On May 1, 2024, Harvard Education Press held a webinar, “Revisiting Brown v. Board of Education,” on the occasion of it being the seventieth year after the ruling. Our panelists Margaret Beale Spencer and Nancy E. Dowd, coauthors of Radical Brown: Keeping the Promise to America’s Children, and Leslie T. Fenwick, author of Jim Crow’s Pink Slip: The Untold Story of Black Principal and Teacher Leadership, discussed the legacies of the decision and the ways to move closer to the ruling’s original intent.

Because of the importance and urgency of the topic, we asked our panelists if they could address the questions that were received during the webinar that they didn’t have time to answer. They generously agreed to do so. Here are the questions and their answers.

**How can we address the increasing geographical segregation in our schools?** We are dealing with a different, legal form of segregation, seventy years after the landmark decision, Some schools may comply with the Civil Rights Act and educational laws by doing the bare minimum in terms of inclusiveness and accessibility. Others are not able to diversify their student population because of their location. My second question is: Is the present trend in school choice helping to mitigate this geographical segregation or creating a greater divide?

**Leslie Fenwick:** Brown and the decisions subsequent to it did not define desegregation as black-white student body ratios. My book, Jim Crow’s Pink Slip, explores this in depth. Focus on desegregation being defined as diversifying school personnel. Read my Brookings Institution article, here: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/massive-resistance-to-browns-integration-decision-purged-black-educators/

**Nancy Dowd:** In Radical Brown we argue that the Brown decision not only mandates comprehensive change in schools but also that the decision mandated the dismantling of the entire comprehensive system of segregation. Geographical segregation is the manifestation of housing and economic policies among others that have been sustained, as well as the drawing of school zones that perpetuates single race or near single race schools. So the broader implications of Radical Brown are the necessities of policies that address comprehensive equality. In the present moment, one more immediate approach might be to revisit the policies of drawing school zone lines, magnet school policies, school choice policies, and a range of other ways in which the means of sustaining separation could be challenged and the goal of multiracial equal schools (so equity and equality) is realized. But those changes even if realized are simply not enough. As we argue in Radical Brown, the core is in every aspect of education to adhere to the mandate of
common equal humanity. That includes principals, teachers, curriculum, school culture, after school programs, community supports.

**Margaret Beale Spencer:** I ditto the comments noted and as emphasized in *Radical* Brown, the systems noted are interconnected. Thus, the geographical changes needed and noted are also linked, for example, to housing needs as well as necessary social and health programming supports. As we note, comprehensive change *means just that* (and as guided by non-pathologizing theorizing about non-white humans): Significant alterations in the character and acknowledged interconnected nature of foundational systemic supports required for everyone’s humanity are needed. The latter is highly salient *given context linked human development processes unfolding across the life course.* Families and communities—as contexts—are made up of individuals with age specific needs, as well.

*How do we go about creating culturally-relevant curriculum while being mindful of recent laws that challenge talking about uncomfortable conversations?*

**LF:** Rely on the resources of the Smithsonian museums for your K–12 curricular content about America’s history. Use the PK–12 teaching resources from the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History, Smithsonian Museum of the Native American, and the new Smithsonian Museum of the American Latino. (Do not just create your own lessons and materials. Rely on these prominent resources to educate yourself as a teacher and for instructional strategy).

Check out the K–12 teaching resources at [The Pulitzer Center](https://www.pulitzercenter.org). Share history in an age-appropriate way.

Teach students in an age-appropriate way, how historians write history. In other words, teaching students the methodologies that historians use.

Create coalitions of parents and teachers committed to teaching (in accurate and developmentally appropriate ways) America’s racially turbulent and triumphant histories.

**ND:** There are a host of curricular sources to infuse the curriculum rather than make this an “add on” or special program. In other words, this is as relevant to teaching math as it is to teaching history. “Uncomfortable conversations” need to be presented as essential to intellectual learning and discourse; the idea that you learn best when challenged and being exposed to the opposite of what you know and what you think is your position, and looking for the bridges and connections rather than thinking oppositionally. The point of uncomfortable conversations is intellectual growth and understanding and the development of each child’s sense of their own humanity and the humanity of others.

**MBS:** I totally agree with the prior comments. Unfortunately, uncomfortable conversations include exposure to materials that are “truth-telling” about the nation’s history but are absolutely
necessary. Including a focus on people who look like youth themselves and whom the curriculum attempts to inspire is critical.

Dr. Fenwick, what are your thoughts on the relationship between firing Black school principals and teacher leaders in K–12 [back] then, with the lack of Black leaders in higher education spaces today?

LF: Read this Washington Post op-ed that I wrote that examines the underrepresentation of Blacks in higher education faculty and leadership positions.

As a Chicago Public School teacher, I am blessed to work with children of a multitude of cultures. My question is how do we as educators teach the “hard conversations” to K–8 children?

LF: Rely on the resources of the Smithsonian museums for your K–12 curricular content about America’s history. Use the PK–12 teaching resources from the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History, Smithsonian Museum of the Native American, and the new Smithsonian Museum of the American Latino.
Check out the K–12 teaching resources at The Pulitzer Center.

Share history in an age-appropriate way.

Teach students in an age-appropriate way, how historians write history. In other words, teaching students the methodologies that historians use.

ND: We might find that our students K–8 will teach us as much as vice versa. They take in what is happening in the world and with their peers. We might find that the concept of uncomfortable conversations is not so different from many other parts of socio-emotional learning, of collective gain, not the allocation of blame. It’s discovery and knowledge. I sometimes think we, the adults, think it’s uncomfortable but for K–8 kids, it’s not; they reflect the realities they are seeing rather than feel uncomfortable (in other words, discomfort is learned). Natural curiosity is a benefit and the benefit of learning something you didn’t know.

MBS: Ditto the prior suggestions.

I’m in Baltimore, and a couple weeks ago, I heard in the news that a significant number of Black educators are leaving the profession here. What do you know about this current event and what do you suggest to do to fix it?

LF: I just finished presenting in an Education Writers Association (EWA) webinar about teacher diversity which included Kristen Griffith, the Baltimore journalist who wrote the award-winning article about this topic. I learned from her that many of the Black teachers leaving the profession held conditional certification because they had not passed the entrance licensure exam for the
state of Maryland but had passed the exit licensure exam. Maryland requires both. Read this AACTE policy monograph that I wrote that explores in some (historical) depth licensure examination use and cut scores.

ND: I don’t have anything to add here, other than this is a classic example of using licensing as barriers rather than investigating why something is happening and fostering support rather than barriers.

MBS: Ditto.

Ironically, in the Boston Public Schools (and the State Department of Ed) arguments against segregation have been used to prevent the grouping of English Language Learners so that they can be instructed in their native language, which is the best way for ELLs to learn academic English. Any comment on this kind of perversion of Brown?

LF: Unfortunately, much of our understanding about ELL students is shaped by misinformation about immigration policies and status. Read this Washington Post opinion article that I authored. I wrote it to help shape what we know and understand about immigration and ELL students. By the way, the majority of ELL adolescents are American citizens.

ND: What this policy also lacks, it seems to me, is not seeing the benefit of having ELL students, what they bring and could teach about their languages to other students, in other words, looking at how the policies can foster common humanity rather than “otherness.”

MBS: Missing from perspectives is that ELL students represent language skill precocity that is generally ignored. Being immersed in English language environments is a statement of their resilience and potential role to serve as “opportunity resources” for “mono-English-language” speakers. Their strengths are not fully acknowledged and used as resources in social interactions with others. Instead of narrow “resource takers” perspectives, perhaps an emphasis should be on their role in schools as “non-English language learner” resources. The dilemma goes to our concern in Radical Brown of the too quick problem to “pathologize difference” as less-than.

How can social justice be integrated in this work?

LF: Continue to focus on resource inputs (financial and human resources) to schools serving students of color and students from families experiencing poverty. Pay attention to the data about who are the nation’s most academically credentialed educators. The data show that Black educators are the nation’s most academically credentialed and professionally experienced. Yet, they are underrepresented in the principalship and superintendency. I explore this fact in greater detail in my book, Jim Crow’s Pink Slip.

ND: Introduce the concept to students and to educators and make it a part of the mission of education. So, for example, when any subject is taught, consider how that subject might assist and support multiple communities, and maybe identify a project that the students can engage in,
to foster a lifelong practice of contributing to justice, contributing to community. This is a tangible benefit to the school, or other students, or the community but also an intangible, spirit-feeding and character-building experience for students.

**MBS:** Ditto. Critical to recognize is that social justice is best learned in the ways we live, interact, and the willingness to self-critique. If there is an understanding of what social justice is and why it is important to all, then, providing and contributing to climates which allow students, teachers, and staff to be in a constant critical analysis mode is important for learning and social relations. The “living” of social justice is powerful and provides myriad opportunities for modeling social justice behavior and explaining why or why not it may look different from explanations. No doubt, it takes more time but provides opportunities for children and youth to combine emotional learning with offered intellectual content. The intersection of socio-emotional content with cognition-based teaching/learning is more easily internalized and, in fact, is consistent with the Maya Angelou suggestion: “...it is not so much what is said but how it makes you feel.” Living social justice (or not) provides the suggested and needed “self-assessment opportunity.”

*The conceptualization and actualization of shared humanity is hugely important. How does it relate to the conceptualization and embodiment of humanization and humanizing approaches?*

**LF:** I defer to Margaret, here. Her work is so powerful on this point! As a strategy, begin and end all analyses with the state of the nation’s children. Stay focused on the children and their well-being. Stay focused on human development.

**ND:** Comprehensive shared equal humanity does not imagine a universal but recognizes the multiple as well as the different places that we start from. While we share vulnerabilities and resilience, they are manifested differently in our current context. Reaching and creating shared humanity will take multiple approaches that touch the creative and the meaningful in powerful ways.

**MBS:** I repeat my comments for the last question. In essence, it is critical to remember that from the cradle leading to the coffin, humans are “information providing and internalizing” machines. Our biology dictates the stage and character that information is processed. However, there is something to be said about our feelings and developed emotional intelligence. Humans are basic in their ability to feel...and to react/respond to those feelings. Even babies know when they are getting (or not) what they need for survival: There is a malady in infancy called failure to thrive; even infants know when their human emotional/acceptance needs are not being met. Thus, there is something very basic about the foundational role of humane treatment and survival. Thus, the very old adage that we need to treat others the way we prefer being treated is more than quaint. Feelings of being coveted, cared for, accepted, and experiencing messages of value are critical before having the ability to articulate the fact. Thus, my point is that although we forefront our intellectual selves and cognition, however, and bottom line—although linked with biology and neurological changes—affect/feelings/our emotions precede or jumpstart cognition. Feelings precede awareness, which then jumpstarts the ability to articulate the meanings made of the experiences provided. In sum, providing and contributing to contexts and interactions that
reinforce positive and caring feelings represents the basics for functioning in a humane manner and supporting the humanity of others, which then—bidirectionally, given feedback—reinforce our own humanity.

*Does the data suggest that superintendents of color are more or less effective at creating sturdy pipelines designed to cultivate, nourish, and support Latinx and African American principals and teacher leaders dedicated to pioneering culturally responsive work across their respective districts?*

**LF:** The data are clear about African American principals and their outcomes on diversifying their schools’ teaching force and improving Black students’ academic and social outcomes. I cite these reports and their findings in the last chapter of my book *Jim Crow’s Pink Slip*. Former superintendent, Dr. Shawn Joseph, is beginning to explore the link to superintendents of color.

**ND:** My sense is yes; the expert on this is Leslie.

**MBS:** Ditto—Leslie’s perspective is best here. Of course, there is always diversity and something to be said about leadership and how (as reactive coping with inhumane conditions) one channels aggression.