reform in the Black Power Era

Joy Ann Williamson Lott

The black freedom struggle of the mid-twentieth century suffers from sterilization in the collective American memory. It is treated as a relic, a long-ago era that finally brought legal precedent in line with American ideas on democracy, freedom, and equality. Sanitizing history in this manner ignores the difficulty of the reformation process and minimizes the costs that activists paid when attempting to make the American Dream a reality. This piece seeks to humanize the reforms of the Black Power era at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). It is not a discussion of the intricate nature of reform, but the climate in which the reforms occurred. In the late 1960s campus administrators and black students clashed on the kinds of reforms necessary to make UIUC a hospitable learning environment and valuable campus experience for black students. While they engaged in careful deliberations, both administrators and black students were under siege from a variety of internal and external sources admonishing them to focus on the business of education. Under these conditions, the reform process was intensely stressful. The point of this piece is to remind us of the price UIUC constituents, particularly black students, paid to make the reforms a reality.[1]

Champaign, Illinois, was a southern town in its attitude toward and treatment of black residents well into the twentieth century. By the 1930s the city maintained a firm pattern of residential and educational segregation. Commercial sites like barber shops, theaters, and restaurants maintained segregated service policies until the early 1960s. UIUC supported similar regulations by barring black students from residence halls, maintaining all-white sports teams out of courtesy to "a Big Ten understanding," and allowing white student organizations to have racially restrictive covenants.[2] The increased demand for democratic rights at the end of World War II and the liberal attitudes of certain administrators, faculty, and students influenced university policy in the mid-1940s, but the university took only small and measured steps toward creating a hospitable campus climate for the small number of black students. University officials opened residence halls to black students in 1945, but only did so after being shamed in the black Chicago press and by a public campaign spearheaded by a black state