Civil Rights

Yonis

[Institutional Affiliation(s)]

Author Note

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In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court gave a landmark decision in *Brown. Board* wherein they unanimously held that racial segregation in all its forms at public schools is contrary to the Constitution. The decision is among the major civil rights initiative in the last century and is considered to be instrumental in reducing race inequality in education and public life in general. In the paper, the *Brown v. Board* case would be discussed in terms of its background and its impact on U.S. public policies at the time of the decision as well as in the future ahead.

In the 1950s prior to the U.S. Supreme Court decision, segregation in public schools was a common practice or requirement, especially in Southern states. In spite of the claim that schools for black students were equal to their white counterparts, it was a common observance that the former significantly lacked in terms of the quality of education and basic necessities and facilities it provided to the students (Patterson, 2001). The practice was sanctioned by the earlier Supreme Court Ruling in 1896 in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that it was legal for public facilities to be racially segregated on condition that they provide equal facilities for whites and blacks (Patterson, 2001). The same ruling also sanctioned the Jim Crow laws that barred African Americans from sharing the same public facilities, such as buses, with the white population, relying upon the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine. It was in 1951 when Oliver Brown filed a suit against the Topeka Board of Education for denying entrance to his daughter at a white-elementary school.

The U.S. Supreme Court in May 1954 unanimously decided that segregation between black children and white children violated the 14th amendment regardless of whether tangible factors within schools such as their physical facilities are equal. In the decision, Justice Warren held that the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ did not have a place in the domain of public education as segregation in schools is inherently unequal (Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954).

Although the initiative taken by the Supreme Court did not achieve desegregation immediately by its own, however, the ruling proved instrumental in fueling the emergence of the civil rights movement. A year after the decision, the Rosa Parks incident occurred which led sparked protests, sit-ins, and boycotts, among which Martin Luther King Jr. also participated. The protests eventually led to the removal of Jim Crow laws, and eventually led to the passage of the 1964 ‘Civil Rights Act.' The Act hastened the desegregation process throughout the nation and was soon followed by the 1968 Fair Housing Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. This legislation, in turn, lead to widespread desegregation in the South and by the late 1970s, significant racial integration was achieved (Patterson, 2001). The most significant impact of the Brown decision was that equal protection extended to other areas of law, and while *Brown v. Board* did not begin the movement for civil rights, it served as the turning point in the movement for racial equality. Although other forces were at play, however, the Brown decision had a significant symbolic effect that supplemented other factors in the civil rights legislation.

The overall effects of the Supreme Court decision on the civil rights movement and on public education as a whole can be divided in terms of indirect and direct effects. The direct effects included widespread desegregation in schools, whereas the indirect influences included national attention towards civil rights issues, inspiring different grassroots activism movements for racial equality and a greater sense of guilt among the Northern states. Before the decision, there were no black children in Kentucky studying within the same school as white children. The percentage grew to 54% within a decade. Similarly, in Oklahoma, the figures grew from 0% in 1954 to 28% in 1964 (Klarman, 1994). These influences led many analysts and scholars to see the Brown decision as laying important groundwork for racial equality legislation in the future.

The decision by the Supreme Court proved to be a transformative power. Although it did not end racial conflict, it led a significant impact on public views with regards to racial oppression. It reduced the influence of white supremacists in maintaining social segregation in various areas of public life and brought down systemic racial hierarchy that used to exist prior to the decision. For African-American students, it was a heavy milestone in terms of gaining access to the same quality education as white citizens (Reed, 2000). Moreover, it moved the public debate on equal education to the center stage and advocacy regarding fair and equal access to quality education became part of the public discourse (Ricks, 2004).

Another contribution of the decision was creating precedents for future legislation and initiatives. Nearly four decades after the decision, the U.S. Supreme Court green-lighted affirmative action in enrolment of minority students in higher education institutions, in the Michigan decision. The court held that diversity in campuses prepares students to work in a better way in the workplace and society at large. The effects of the Brown decision could also be noticed in terms of reduced disparities in mathematics and reading skills between white and black students, along with reduced income gaps between adults (Ferguson & Mehta, 2002). Although disparities in jobs still exist on the basis of ethnicity or race, however, improved skills among students led to significantly improved employment prospects compared to earlier times (Ferguson & Mehta, 2002).

To conclude, those born in the 21st century have seen significantly improved conditions as a result of the policies and legislation that were influenced by early civil rights-based initiatives such as the *Brown v. Board* decision*.* Racial barriers to employment and education have significantly weakened over the years, and progress is evident. However, despite achieving important milestones in terms of civil rights, there is still room for enhanced policy measures to improve access to resources for students in order to further narrow achievement gaps.

# References

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