

39 The Virtues of Public Education

Susan L. DeJarnatt

Brown had little immediate impact on my own education but has had a profound effect on that of my children. I grew up in a small town in the Pacific Northwest that started its civic life as a lumber company town. It is the home of what during my childhood was the world's largest pulp mill, operated by Weyerhaeuser. The founders of the town were Southerners who saw no place for people of color in their mill or in their town. The tiny African American community was unofficially but effectively restricted to a single neighborhood whose children went to the other high school in town. Ironically, that high school also educated most of the children of the managerial class. My classmates were nearly all white and nearly all working class.

The only relief from the all-white population was a small community of Hawaiians who were allowed to work at the mill and whose children went to my high school; a handful of Asian Americans; and the one lone African American girl who transferred in halfway through my junior year in high school, who was quiet, shy, and probably miserably lonely. *Brown* had no immediate impact on this situation because there were so few people of color to begin with. But the civil rights movement made us aware, at least in the abstract, of the impact of segregation in the United States, and the general sense I had was that most of my fellow students thought segregation was wrong and unfair. Certainly that was the value I was raised with at home—that Martin Luther King was a hero, and that Lyndon Johnson's and Hubert Humphrey's great accomplishment was the 1964 Civil Rights Act. My parents admired Johnson and Humphrey for their civil rights efforts long after I had become very dismissive of both men because of their role in promoting U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

My schools were not very strong academically. They were designed to educate the children of the working class and to prepare them to work at the mill or to marry the men who worked at the mill. The most important students were the football stars and the cheerleaders. It was not an easy place to be an openly smart, college-bound girl. I couldn't abide the limited goals of most of my classmates and they thought I was peculiar. But I shared the education experience and made friends with kids whose economic circumstances

and worldviews were very different from mine. Working-class and poor people were real, not some abstract “other.” I learned more about what life is like for most people in the United States in my hometown than I did in the more privileged college environment that I left home for. I learned that because I went to school with a representative cross-section of the community I lived in. No one went to private school, except for some of the Catholic kids who went to Catholic grade school before joining everyone for high school. Some kids dropped out, some got pregnant, some joined the army, some went to college, many went to work at the mill. I didn’t want the limited horizons of that small-town life for my children and I did not want such a racially monotonous environment. But I did value the experience of feeling that the school was reflective of the community whose children it educated, and I wanted that for my children too.

I have lived in Philadelphia my entire adult life. I ended up here by chance but the place suits me well. It has the cultural and culinary advantages of a city with new things and new people always to be discovered, and anonymity available if you want it. But it also has a deeply rooted community and is small enough that you can feel a strong sense of connection. And it is not racially monotonous.

I have two children, one now in college and one in fourth grade. The older one went to our neighborhood school from kindergarten through eighth grade. She then moved on to an academic magnet public high school that draws students from all over Philadelphia. My kids have shared their education with the children of their community—except for most of the well-off white ones. In elementary school, they have been in the position of being in the minority, which has been occasionally uncomfortable but hardly threatening. And they have benefited from learning and playing and growing up with children from a wide range of backgrounds who do not all look just like them. I am not always thrilled with the academics. Philadelphia has fallen victim to high-stakes testing and directs too much of its curriculum to pursuing the holy grail of test scores. My children have had some great teachers along with a few not so great ones. But the social experience has been invaluable.

Brown did not desegregate the Philadelphia public schools. Indeed I would bet that they are more segregated now than they were in 1954. Certainly there is a higher percentage of children of color and a lower number of white kids in the public schools here these days than there was forty years ago. But *Brown* had an impact in expanding the horizons of children of color and making clear that all children are entitled to an education. My daughter’s high school experience was ideal in bringing the *Brown* vision of inclusion to life. No ethnic group had a majority in her high school but all were there and were full participants in the life of a very challenging academic environment. She would not have been able to go to this school if not for *Brown*, at least indirectly.

The school excluded girls until 1983. Although the opinion that led to the admission of girls did not rely explicitly on *Brown*, it did rely on *Brown's* vision of inclusion and equality.¹

The neighborhood I live in, Mount Airy, is green, leafy, and full of old stone houses. It is historically liberal and historically committed to racial integration, though it is becoming less integrated economically. I love Mount Airy but I regret that the neighborhood schools do not reflect the entire community. They don't because too many white middle-class residents have chosen private schools instead. These same thoughtful, smart, caring people who would never accept or tolerate formal segregation and who genuinely value the message of *Brown* are not willing to help bring its message and vision of inclusion to life with their own children. The public schools of Mount Airy actually work quite well. But white people have to accept being in the minority and have to value the social capital generated by that experience.

Public education in Philadelphia is far from perfect. The school buildings are old. The libraries have outdated books and, often, no librarians. Foreign languages are not taught in elementary school. Music and art programs are always at risk. Too many schools are teaching only the children of the poor and are struggling to meet that challenge. I envy the private schools and the suburban systems their well-appointed facilities and small classes. But the solution to these problems and the disparity is funding equity, not abandonment of public education. We need to apply *Brown's* vision to demand equal funding for all public schools. In the words of Justice Marshall:

It is an inescapable fact that if one district has more funds available per pupil than another district, the former will have greater choice in educational planning than will the latter. In this regard, I believe the question of discrimination in educational quality must be deemed to be an objective one that looks to what the State provides its children, not to what the children are able to do with what they receive. That a child forced to attend an underfunded school with poorer physical facilities, less experienced teachers, larger classes and a narrower range of courses than a school with substantially more funds—and thus with greater choice in educational planning—may nevertheless excel is to the credit of the child, not the State. . . . Indeed, who can ever measure for such a child the opportunities lost and the talents wasted for want of a broader, more enriched education? Discrimination in the opportunity to learn that is afforded a child must be our standard.²

Unfortunately, the Supreme Court failed to see equity in funding as vital in *Rodriguez*, so the struggle for equality today is in the legislatures, not the courts. That battle is most likely to be won if the parents of children of privilege have

a personal stake in the public schools. The more the children of privilege are educated with the children of the disenfranchised, the more likely it is that the parents with power will wield it to improve education for everyone.

I hope we can rise to the challenge and recognize the importance of public education to our entire community. *Brown* says we have a collective responsibility to educate all our children—rich and poor, charming and difficult. If we look out only for the kids we are related to, our entire society is going to suffer. We can build gated communities and prisons to keep the kids we failed at bay—but building and using good public school systems offers a lot more hope for all of us.

NOTES

1. See *Newberg v. Bd. of Public Ed.*, 26 Pa. D. & C. 3d 682 (1983). Judge Gibbons explicitly referenced *Brown* in his dissent from an earlier challenge to the single-sex status of the school. He noted that he “was under the distinct impression . . . that ‘separate but equal’ analysis, especially in the field of public education, passed from the fourteenth amendment jurisprudential scene” after *Brown*. *Vorcheimer v. School District of Philadelphia*, 532 F. 2d 880, 888 (3d Cir. 1975) (Gibbons, J. dissenting).
2. *San Antonio Independent School Dist. v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S., 1, 83–84 (U.S. 1973) (Marshall, J. dissenting).

Susan L. DeJammatt was born in 1953 in Sterling, Colorado, and attended elementary and secondary school from 1958–1970 in Longview, Washington. She is now an associate professor, Beasley School of Law of Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.