
SILENT COVENANTS: BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION AND THE UNFULFILLED HOPES FOR RACIAL REFORM

DERRICK BELL
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Reviewed by Lisette Allen

Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform (Bell, 2004) examines the struggles for equality in the United States from the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) to the present. It outlines the challenges and disparities that arise when social justice is in conflict with political issues. Bell provides a realistic glimpse into the tribulations of racism, many of which are yet to be resolved. The author's goal is to shed light on the history and outcomes of major court decisions that were seen as bases for Black rights. Bell states, "Throughout the history of civil rights policies, even the most serious injustices suffered by blacks, including slavery, segregation, and patterns of murderous violence, have been insufficient, standing alone, to gain real relief from any branch of government" (p. 49). Bell's goal is to summarize what we know of racial inequality in order to understand its complex yet troublesome roots. Bell uses specific references to court cases that date to 1790 to validate the argument that racial equality is still a long way away. Readers are encouraged to recognize the historical value of these cases and appreciate that the outcomes did not necessarily serve the best interest of those involved.

Bell begins by reviewing the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and the impact that it had across the United States. The Supreme Court's decision set the groundwork for the standard that separate facilities for Blacks and Whites were constitutional as long as they were equal. The "separate but equal" principle was quickly extended to cover many areas of public life such as restaurants, theaters, restrooms, and public schools. Bell states, "The tree of segregation had deep roots, and public acceptance went beyond the South to encompass hundreds of communities across the nation" (2004, p. 12). In the 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Bell emphasizes that school

boards relied heavily on the premise of “separate but equal” and the legal argument was whether or not schools could operate effectively under this principle. Bell points out that *Brown v. Board of Education* was considered more “symbolic than real” (p. 19) because it only shed light on the inequality of the schools, thus, not providing any noticeable changes. Although Blacks considered this ruling to be the pivotal move toward equality, *Brown v. Board of Education* proved to be essentially stagnant. Chief Justice Warren believed that

to separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generated a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone. (as cited in Bell, 2004, p. 17)

Bell focuses on the fact that simply because the Supreme Court rules favorably on an issue, the outcome is usually not necessarily met with enthusiasm.

Bell refers to three major examples of “interest-convergence covenants” (2004, p. 49). They involve the abolition of slavery in the Northern states, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Civil War amendments to the Constitution. Bell refers to these as “interest-convergence covenants” because the slaves were free but had no citizenship or voting rights, the Emancipation Proclamation came by decision-making action because White plantation owners were concerned with their interests, and the Civil War amendments were made to uphold Republican control in Congress.

School funding was another issue facing the equalization of schools. Now that segregation was considered unconstitutional in the United States, inner-city schools were still faced with huge gaps in their educational needs. Bell recounts the first major case in California. “The California Supreme Court struck down the state system for funding public education as unconstitutional” (2004, p. 161), because despite state aid there were yet many cases of disparities in aid given to many minority school districts. Many of these lawsuits have paved the way to slowly leveling the funding of educational programs.

Although this book could be useful for many different audiences, it is written especially for people who want to gain an in-depth understanding of the historical timeline that encompassed the struggle for equality and the landmark cases that gave hope for the future. Bell’s style is both personal and engaging. At the beginning of each chapter, Bell references court decisions that have established a foundation for the point of each chapter. However, this lends itself to the presumption that the reader has an adequate knowledge of these major court cases. Bell encourages readers to seek a moral understanding of landmark decisions and decide on their own what impact each

has had on the issues of equality.

Fifty years later, civil rights activists are still trying to equalize schools; they are unsung heroes, understanding that minority children ultimately pay the price for decisions that are politically based. In *Silent Covenants*, Bell highlights key factors that have created a foundation for much needed change. Today, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) has influenced local, state, and federal programs that focus on creating stability in an unstable educational system.

REFERENCES

- Bell, D. (2004). *Silent covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the unfulfilled hopes for racial reform*. New York: Oxford University Press.
 Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
 Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

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TEACHING THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL: ESSAYS ON HOPE AND JUSTICE

WILLIAM AYERS
 TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS, 2004
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Reviewed by Mary Westervelt

In modern American culture, teachers, administrators, and academics know the buzzwords common to the field of education. The terms research-based instruction, data-driven, and standardized tests illustrate distinct phrases familiar to people involved in education. These key words are partly a result of the accountability measures the federal government placed on the public school systems in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This law was instituted to hold educators accountable for student learning and to reward the districts successful in implementing positive change. However, in many cases the pressure to improve test scores leads teachers to teach to the stan-