Brown v. the Board of Education: The Desegregation of America’s Schools

Homer Plessy, an African American who was seven-eights white, symbolized a turning point in American History. Protected on paper by the Fourteenth Amendment, African Americans had not enjoyed their constitutional rights since segregation limited their liberties. In 1896 seven justices voted segregation is allowed if the facilities were “separate but equal.”

Fifty-eight years later, argued effectively by NAACP legal counsel Thurgood Marshall, the “separate but equal” doctrine was overturned unanimously in Oliver L. Brown et al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. The plaintiffs in the class action suit were thirteen Topeka parents on behalf of their twenty children who were demanding that the school district reverse its policy of racial segregation.

Demonstrating that African American children have negative perceptions of themselves causing inferiority and self-hatred due to segregation, Drs. Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark testified as expert witnesses in several school desegregation cases using the “Doll Study.” For the first time in U.S. history, social science research was used in a Supreme Court decision. Chief Justice Earl Warren drew heavily on the psychological studies led by Dr. Kenneth B. Clark, ordering the desegregation of schools “with all deliberate speed.”

Adolfo Cueva