Desegregation of Public Education in the United States:
A Curriculum Unit

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Section I: Overview

This unit is designed to provide historical understanding of the events, peoples, and ideas of the desegregation of the American public school system. While desegregation was a momentous and complex process that fundamentally changed public education in America, this section provides for only some of the general information and historical background knowledge necessary for the implementation of the unit. Desegregation was just one aspect of the larger Civil Rights Movement in America. Thus, teachers are strongly encouraged to seek other sources, information, and perspectives (See Section III – Bibliography) regarding the events and views of desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement in order to expand the breadth of knowledge on these pivotal eras of U.S. History.

The 1954 Supreme Court decision Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (from here on referred to as Brown) was a landmark case in the history of the United States. The decision fundamentally changed not only education, but was a decision that changed the fate of American history at large. The decision ruled that the 1896 Supreme Court decision Plessy v. Ferguson (from here on referred to as Plessy) was unconstitutional, as it denied black Americans equal educational opportunities. Plessy declared that desegregation in the Unites States was constitutional as long as educational facilities for blacks and whites were equal—the “separate but equal” doctrine. However, as demonstrated in the history of desegregation, the doctrine was not only unfair but outright discriminatory toward black Americans. Plessy was challenged and overturned by the 1954 Court, which unanimously conferred that racial segregation of the American public school system violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) led
the movement for desegregation and the association’s chief counsel, Thurgood Marshall, was the lead lawyer for the plaintiffs of *Brown*.

In studying desegregation, it is important to keep in mind that there were other movements and cases that paved the way for the success of *Brown*, and students should also be familiar with all the events and cases that led up to the *Brown* ruling. For example, *Brown* originated in an appeal to the Supreme Court from the NAACP. Linda Brown, a third grader, was denied entry into an all-white school in Topeka, Kansas. The Topeka NAACP filed a suit in 1951. The District Court, however, ruled in favor of the Topeka Board of Education, citing *Plessy*, which the Court argued abided state law requiring the “separate but equal” doctrine. The District Court’s ruling was then appealed by the plaintiffs and the NAACP to the Supreme Court. Oliver Brown, who the case is named after, “was just one of the nearly 200 plaintiffs from five states who were part of the various NAACP cases brought before the Supreme Court in 1951” (http://brownvboard.org/summary/). In fact, *Brown* represented five cases in all. The others were from Delaware (*Gebhart v. Belton*), South Carolina (*Briggs v. Elliott*), Virginia (*Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*), and Washington, D.C. (*Bolling v. Sharpe*).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>The parents of black students try to enroll them in the local &quot;white schools.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>The suit is started by Oliver Brown and other parents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>The Supreme Court first heard from the lawyers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>One justice died and had to be replaced.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>The case ends in favor of Linda Brown</td>
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Timeline accessed from: http://library.thinkquest.org/J0112391/the_fight_for_desegregation.htm

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in favor of Brown and the NAACP. Though there was still a heavy segregationist population in the United States, and although there
were many state and national political figures who did not agree with the Court (like Governor Faubus of Arkansas), the case proved crucial for the history of desegregation and the ensuing Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

This unit devotes special attention to the initial events of desegregation as they occurred in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957, three years after the Brown case was decided. The governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, defied the federal Court’s Brown ruling and dispatched the Arkansas National Guard to prevent African-American students from entering Little Rock Central High School in September, 1957. The nine black students were barred from entering Central High while an angry mob of white segregationists threatened, spat on, and harassed the students who were just trying to attend school. One black reporter was smashed in the head with a brick and other black reporters were beaten, while damage was done to the school. Ensuring that the Faubus and the segregationists would not defy federal law, President Dwight Eisenhower dispatched 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock and placed the Arkansas National Guard under federal command. A total of 1,200 paratroopers of the 101st Airborne remained in Little Rock for some time to prevent mob rioting, and each of the nine black students was assigned a troop as an escort to ensure their safety, but this did not last the whole year. There were still incidents and hateful acts of violence and threats from white students within Central High that the nine black students had to endure for an entire school year. Desegregation, and the hateful and discriminatory acts of racist students, took an emotional and physical toll on the Little Rock Nine. But despite their struggles, finally, in May, 1958, Ernest Green, a member of The Little Rock Nine, graduated from Central High School. But the story of desegregation does not end here. Racism and de facto-segregation still exist and should be discussed as the teacher and students move forward with their next unit (Brown, 2004; & Hochschild, 1985).
Desegregation of public schools did not come easy. During the 1950’s, the move to provide equal educational access for black Americans was controversial, fiercely debated, and often led to violence. Traditional, safe historical interpretations tend to downplay or belittle the brutality and violence at the hands of white segregationist that was a part of the move to desegregate schools and society. Hence, this unit intently focuses on the lives of those Americans who were victims of injustice, violence, and unfair treatment, with a particular focus on forbearers of the process, The Little Rock Nine. These were the Americans who were the most integral in the desegregation of public schools.

Though many other materials and authors (Huchaby, 1980; Patterson, 2001; civilrightsteaching.org) will be drawn on for this unit, the central text is *Warriors Don’t Cry* (1994), written Melba Pattillo Beals. Learning about the broader historical events is important to the study of desegregation, but students should also be exposed to what everyday people who had to literally fight for desegregation went through. Students need to be exposed to the voices of the actual people who lived through desegregation. In *Warrior’s Don’t Cry*, Beals provides an autobiographical account of the struggle that her, her family, and her fellow black students faced in the racist South in the beginning years of desegregation. Beals documents her and her family’s daily experiences as victims of racial discrimination and injustice, which will offer students a heart-felt view that will surely raise student intrigue in desegregation, a view few textbooks can ever portray. However, since this unit is mostly devised around the particular experiences of The Little Rock Nine, teachers should reference the Bibliography in Section III for further primary and secondary sources that address desegregation on the national level, which can help familiarize students with some of the broader national and political events surrounding desegregation.
In sum, this unit on desegregation is designed to familiarize students with those individuals most integral in the historical events of desegregation and civil rights in the United States. The main point of emphasis is in studying *Brown v. Board of Education* and the case’s repercussions, as first exemplified in Little Rock. A broader unit on the historical context of racism and U.S. History needs to precede this unit as well as be integrated with it. The unit will also assist teachers in fostering the experiential learning of students with respect to desegregation and Little Rock. An important feature of the next section is to guide students in acquiring in-depth understanding of the events and people of desegregation.

**Section II: Activities**

One major goal of the activities section is to provide a continuity of hands-on educational experiences for students. For example, Activity 1 provides historical context while Activity 4 helps students consider the contemporary state of affairs concerning race relations and how modern education and society are products of the events and ideas of the past. When students complete both of these activities, they are enriching their historical knowledge and also contemplating how the past impacts the present and perhaps the future. Here, I offer some example activities, and educators should not feel compelled to undertake every activity on this list; however, continuity should be an important part of any history unit. The question of precisely how to promote historical continuity is a contextual matter for each individual teacher to decide. Also, each activity should be modified depending on grade-level, teacher preference, and classroom and curricula restraints.

- **Activity 1 – Research and Biographical Sketches for Historical Context**
  
  Students are to choose one prominent figure in the desegregation movement. This person may be a national, state, or local political figure (such as Thurgood Marshall, Governor Faubus, a NAACP leader, or Supreme Court Justice). But this historical figure could also be an “everyday, normal” person (such as Melba Beals or another member of the Little Rock Nine).
Students will then research this figure to acquire background knowledge and understanding of his/her particular role in desegregation. Students should research a wide variety of sources, including, but not limited to, primary source such as the Brown case itself (http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=347&invol=483); newspaper and magazine archives; books and other biographies and autobiographies; black and progressive organizations; educational websites such as: http://www.nationalcenter.org/brown.html; http://www.nps.gov/brvb/index.htm; and http://www.centralhigh57.org/index.html. (See Section III - Bibliography)

The biographical sketches should include at least:

- a timeline of the figure’s involvement in desegregation
- a short summary detailing the figure’s life
- a summary (approximately one page) discussing why this person was an influential figure in the movement

• Activity 2 – Book Review Essay

- Have students read Warrior's Don't Cry. After reading the book, students are to write a thoughtful review of the book. This review should be a carefully crafted, rigorous piece of writing.
- The review should involve various phases of preparation, e.g., brainstorming, note taking, outlining, rough draft, and final copy. It is important to note that these phases take place during and after reading the book, not just after. The book essay should be at least four pages in length and be comprised of two parts:
  - **Part 1 – Summary.** The first part of the essay will summarize the book’s content. Teachers should provide a book review prompt with the following questions: Who were the main participants in the book? What is the basic story? What were the most important events or scenes? How did the book begin and how did it end?
  - **Part 2 – Analysis and Opinion.** The second part of the essay, students will provide their personal thoughts on the book. Some possible questions to pose to students are: Why did they like or not like it? Who were their favorite characters? What parts were most interesting? Does the book have any impact on their lives or on education?

• Activity 3 – Individual Project

- While students are studying desegregation they will complete an individual project. The individual project will promote the artistic expression of students. It is important for teachers to reiterate to students that they do not have to be “artistic,” at least as the term is popularly understood, to complete this activity. Artistic is whatever the teacher prefers it to be, and whatever the individual student feels is artistic, as long as
he or she is creating an original piece of work. Some possible individual projects include:

- paint a portrait of the person they chose
do their biographical sketch on
create a blog or website about desegregation
a PowerPoint presentation
write a poem or song
write a short story
draw a portrait of the person they chose do their biographical sketch on
design a presentation, film, or slideshow

• Activity 4 – Group Project

  o Small groups of 3 to 4 students will create and present interactive projects to the rest of the class. Students may bring their individual projects together and create, collectively, a combined project. Group activity will help students share and learn from each other, and approach important issues from different perspectives.
  o Projects may include, but are not limited to: a short film, a short play, writing and singing/performing a song, or a similar group performance. Whatever the project, groups are to present what they have learned about desegregation to the rest of the class. Each student should play an important role in the planning and performance, but the overall project is a collaborative effort that is aimed at demonstrating that the group has, as a whole, engaged the material and can convey it in an innovative and cooperative manner.

• Activity 5 – Journal Reflection and Sharing

  o To finish the unit, students are to engage in deep reflection over what they have learned about desegregation of the American public education system. They should complete a final reflection journal of five entries (each entry should be about one page in length) over the span of five school days (one entry per day).
  o Have them share some of their main thoughts and views on what they have learned with their classmates. Students can reflect on where, who, and what they have studied, and also contemplate how their new knowledge helps them understand contemporary society and modern issues surrounding race and education.
  o The scope of this final activity should be broad enough to give students the freedom to express their own voice and view on desegregation. But the activity should also be a focused reflection, not just anything students want to write about. It may be beneficial to review some of the previous activities, such as the biographical sketch, to recall details and ideas.
Section III: Bibliography

Books, Court Cases, and Journal & Magazine Articles:


Websites:

http://civilrightsteaching.org/

http://desegregation.com/

http://www.nationalcenter.org/brown.html

http://www.nps.gov/brvb/index.htm

http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/civilrights/ak1.htm


http://library.thinkquest.org/J0112391/the_fight_for_desegregation.htm

http://www.archives.gov/midatlantic/education/desegregation/

http://www.centralhigh57.org/index.html

**Link to Little Rock Images on Google:**

http://www.google.com/images?hl=en&q=desegregation+at+little+rock&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=5bf-S8KSI4yuNshOoDs&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=4&ved=0CDEQsAQwAw

**Audiovisuals:**

http://www.teachersdomain.org/special/civil/tactics.school/
(School desegregation)

http://www.teachersdomain.org/resource/iml04.soc.ush.civil.tl_crmvmt/
(Interactive timeline)

**YouTube Videos** (short films and/or excerpts from documentaries and other programs):

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iH4Zx96xbY (Little Rock Nine ninth-grade student history project, Shea Higgins & Aaron Higgins)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyM5MFZ3ciI&feature=related (Interview with Ernest Greene)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTrSH4YJkAk (presentation by Jefferson Thomas)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUTIb6tcIs&feature=fvw (Vintage Film Exhibit, produced by NAACP)