

# **An Oreo Ain't Nothing But A Cookie: An Analysis of Identity Struggles of African Americans in Desegregated Public Schools from 1950 to 1968**

**Rotha Perkins**

**Abstract:** *"It is not just the white man who does not know the Negro's name, however; the Negro does not know either. . .the controversy over name is bound up with the most fundamental question of **identity**: the flight from blackness, the hatred of self, the yearning to be white. . ."* (Powell 1973, 22). The purpose of this qualitative study is to analyze the identify struggles of African American students from 1950-1968. I used empirical evidence based on the events and my experiences expressed through the realities of my identity **struggles** during the Civil Rights Movements. The analytical descriptions and interpretations are naturally occurring behaviors in the struggle for **social justice** and **educational equality**. I based my research on the question: what are the identity struggles of African Americans in Desegregated Schools during the Civil Rights Movement?

**Keywords:** Oreo, identity struggles, civil rights, 1950's and 1960's

## **Introduction**

African Americans students who attended desegregated schools during the Civil Rights Movements suffered identity crises in their efforts to navigate two worlds, their culture and the dominate culture. In the African American community these students were identified as *Oreos*, black on the outside and white on the inside. Oreos were not accepted into mainstream society because of their skin color and denounced in the Black culture because of their white oriented acculturation. In the 1960's there was a movement for African Americans to take pride in identifying as Black, to remove the stigma of derogatory terms that had haunted African Americans and the ways they self-identified.

## Terminology

I will begin this paper with terminology used to describe African Americans during the period 1950 to 1968. Much of the “naming” were terms White Americans used to identify African Americans.

**Black** [variations] “Dark-skinned, belonging to an African ethnic group or to any other ethnic group with very dark skin. A Black, a Negro: often used without the article after the fashion of a proper name. Darcy: now considered historical and derogatory” (Harper, 2001).

**Colored** “Having a skin other than ‘white’. Wholly or partly of Black or ‘coloured’ descent. In Spain, African of mixed black or brown and white descent; of or belonging to the population group of such mixed descent” (Harper, 2001).

**Oreo** “A derogatory word for “black persons” felt to have a “white” mentality, [1968, *Black American English Dictionary*]” (Harper, 2001).

**Negro** [variations] Niggra, nigra, nigrah, nigruh: “A member of a dark-skinned group of peoples originally native to sub-Saharan Africa; a person of black African origin or descent. In early use also applied to other dark-skinned peoples, esp. Moors” (Harper, 2001).

**Negro** “A member of a black-skinned race of Africa, 1555, from Spain or Portugal” (Webster, 1979, 95). “Negro as black, the darkest color, devoid of light, funny and macabre, clandestine, Negroid, full of anger, hopeless, seriously bad or unfortunate and dishonorable” (*Online Dictionary* 2006). “An offensive term for a Black person” (*Encarta Dictionary*, 2006). In Jonathan Kozol’s (1967) *Death at an Early Age*, “a teacher stated, I don’t want these children to have to think back on this year later on and have to remember that we were the ones who told them they were *Negro*” (68).

**Acting White** (could not be located in an etymology or dictionary) Fordham and Ogbu (1986) posit *acting white* means “that Blacks have not historically valued

education, viewing academic success as the domain of Whites and thus fundamentally in opposition to Black culture and identity." African Americans valued education as a means of economic and social success, not *acting white*. To African Americans the term *acting white* meant Negroes who put on airs, acting white, not African American. To snub noses at other African Americans or "*acting white*" meant you thought you were culturally superior to other African Americans.

### **Critical Methodology**

The "educated Negroes have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools, Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton and to despise the African" (Woodson 1970, 1). Critical pedagogy is a teaching approach, which attempts to help students question and challenge dominion and the beliefs and practices that dominate. Critical theorists determine a genuine need to reconsider the meanings of domination and emancipation "since people can be dominated through learning the kind of knowledge, culture, and history that serves to legitimize domination and reinforce the roles of the subjugated" (Pai, Adler & Shadiow 2006, 141). During desegregation, African Americans were unable to affirm and reject their own histories in order to begin the process of struggling for the conditions that will give them opportunities to lead a self-managed existence.

When African American culture, history, and knowledge is stripped, ignored and misinterpreted in the educational curriculum, chances are African American youths will not ascertain legitimacy. "The thought of inferiority of the Negro is drilled into him in almost every class he enters and in almost every book he studies. If he happens to leave school. . . finishes high school or reaches college, he will naturally escape some of this bias and may recover in time to be of service to his people" (Woodson 1970, 2). Education through white dominance created the *Oreo*

identity struggles in African Americans.

In *Cultural Foundations in Education*, Boas (cited in Pai, Adler & Shadiow (2006) suggested that the fieldwork approach method “is based on the assumption that the most reliable data about cultural patterns should be obtained through objective observation of a society by an investigator who is also closely involved in the life of that society” (10). Based on this assumption, I began this paper with eagerness.

### **Data Collection**

Many hours were spent reading, previewing, and reviewing historical documents on the Civil Rights Movement. Much use was made of the University of Missouri-Kansas City Miller Nichols Library and local public libraries. I then extended my search to the internet; I found many links to various events during the period, including Dr. Martin L. King, Jr.’s National Historical Society. Some of the most influential texts I found for reflecting the mannerisms, characteristics, and ideals of African Americans during the period 1950-1968 were the Jim Crow laws (established in 1865) and Woodson (1933) *MIS-education of the Negro*.

Next, I wanted to get primary knowledge on what I had been reading. So I began by interviewing my mother about her education in a black school in a rural town in Missouri (Howard 2006). Then, I interviewed my sister about her education in a predominately white school, 1965-1969 (Franklin 2006). I also reflected on my perspectives of my education in a predominately white school 1964-1968 (Perkins 2006).

My mother is the only child of a second-generation Cherokee Indian mother and second-generation White German father. My father is an only child of Southern African American parents. My mother and father separated when I was five years old, mainly because of their social and cultural differences. I have four siblings, of whom I am the oldest girl, and two brothers, one older and one younger. Because

my mom was a single parent and needed to work, the neighborhood acted as our surrogate parents. We had many fathers and mothers that made sure we were well fed, clothed, and went to school. These caring communities were a hallmark of African American families in the late fifties and early sixties.

### **Brown v Board of Education Topeka, Kansas 1954**

“Separating [Black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferior[ity]. . . . Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (Brown v Board of Educations of Topeka 1954). For the State of Missouri, “Jim Crow” laws demanded that African descendants should attend a separate school from Whites.

Separate free schools shall be established for the education of children of African descent and it shall be unlawful for any colored child to attend any white school, or any white child to attend a colored school {Jim Crow Law, Missouri}King (1998).

After the long struggle to win educational equality, many empowered civil rights leaders began to stage sit-ins and peaceful demonstrations throughout the South to repeal other Jim Crow Laws. My education began in the early fifties, right after Brown v. Topeka Board of Education. Prior to the seventh grade, I was educated in urban, predominately African American public schools. African American teachers strove to educate African American students to become successful and productive members of society. Education was important to the African American community. African Americans felt education was the “way out” of the struggle of being *Black* in America.

Because I have a darker skin tone versus a “high yellow” skin tone, I suffered segregation within my culture and within the educational system because of the minimal group paradigm. Howard (2006) states the “minimal group paradigm

suggests that human beings tend to demonstrate discriminatory in-group dynamics even when there is an extremely limited basis for drawing distinctions between members of the groups" (31).

A form of tracking existed in the urban schools. The dark-complexed students were educated to attend trade schools, while the "high yellow" students were prepared to become doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. The "high yellow" students received preferential treatment in their education because African American teachers believed that they could enhance and advance the African American social and economic foundation. In the fifties most of the professional and affluent African Americans in Missouri were of "high-yellow" tone.

### **The Civil Rights Movements**

During (1955-1965) the Civil Rights Movement Americans faced many crises: Vietnam (protestors of the war), desegregation, uprisings and sit-ins on college campuses and universities. African American students attempting desegregation continuously suffered castigatory harm. In 1957, a crisis erupted in Little Rock, Arkansas. The Governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus called out the National Guard on September 4 to prevent nine African American students who had sued for the right to attend integrated Little Rock's Central High School. African American students attempting desegregation suffered a barrage of epithets that burned deep into their souls. The harm was so intrinsic, that in the early sixties, African Americans had a saying, "If you're white, you're right; if you red, move ahead; if you're brown, get down; if you're yellow, you're mellow; but if you're black, get back."

In the South, civil rights activists, both African Americans and Whites, began to suffer brutality, not only from the police but also from other dominant white groups. One such group was the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a very prominent White

group in the South well known for beating, lynching, burning, and killing African Americans, began to advocate “White Supremacy.” The flight to the North was the dream of most African Americans in the South. The Northern African Americans began to fear the destruction of their complacency or their “so-called freedom” or as some African Americans joked “up from slavery.” Even though the KKK was terrorizing African Americans in the South, other strong White supporters of the Civil Rights Movements marched, staged sit-ins and attended vote rallies. After Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s march on Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963 and his famous *I Have a Dream* speech, Northern African Americans began to believe in the Civil Rights movement and to have hope for the future of African Americans and the abolishment of all Jim Crow Laws in the North.

In 1964, I began attending a predominately white school. The education in desegregated schools was social reproduction and in the 1960s, the dominant social class of society was “white European males.” Spring (2002) suggests that the problem with social reproduction was “students as passive recipients of knowledge” (91). As a teenager in a predominately white school, I became a passive recipient of knowledge. My identity was shaped by the White world in my attempts to develop peer relationships. In my attempts to establish my self-identity, I had to navigate two worlds, the world of school that was White and my cultural world that was African American. What I did not know was my self- identify I developed in my teen years would develop into my identity crisis in my adult years. My integration and education into a predominately white school had clouded my cultural lens.

### **Desegregated Education**

In school, the curriculum focused on White European male, the dominant group. Most of the teachers were White Anglo-Saxon males, although there were a

few females. African American students could not openly associate with other African American students in the educational institution. By separating African American students in many classes, administrators believed it would alleviate any type of racial tension or race riots triggered by the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement. Outside of physical education and art class, I was generally the only African American in my class.

Current events in the school were limited to the war in Vietnam, drugs, and other significant events that negated the struggles of African Americans. History and Social Studies textbooks depicted African Americans as slaves and Native Americans as savages. Literature classes required the reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), written during the period when the South enforced the Jim Crow Law of "separate but equal." There was a lack of rich, African American literature, which portrayed African Americans with strong characteristics and traits like *Malcolm X* (1965), a radical sixties civil rights activist whose motto was "by any means necessary." It was not identified as literature but a book to be banned because of the racial ideologies.

My most frightening experience in desegregated schools was feeling ashamed and embarrassed for the Africans (slaves) pictured in textbooks. The hidden curriculum depicted slaves as less than human beings. Hewitt (2006) states *hidden curriculum* "is the idea that schools do more than simply transmit knowledge, as laid down in the official curricula. Behind it lies criticism of the social implications, political underpinnings, and cultural outcomes of modern educative activities" (3). The curriculum implied that slaves were shiftless, lazy illiterates that needed supervision and control. I began to denounce my culture as an African American.

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which stipulated the withholding of federal funds from public schools that were not desegregated. Title VI of the



Civil Rights Act “required the mandatory withholding of federal funds from institutions that practiced racial discrimination” (Spring 2002, 99). Because of forced desegregation, Whites began to practice a form of “hate.” Woodson (1970) states “in geography the races were described in conformity with the program of the usual propaganda to engender in Whites a race hate of the Negro, and in the Negroes contempt for themselves”(17).

*Prejudice and Racism* (Jones, 1972) summarized the racial attitudes of some Whites: Whites feel more negatively toward Blacks than they do toward Hispanics, Asians, and legal and illegal immigrants. They perceive Blacks as lazy, violent, and less intelligent than members of other groups. Whites also believe Blacks receive more attention from the government than they deserve and are too demanding in their struggle for equal rights (105). Fanon (1967) suggests that “Hate is not inborn: it has to be constantly cultivated, to be brought into being in conflict with more or less recognized guilt complexes” (53).

### **The Effects of Desegregation**

In desegregated schools, “hate” was cultivated through the curriculum, by educators, administrators and some White students. African Americans felt if they took on the norms, behaviors, attitudes and mannerisms of the White race they would be accepted. To become Americanized, African Americans began to acculturate the mannerisms, psychology, attitudes, values, viewpoints, language and norms of Whites. Because of acculturation, African Americans experienced an identity crisis interacting within the African American communities. Debbie (pseudonym), an African American student, grew up in a White neighborhood, attended White schools, had White friends, and never thought about being African American. In her adult years, she noticed her inability to relate to other Blacks. Debbie developed a White mentality and lost her Black identity, she was an *Oreo*.

*Oreos* faced devaluation of their cultural identity in desegregated schools through the images of the media. Inferior self-images and doubt began to grow based on the African American's views of dominant society.

With the exception of a few misfits within the closed environment, we can say that every neurosis, every abnormal manifestation, every affective erythrim in the African American is the product of his cultural situation. In other words, there is a constellation of postulates, a series of propositions that slowly and subtly – with the help of books, newspapers, schools and their texts, advertisements, films, radio – work their way into one's mind and shape one's view of the world of the group to which one belongs. For African Americans that view of the world is White. (Fanon 1967, 152)

African Americans through their mis-education began to despise themselves and adulate the White race. Those African Americans that were "White enough" began "passing as White." African Americans began to negate their culture in hopes of raising their social status from second-class citizens. "Passing as White" was one avenue African Americans chose to alleviate poverty, self-degradation, and the Negro stigma. "My father passed for white for economic reasons until he died, but resided in a black neighborhood" (Howard 2006). Below is an excerpt from an article called, "Passing Narratives":

But, with my blond hair, my sister's green eyes and freckles, what they gonna say? What made us colored? See, that's what you got to know. Those signs didn't mean nothing to us, and the White people didn't even know that there were colored people who weren't real black. If they knew, then they didn't care. As long as we looked like them. And we was as White as them. (Gaudin 2006, 2)

African Americans began a flight from blackness, to escape from the years of bondage, degradation, and self-hatred. Isolation and invisibility, distrust and self-

denial were a constant for African Americans in the Northern educational institutions. A student who graduated in the top 100 of her class of 350 seniors understood all too well, what it felt like. She states:

I would raise my hand to ask a question about an assignment the teacher had given. Sometimes my hand would be up for five minutes. I could tell the teacher saw my hand, but she never would recognize or call on me. I felt “invisible.” Even though teachers refused to interact with me, I determined that I would get an education, study, work hard, and pull myself up by my own bootstraps and graduate. I always believed that I could get any job I wanted. I understood that my high school education would merit numerous educational and economic opportunities. (At the time, a high school education was all that was required to get a good job with benefits. Big businesses, industries, government, city, banking, and retail opportunities were available.) What I did not understand was those jobs were never in the forefront for African Americans.  
(Franklin 2006)

Oreos were misunderstood in the African American culture and unable to fit into the dominant culture, because of the color of their skin. “I remember buying bleaching crème and spreading it all over my body, hoping that the Black would wear away” (Perkins 2006). Since so much of an Oreos’ acculturation evolved through dominant White schooling, it negated the African American’s culture. Oreos no longer understood the jargon, rituals, traditions, or the culture of African Americans. It was not until the late sixties that Oreos begin to self-identity as proud African Americans.

### **Desegregation Today**

Resegregation has been on the rise since 1990s. In the Kansas City School District, Afro-centric and Freedoms schools have been operating since the early 1990s. In 2006, three separate incidents created controversy regarding

resegregation:

- In April 2006, Nebraska state legislature approved a measure to split the Omaha school system into three separate districts: one for Whites, one for Blacks, and one for Latinos.
- In June 2006, the Supreme Court heard appeals from White parents in separate school districts. The White parents argued that the school district discriminated against their children based on race when assigning students to schools.
- In July 2006, the Supreme Court let stand Justice O'Connor's decision regarding the Lynn School District. The Lynn School District considers race when approving school transfers. (Kilman 2006, 48)

Fifty plus years after *Brown v Board of Education Topeka, Kansas*, our society is still attempting to provide socially just and equitable education for all of its citizens. The "social reproduction" continues because the ruling class controls the society's means of production including its ideology, social justice, and equitable education. Curriculum will continue to be determined by what is in the elitists' best interests. In some areas of America, we are moving once again toward separate but equal. Separate has never been equal. We must continue to fight segregation so that we can produce culturally responsive citizens that will stand up for social justice and equity. As Americans, we need to embrace our ethnic and cultural backgrounds, traditions, and rituals.

It is important now more than ever to prepare new teachers to practice culturally responsive, multivariate, and multiracial pedagogy for diverse educational populations. Howard (2006) makes the statement that "diversity is not a choice" (3). The face of our future, the new majority population will be and continues to be people of color. He states, "Children of color and multicultural complexity. . .will continue to come in ever increasing numbers into our nation's

classrooms” (2006, 4). Educators must stop yielding to political power and ban together for unity. This is not a “blame game” (Howard 2006, 4) but a reality check for all educators who continue to teach the dominant Western European traditional curriculum and practices. Educators through self-reflection, transformation, acceptance and struggle need to teach a multicultural and multivariate curriculum to promote social justice and equity in education.

### **Implications**

White dominance is an “institutional practice that systemically favors certain racial, economic, and language groups, while negatively influencing others” (Howard, 2006, 29). Howard (2006) asks the question “How is it possible with so much research and information available about multicultural issues today, that prospective educators can complete their entire teacher education and certification program without gaining a deeper grasp of social reality” (30)?

Social positionality is how we view the world, “how we construct reality, how we ascribe meaning and value to our lives is intimately connected to our position with social and historical hierarchies” (Howard, 2006, 33). The social positionality of Whites has afforded Whites the ability to develop a sense of “invisibility” (Howard, 2006, 34) related to the drama of multiculturalism in a diverse society. It is “important that Whites lift the curtain of ignorance and denial that has protected them from understanding their location in the hierarchical social arrangement” (Howard 2006, 34).

Cultural pluralism or multiculturalism is reflective of many cultures incorporating race, ethnicity, language, tradition, and gender. Multiculturalism or cultural pluralism prohibits the cloning of Americans into one unified mass of ordinary imperfection. Instead, with cultural pluralism we have variety in races, ethnicity, languages, traditions, and gender. The uniqueness of multiculturalism or cultural pluralism is

that members of mainstream society can evolve into a “salad bowl” (many microcultures) with the dressing as the unification of Americanism, the shared core culture (macroculture).

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