The Struggle for Educational Equality

Junior Division

Individual Research Paper
Education is a very important aspect of our current world. In order to be successful, you must have a good education. In today’s society, it is probably hard for many to imagine what a world of unequal education would be like. Well, back in the 1950’s, white Americans segregated themselves from black Americans. They believed that education as well could be equal when separate. It is the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954 that ended the segregation in education. This landmark decision had a profound effect on the people in the United States and proved that integrated education had a long lasting educational, social, and political impact on the life of African Americans. The case of Brown vs. Board of Education has proven to be one of the most important turning points in our history, and it also highlights the pivotal role of the U.S. Supreme Court in shaping our nation and society.

Let us first go back in the history to find the root of racial injustice for African Americans. When our founding fathers founded America, there were the 13 colonies. The Southern side had more of an agricultural economy while the North had an industrial economy. As America as a nation grew, cotton plantations began to expand throughout the South. So in order to support large cotton plantations, the South needed manpower. The cheapest manpower available at the time was slaves. Off on the Western coast of Africa, slave traders caught native African people and shipped them over to the America. That is where slaves come from. Even after the Civil War, former slaves and descendants of slaves were still not treated equally. For the next hundred years, they struggled for equal rights and just overall equality. My project on Brown vs. Board of Education shows how a major Supreme Court case changed the educational inequality for African Americans.
One of the major challenges that the Brown vs. Board of Education faced was to prove that the “separate but equal” doctrine was not true. However, where did such doctrine come from? Well, it all began with Plessy vs. Ferguson. In 1896 Louisiana, Homer Plessy rode in a coach for whites in a railroad train. He was 1/8 black and the stationmaster told him to ride in the black coach. But he refused. This case was brought up to the Supreme Court at the time, and the Supreme Court ruled that as long as the compartments were of equal standards, blacks and whites could be segregated. Thus, the doctrine of “separate but equal” remained in place (though not unchallenged) for almost 60 years until the Brown vs. Board of Education changed that completely. What swayed this court to decide in Oliver Brown’s favor? I think the following three main areas of the argument were critical. Of these the most important was the actual argument that segregation had negative effects on black children’s minds. To prove this, a social scientist, Kenneth Clark, conducted so called “Kenneth Clark doll test”. In this test, Clark asked black children (segregated) to select a doll that they wanted to be. Black children overwhelmingly chose the white doll. This implied that segregation had a negative impact on black children’s self-esteem. The second reason was that there was a new Chief Justice who favored integration rather than segregation. Chief Justice Earl Warren had made the decision on the separation of Japanese into camps during World War II when he was the Attorney General in California (the decision that Justice Warren regretted in his late years). In Brown vs. Board of Education, Chief Justice Earl Warren played an essential role in persuading other Justices. Finally, this was the first major case that challenged “separate but equal” and was backed up by the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and their chief lawyer Thurgood Marshall. He had the know-how for this case and had a good argument.
All of these helped the Supreme Court make its unanimous decision to destroy the “separate but equal” doctrine.

However, the progress was slow. One year later (in 1955), Brown vs. Board of Education II was passed. The wording in the decision that integration can be made “with all deliberate speed” implies that in order to desegregate, you can take as much time as necessary. Some of the Southern states took advantage of this and delayed desegregation until 1980 or so. Nevertheless, this doesn’t change the fact that Brown vs. Board of Education was a landmark case representing a huge turning point in our history. Despite what I will say (and mostly what you think is good) and all the good that is in our current world, I will remind you that we must continue our battle against segregation. For if we don’t, then we will slowly but surely slip back into the ages of segregation.

Now that you know what Brown vs. Board of Education was all about, I will talk to you about the after effects. As Oliver Brown’s daughter, Linda Brown Smith, said remembering her father, “I think about what my father, and what other parents did, and what my family did, as far as our part that we played in Brown v. Board of Education, and I feel that because of what my father thought, and because of what other parents throughout the land thought about their child having to live with the stigma of not having a choice, and what they did, has caused that stigma to be lifted, today.” This is from an interview on October 26, 1985. Even after 30 years, Ms. Smith thought that there was still an impact of Brown vs. Board of Education on black children and other minorities.

Moreover, some of our most influential black people today say that their success was all because of Brown vs. Board of Education. Cheryl Brown Henderson, another
daughter of Oliver Brown, is now the President and CEO of the Brown Foundation for Educational Equity, Excellence and Research. When she talked about how Brown vs. Board of Education affected her, she said that “However, above all else in the wake of Brown I leaned that individual academic achievement has nothing to do with the race or ethnicity of who a student is sitting next to. Individual academic achievement, like other presumed indicators of success, is based on a multitude of variables, race and ethnicity are only factored in if they are used to withhold resources and opportunities.”. And even our very own secretary of education said that “… the world of opportunity was opening up for us.” Brown created more opportunities and helped and others to take another (educational) step forward in their life.

There are statistical data support my thesis too. As stated in the book of “50 Years After Brown v. Board of Education: The Promise and Challenge of Multicultural Education” (by Sabrina Zirkel* Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center Nancy Cantor),

“Students of color represent two to three times the percentage of college graduates, four to seven times the percentage of law graduates, and two to four times the percentage of medical school graduates than they did in 1960 (Bowen & Bok, 1998).” Furthermore, in a recent NBC News: Education Nation, statistics showed that black graduation rates have been increased over the last few years. Specifically, NBC News: Education Nation said “… it has improved significantly in the last eleven years…”. The opposite of graduation rates is dropout rates. What the National Center for Education Statistics (US Department of Education) found was that in the 1970’s, dropout rates were at 13.2% for black students. In 2010, the dropout rates were at 8%. A 5.2% decrease in dropouts. That is a significant number to consider. Taken together, Brown vs. Board of Education has certainly improved
the education black Americans.

In my annotated bibliography, you will see one set of two different pictures depicting students in classroom from pre-Brown and post-Brown eras. Those pictures show that we as a society have been more accepting and integration occurs even in pre-schools. People are changing in a changing society. Furthermore, changes in education have led to other positive trends in the life of black Americans. In the National Bureau of Economic Research’s recent study, they found that “The earnings gap between southern-born black men and non-southern-born black men in the same birth cohort narrowed by about 10 percent in the post-desegregation group.” A difference of 10% is a significant change. Now that I have talked about incomes, it’s best to give the actual numbers. In 1970, 28.9% of blacks earned under $15,000 and now, only this number dropped to 25.4% (that is an improvement because less people are in the low income category). Also, 1.6% make over $200,000 in 2010 while no African American made that in 1970. These data indicated that the life of black Americans have improved after desegregation and will continue to improve if we hold true to its laws and rulings.

In a recent edition of Teaching Tolerance, an educational magazine focusing on diversity issues, many famous and important black people talked about that Brown vs. Board of Education was an important moment because it changed our society’s way of thinking and responding to such situations. “Brown v. Board of Education (1954) opened the door to widespread social change...” Most black Americans have experienced a very emotional change in their life due to Brown vs. Board of Education. Julian Bond (former chairman of NAACP) said: “...reinforced pre-existing assumptions they had of equality with
Whites...”. Brown vs. Board of Education boosted confidence and reinforced all the social rights that were guaranteed to all men when the Constitution was written. In my own school and many other schools like Winburn Middle, there are black students learning together with Hispanics, whites and students from diverse backgrounds. Brown vs. Board of Education has certainly changed our schools as well as our society. Blacks and whites treat each other equally and with respect. Even all the facts cannot sway the most stubborn person, no one can deny that and we all must accept that Brown vs. Board of Education did have an effect.

The influence of Brown vs. Board of Education has spread beyond education. Today, we live in a society that both blacks and whites have political rights and power. Although blacks can vote and have all the rights guaranteed in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution for over a hundred years, throughout the history of African Americans, they have always had to fight for their rights. Take Martin Luther King Jr. for example, he and others fought for political and social freedoms for blacks. Now, we honor him in January every year. Over the years, there are black Americans elected to offices to represent black and all Americans. For example, Rod Paige, a black kid grew up in Mississippi, served as secretary of education from 2001 to 2005. Without the ruling of Brown vs. Board of Education, these people might not be where they are today. Moreover, the election of President Obama in 2008 and re-election in 2012 clearly indicated that black Americans are making further progression politically. If you listened to any coverage of recent election, you would know that Republicans and Democrats all fought for minority support in order to win the key swing states. One of those minorities is the black American. Brown vs. Board of Education is one of the major contributing factors that resulted in all the political changes we see today.
Black Americans have come a long way since they were brought to America as slaves. The education of black Americans has also come a long way since the time of Brown vs. Board of Education, and now is not the time to stop. No, it is the time for Americans to continue in its long battle to get equal education opportunities for all children of different racial backgrounds. Brown vs. Board of Education has started one of the major changes in the life of black Americans. However, even in our current society, an old threat in a new veil has approached. School district borders are being redrawn so that segregation is once again a threat. We cannot stop here or we will slip back down the long and treacherous tunnel we have almost climbed out of. Now is the time to continue our fight against inequality!

In summary, Brown vs. Board of Education has caused significant educational, social, and political changes. Brown vs. Board of Education has changed our world. Brown vs. Board of Education has certainly been an interesting topic to research and I have learned a lot from it. From the individual elements of Brown vs. Board of Education to the major turning point, it started the ever-lasting change in our society. As Martin Luther King Jr. would have said: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” We have come a long way in MLK’s mind and we must continue to carry out this dream!
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


This is the official decree that made the Brown vs. Board of Education official. I think this document is a good example of the intent of the Supreme Court. I plan to use this to contrast it with what actually happened in response to the ruling. It is an original document of the Supreme Court.


These two pictures compare the changes between before and after Brown vs. Board of Education. The change is apparent as one has all blacks and the other has an integrated class. The change in Brown vs. Board of Education has affected us and change the way we live. These two are both pictures from the National Archives.

Even though I am doing my project on Brown vs. Board of Education, understanding Plessy vs. Ferguson is essential to understanding Brown vs. Board of Education. A newspaper is required for our research so this primary source newspaper is an excellent one for research and analysis. This paper of the time is original and found in the Library of Congress so it is reputable.


I used the interview to get a personal look of how this case affected the daughter of Oliver Brown. Linda Brown Smith provides a detailed response to the questions. This gives me even more information and an impact on society source to analyze.


It is important to have a primary source in any research. With a transcript, I can get a feel for what the wording and actual thoughts were going on. Also, this source helps explain the final decision and its wording and tone. This is the official document so it is very reliable.


Even though I am doing Brown vs. Board of Education, it is important to know about Plessy vs. Ferguson. This is because Brown vs. Board of Education overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine that Plessy vs. Ferguson set up. If I know more about Plessy vs. Ferguson, then I will better understand the overturning of it (Brown vs. Board of Education).

Secondary Sources


This book has many perspectives on the affects of Brown vs. Board of Education. It has a lot of information on this case. It has given me positive and negative affects of Brown vs. Board of
Education. It also includes information on before the case and the case itself (attorneys, plaintiffs, etc.). It is a very reputable source with information I knew and much more that I didn’t know.


This paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) helped me prove that blacks after Brown vs. Board of Education had better income compared to when they were segregated (this is all compared to your average white man income). This proves the social (which I guess is economics) part of my thesis statement.


This source is a high school teacher's paper for teaching. This secondary source (in an unbiased tone) described the change in society. Also, it described the effectiveness of the court’s decision on society. This source will help me prove that this case was a turning point (to some degree) of history.

**Cases in Controversy The Fourteenth Amendment. 2003. Jumby Bay Studios. 2012. DVD.

This source gives a good overview of Brown vs. Board of Education and other cases leading up to it including Plessy vs. Ferguson, Sweatt vs. Painter, and McLaurin vs. Oklahoma. The documentary has a good deal of information on those cases and Brown so it should be an excellent overview of the Brown case. Also, based on my research so far, this source is a reputable source with the right information.


This web site shows an improvement in the black income spread. It proves my thesis very well in the social impact. Brown vs. Board of Education has certainly changed the world of America. This is a very significant change in black history.
This document is from the National Archives for a lesson plan for teachers. However, there is background information that provides the multiple perspectives needed for these notes. This has the two perspectives of the Brown side and the Board of Education side. This will provide a deeper insight for me on the Brown case.

This document by the NCES (National Center for Education Statistics) made a study of high school dropout rates from 1960-present. 1960 is around when Brown got settled out and was resisted. Slow to start but now with a steady decrease of black dropouts, Brown did have an educational effect.

For our NHD project, we have to conduct an interview. Oral history is the best so interviewing a Historical Society person would be a great source of information. He answered many of the questions I had and he was a big help to my NHD project. He also pointed me to many other sources of information.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a huge impact on black rights. He was substantial to the Civil Rights and he made the famous education quotes in his “I Have a Dream” speech. Also, my paper needs some big way to end and MLK has some great quotes to end it off.

This is a Supreme Court case that was summarized by a Tulane Law School student. He was nominated to be a clerk in 2007 for the Supreme Court. I plan to use this as a starting point for my research and is a good starting point.

This source was written by a professor on Brown vs. Board of Education. He gave a historical background and a historical impact summary. I used this to help me give the historical context of the time period and a detailed idea of the people’s view back then.


This is an NBC report on black high school graduates. Though only 52% graduate, it is a good improvement over previous years graduation rates. This proves the slow but good growth in education after Brown. This report was succinct so it was a good source.


This source is a National Museum of American History web page. This is a document giving a good overview of Brown vs. Board of Education. Although it is a little short for a document, it is a good starting point of research.


The *Teaching Tolerance* magazine had a great conversation with some of the better known black people of the U.S.A. With people such as Cheryl Brown Henderson (Oliver Brown’s daughter), Rod Paige (Secretary of Education), Dan Rather (author and managing editor of CBS evening news), and others. They all had personal experiences with Brown v. Board so they all had opinion on Brown. But they prove that Brown did help African Americans from social and political power standpoints.


This web page is full of the individual parts of what happened during Brown vs. Board of Education. It is a good representation of a black view and provides even the smallest parts. It is a
very good page full of information I can use in order to do research on NHD. This document is part of The Library of Congress and should be reliable.


This source was a great proof of my thesis statement. It proved that black education has improved and has moved towards integration over the past 50 years. Written by a graduate student and research center person, this information is reliable and proves the education part of my thesis.