

# Dossier

## “Prácticas públicas de la historia. Contextos locales, diálogos globales”

### The 1957 Central High crisis: civil rights and education in the United States as a public history experience through the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History

La crisis de Central High (1957): los derechos civiles y la educación en los Estados Unidos como una experiencia de historia pública a través del Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History

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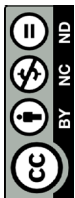
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## Abstract

Through an oral and visual history archive, we sought to develop an analysis regarding the period of school segregation in the United States, as well as the moment known as “integration”. Drawing on the experiences recorded in The David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, an analysis based on the memories of the period of overcoming segregation in the school context was developed. Our focus was on the perception of the persistence of prejudice as a factor that harms the learning process, as was observed in Terrence Roberts’ speech. The orientation of the work within the sphere of public history aims to show how people simultaneously experience a conflicting situation and the problem of abandoning the past, bearing in mind the continuity of the issues faced and which need to be reestablished.

**Keywords:** Central High and the Educational Crisis in Arkansas, US Civil Rights Movement, Oral History and the Pryor Center.

## Introduction

Based on the archives of The Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, we seek to reflect on the struggle for the end of segregation in the United States’ educational space, focusing on an Arkansas case study<sup>1</sup>. The Pryor Center was created out of the perspective of

1 Although the broad segregationist apparatus is not the focus of our article, it is important to understand such a system and its presence within Arkansas. This state joined the secession movement in the Civil War of 1861 and at the end of the war it went through the process of Reconstruction promoted by the Union. In this sense, even though the 13th and 14th Amendments brought more voice and possibilities for black populations to Arkansas it was one of the states that generated and maintained the “separate, but equal” policies that divided spaces and society between whites and blacks. Although throughout the 1870s and 1880s, mainly in the capital Little Rock, it was possible to perceive an integration - it was from the 1890s onwards that segregation expanded and there was an impediment to several joint practices between whites and blacks. The movement in favor of segregation would have arisen in the southern region of the state, out of movements by farmers who formed the Agricultural Wheel and Brothers of Freedom in 1888. In the same wave of this opposite feeling, political exclusionary prac-

## Resumen

A través de un archivo de historia oral y visual, se buscó desarrollar un análisis sobre el período de segregación escolar en Estados Unidos, así como el momento conocido como «integración». Aprovechando las experiencias registradas en The David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, se orientó un análisis basado en los recuerdos del período de superación de la segregación en el contexto escolar. Nuestro enfoque se centró en la percepción de la persistencia del prejuicio como un factor que daña el proceso de aprendizaje, como observamos en el discurso de Terrence Roberts. El trabajo está en el ámbito de la historia pública y tiene como objetivo mostrar cómo las personas viven una situación conflictiva, así como el problema del abandono del pasado, teniendo en cuenta la continuidad de los problemas enfrentados y que necesitan restablecerse.

**Palabras Clave:** Central High y la crisis educativa en Arkansas, movimiento de derechos civiles de Estados Unidos, historia oral, el Centro Pryor.

public history, generating an organization and dissemination of Arkansas history, as well as under the logic of building mechanisms for the knowledge stored at the center to be available to the community. Therefore, combining this definition with the assertion of the historian David Glassberg, by adding research and public accessibility, this center of oral and visual history aims to

understand the individual meanings found in the past and their artifacts. While professional historians are talking about having an interpretation of history, the public is talking about having a sense of history, a perspective on the past as at the heart of who they are and the places that matter to them<sup>2</sup>.

In other words, the objective of the practices of oral and public history is guided by the understanding of what the past meant for the people who lived it, as remembered by them, allowing a later analysis of this memory, inserted in their historical time, as we propose here. Thomas Cauvin<sup>3</sup> defined three focuses within public history: the communication of history beyond the academy, public participation and the application of the historical method to everyday themes. These three guidelines are the ones used by the Pryor Center in its endeavour to develop a connection between academia and people. Through the methodology of oral history as a way of getting to know the perspective and life of “common people” related to everyday matters, the Pryor Center illuminates/highlights/ brings to light/ investigates such issues as: inequality, ethnic problems, the vast world of work, politics, sports and many others.

The purpose of the center, when storing such materials, is to: 1) propose debates and show the historiographical practice to the community and 2) enable a digital collection for the development of historical research. By working with the oral history methodology, the center allows a focus on local micro history, in order to give voice to people and narratives that could otherwise be forgotten. We understand that “oral sources give us information about illiterate people or social groups whose written history is either flawed or distorted. Another aspect concerns the content: the daily life and material culture of these people”, as stated by Alessandro Portelli<sup>4</sup>. The narrative becomes the document, the repository of an experience that, when elevated to the category of research object, allows the perception of how a personal experience was inserted in the macro category and how these people have experienced historical events.

The Pryor Center is the only oral and visual history center in Arkansas. By having as their mission collecting, preserving and sharing videos, images and audios related to the history of Arkansas, the impact of the center has a statewide scope making itself present, through its work, in the 75 counties that make up Arkansas. Additionally, the influence of the center at times goes beyond the borders of the state itself.

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tices were initiated, preventing the training and enabling African-American populations to vote - in addition to a practice of excluding the diverse voice within the parties. The first break with the bonds of segregation was generated only in the 1940s, related to university education, as pointed out by Judith Kilpatrick (2009) and Julianne Adams (1994) - and that throughout the 1950s were transplanted to basic education - still that forced from the Brown case ruling. It was only after the 1950s that other devices and segregated spaces were being left out in the state of Arkansas.

2 David Glassberg. <<A sense of History>>, *The Public Historian*, v. 19, n. 2, p. 70, 1997.

3 Thomas Cauvin. <<A ascensão da História Pública: uma perspectiva internacional>>. *Revista NUPEM* 11, nº 23 (2019): p. 5.

4 Alessandro Portelli. <<O que faz a história oral diferente>>. *Revista Projeto História* 14 (2007), p. 27.

The material selected for the development of this work is based on five main interviews, these five people I will refer to throughout the research<sup>5</sup>: Christopher C. Mercer Jr., Dorothy C. Gillam, Edith Irby Jones<sup>6</sup>, Janis Kerney and Rodney Slater<sup>7</sup>. The perspective on which I will analyze their speeches is focused on the period known as Integration, which within Arkansas history is marked by the crisis at Central High School, in Little Rock the state capital, in 1957.

It has already been stated that “the oral history interview is undoubtedly contingent - a unique moment, with unique circumstances, that produces that unique result, as occurs with many documents and sources in history”<sup>8</sup>. However, even though the act of the interview is unique, the action of analyzing the discourse is multiple, since, as in the use of other sources, it will depend on the questions and propositions launched for the base material. By proposing, through an analysis of the narrative of five people, who lived and / or worked during the period of Integration policies in Arkansas, as well as the end of segregation policies - we seek to connect the individual’s human experience to the perception of the macro event<sup>9</sup>.

### Arkansas and the Central High Crisis in 1957

Arkansas, like most southern states, reflected the existence and perpetuation of the Jim Crow Laws, segregating spaces and people. In order to maintain such practices in the educational

5 The five interviews chosen from the Pryor Center interview bank were people who marked the history of Arkansas through their personal and professional development, mainly linked to the struggle for integration and civil rights. Although these five characters have been influenced by their university and professional experience, it is the history of overcoming the segregationist bonds of southern Arkansas that motivated their interviews and the use proposed here. The sum of these five interviews and the perception of the experience of the nine young people who were part of Central High is that of those who suffered from Segregation and who fought to overcome this problem. The exploration of these five interviews includes their past, present and future - narrating how the difficulties of childhood were overcome and how they found themselves in Little Rock in the factual year 1957, while allowing the perception of the period immediately afterwards.

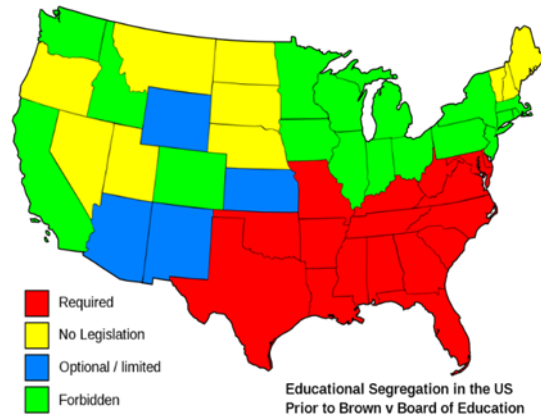
6 JONES, Edith. Interview Transcription from Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. [April 03, 2006] Interviewer: Scott Lunsford.

7 SLATER, Rodney. Interview Transcription from Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. [March 15, 2006]. Interviewer: Scott Lunsford.

8 Verena Alberti. <<De “versão” a “narrativa” no Manual de História Oral>>. *Revista de História Oral* 15, nº 2, (2012): p. 165.

9 The reader will perceive the absence of narratives that come from the Central High faculty regarding the Integration process that the school went through in 1957. We justify this as we did not find extensive reports and records about the teaching experience in the first integrated environment in the capital of Arkansas. However, in the face of this absence, we noticed that the reports of some of the nine students, added to the five interviewed by the Pryor Center, allow a perception based on the experience of the events that base our writing. We believe that with the expansion of our research and the analysis of different sources in the future it will be possible to carry out a greater explanation regarding the posture and experience on the part of Central High teachers. Still, we point out that the five interviews collected by the Pryor Center and analyzed in our work were the result of the commitment of oral history techniques, related to the recovery and safeguarding of the memories and experiences of the individuals - while the speech and experience of the nine, when mentioned, refer to the 60th anniversary of the milestone that became Central High Integration.

field in Little Rock<sup>10</sup>, the strategy adopted by many city leaders was to remain silent regarding the changes required by law, in order to postpone the completion of Integration. In this sense, taking advantage of some interpretative openings that the law allowed, state legislators, as well as many municipalities, chose to deliberately extend the process, as well as the construction of a series of obstacles for its effective accomplishment.



**Figure 01:** Racial Segregation in American Public Schools: In red, states that had such explicit racial separation laws.

**Source:** [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File: Educational\\_separation\\_in\\_the\\_US\\_prior\\_to\\_Brown\\_Map.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Educational_separation_in_the_US_prior_to_Brown_Map.png). Access in April 3, 2021.

Arkansas is among the states that has segregationist laws within the educational context prior to the Brown vs Board of Education ruling, as shown in the map of the states (figure 1). The state has not referred any lawsuits to the Supreme Court to enforce the Brown Case claim. However, we chose to work with Arkansas and the way the struggle for the integration of the education system took place for two reasons: 1) our oral sources are from Arkansas, through the Pryor Center and 2) it is possible to notice a wide variation in the way the state dealt with Integration. On the one hand, some cities accepted and sought to carry out the initiative (such as Fayetteville, Charleston and Hoxie), while in other cities there was an oppositional reaction as symbolized in the Central High Crisis in Little Rock.

Across the United States, Arkansas has become the symbol of racial prejudice and intolerance that was a hallmark of the southern states and their communities. As Pierre Melandri comments<sup>11</sup>, the southerners initially reacted with moderation to the decision of the Supreme Court of Justice but were unable to “hide the scale of their anger when they discovered that, far from ignoring it, their own district judges bowed to the new text”. Governor Orval Faubus opposed allowing schools in Little Rock to become integrated. In addition, Melandri adds in his book that it ended up influencing, in 1957, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 to be

<sup>10</sup> Karen Anderson. *Little Rock: Race and Resistance at Central High School* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 56 – 67.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Melandri. *História dos Estados Unidos desde 1865* (Lisboa: Edições 70, 2000), 188 – 189.

signed by President Eisenhower.

The focus of this resistance was centered in the city of Little Rock, the state capital, within one of the main schools in the region: The Central High School. Charleston (also in Arkansas) became the first city in the South to eliminate segregation from the education system, followed by Fayetteville and Hoxie in 1954, however between 1954 and 1957, the state government was looking for ways to delay the integration of schools in the state capital. With the advancement of policies and increased pressure for integration, organizations opposed to integration began to emerge. One of them was the Central High School Mothers League that sought to “mobilize local opposition to desegregation, condemning integration as a threat to public order and the well-being of whites, spreading rumors that armed students would turn the school into a battlefield”, as Karen Anderson states.

The desegregation plan, proposed by the State of Arkansas, started in 1956 and in its planning would end school segregation only sometime after 1963, as indicated by John Kirk, when analyzing the Blossom Plan (2007). A significant problem with the Supreme Court’s decision in 1954 was that when determining, with the weight of the law, the end of segregation in schools, it was ignoring the need to define a time, a deadline for this to actually happen. Those involved with the new Arkansas education plan took advantage of this flaw and used it as an opportunity to build a policy that would only begin to take effect in 1957, starting from a single school: Central High School.

The start of integration in Little Rock was scheduled to begin on September 4th, 1957, the beginning of the school calendar for the period. However, a manifestation by the white population was proposed that would include barricades and physical confrontations to prevent the entrance of black students into the school. This generated great concern on the part of the NAACP<sup>12</sup> regarding the first nine African Americans, students to be integrated into Central High<sup>13</sup>.

In the midst of this context, the state governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, summoned

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12 The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was a civil and interracial organization formed in 1909, with the aim of fighting for a more egalitarian society in which African Americans had equal rights to whites and ultimately the end of segregationist practices. One of the motives of such an organization was to combat police violence - an issue very similar to the movements that took to the streets of the United States, based on the slogan “Black Lives Matter”. The role of NAACP in the School Integration process was to provide the legal team that sought to undermine segregationist practices, an important exponent of this movement was Thurgood Marshall (1908 - 1993). In Arkansas, it was this organization that supported the families of the first nine students, as well as joining the process of studying measures that could lead to school integration across the state.

13 The nine students selected to participate in this Integration process were chosen based on their school performance, but before their participation was accepted, there was a meeting between those responsible for the integration committee and the parents of these families, who then communicated to their children what the opportunity would mean. The nine secondary school students were residents of Little Rock, but from regions further away from the center. It is important to note that factors such as class and gender did not impact the choice of young people, as the proposal presented by the Integration committee was that the group should be mixed, in order to foster “best” integrative practice. With regard to class, these young people represented families, mostly low-income or low-middle class, who believed that integrated education would be the solution for a good future for their children and grandchildren, albeit a great challenge.

the state National Guard to be present at the proposed demonstrations with the mandate to protect the white protesters, not the nine young students who would enter that school, as Faubus stated that there would be an imminent wave of violence. As Karen Anderson points out, “his demands shifted the responsibility for the possibility of violence to blacks and young whites, when, in fact, the real threats came from white adults”.

There was a position to invert the reality of the moment, pointing out youth as the possible focus of confrontation, instead of the parents who were upset about the possibility of school integration. Karen Anderson adds that “Faubus, however, stated that white adults who organized to protest integration were operating in the field of legitimate and peaceful protest”. In other words, if contrary demonstrations occurred, it would not be the fault of the white crowd, but of the few African Americans who accompanied the entrance of the “nine from Little Rock”, in Central High.



**Figure 2:** Elizabeth Eckford on her first day at Central High. “When Elizabeth approached the school, the crowd was furious. Someone was yelling at a mass segregationist ‘Lynch her. Lynch her. The crowd chanted, No black bitches will enter our school. Sweep this tree. Let’s take care of the black sake”.

**Source:** Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, n° 57, p. 5 (2007).

It is interesting to contrast the official perspective of the state government, with respect to the protesters and who would represent the violence, with the memories of the nine students who started Integration in the state. As student Elizabeth Eckford recalls (figure 02), protesters...

... moved closer and closer. ... Somebody started yelling. ... I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the crowd—someone who maybe could help. I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat on me<sup>14</sup>.

If defending the end of segregation involved the psychological aspects of children and young people, and that integration was the perceived tool for breaking barriers and prejudices, it is necessary that we reflect on the aggressions suffered by the first young people who overcame the system. After this brief contextualization, we will focus our analysis on the figures who fought for Integration and who were central to the end of separation policies based on an

<sup>14</sup> Herb Boyd. <<Little Rock Nine paved the way>>. *New York Amsterdam News* 98, n° 40 (2007). March 4, 2009: p. 28.

idea of race. The year 1958 would come with the determination to close the Little Rock public schools that would only be reactivated in 1959, in the episode that became known as “the lost year”, an action, in which

the governor and the state legislature responded to the Supreme Court decision by closing all Little Rock high schools in the 1958-1959 school year. They then tried to develop a plan by which the state would finance, with taxpayer money, segregated private schools. The Supreme Court decision, as well as the state’s response, crystallized opposition between several influential Little Rock business groups. These groups mobilized sufficient community support to win a special school council election in May 1959. This election led to the school’s return to local public control on a limited integrated basis<sup>15</sup>.

The government’s effort to prevent Integration from becoming a reality is noticeable. In Tony Freyer’s article, people’s annoyance towards the way Orval Faubus was leading the situation emerged precisely at the moment when, in addition to preventing Integration, the government was taking deliberate actions that would harm everyone.

The situation in the state of Arkansas would only improve in the 1960s, however today it still requires a careful analysis and perception of the remnants influences of a dark time, when prejudice and division was what drove many of the nation’s leaders. In this sense, by understanding the context and analyzing these experiences, we hope to be able to answer the fundamental question that permeates this text: Is Integration a reality or is it a policy still in development?}



**Figure 3:** Protesters outside Central High, Little Rock Arkansas. In their posters they call for an end to the “mix of races”, stating that Integration would be a communist policy.

**Source:** Granger / REX / Shutterstock. Accessed October 6, 2020.

It is important to note the contrasting perspectives of official history acted out by great historical characters and the distinct perspective drawn from reports based on the practice of oral history. Within the sphere of official history is the contrast of influences at play between the Governor of Arkansas acting to obstruct the process towards Integration and President Eisenhower ordering federal troops to Little Rock to ensure that the new law is carried out.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Freyer. <<Politics and Law in the Little Rock Crisis, 1954 – 1957>>. *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 40, nº 3 (1981): p. 215.



However, as David Glassberg says, we are led to perceive the practical and direct effects of such events from the perspective of the population, facts and events that generated the official history and that sometimes go unnoticed.

Through our text and the use of the archives of the Pryor Center, we have connected a perspective of Public History, as pointed out by Thomas Cauvin that highlights when pointing out the popular experience and participation in the conduct of these historical events. It is important to keep in mind that the practice of such events was not conditioned from the top down, but rather in the opposite direction, - since as it was the social outcry and the struggle for civil rights that brought about this change. Although somewhat superficial due to space, here we see the faces and voices behind the events that led to School Integration at Central High, albeit against the will and without the support of the Governor of Arkansas.



**Figure 4:** The “Nines de Central High” being escorted by the National Guard sent by President Eisenhower.

**Source:** CSU Archieves, accessed October 6, 2020.

### The Central High Crisis – 1957

The main motivation for Little Rock to integrate its education system was focused on finance, as Dorothy Gillam states: “if the education department was not considered integrated, they did not receive any federal funds, period”<sup>16</sup>. More than the social nature, what motivated the city to adhere to the process of desegregating education were the financial possibilities. A project started in 1954 took shape to be applied in the year of 1957, where nine African American students were selected to enter Central High, in a climate of great tension.

When we see D-day images (Figures 03 and 04) of the integration, in Little Rock, we observe photos and videos that demonstrate the horror and hatred that drove people’s action. A young reporter for the Arkansas Gazette, named Phyllis Brandon (1935 - 2020), was sent to cover the Crisis due to her youth, posing as a student. She remembers that, in September 1957, there were around 150 people shouting and blocking the way for the selected students

<sup>16</sup> GILAM, Dorothy. Interview Transcription from Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. [August 03, 2011]. Interviewer: Scott Lunsford.

to enter Central High, saying that they did not want to mix their children with “this type of people”. As she claims:

This was 1957. And so I worked through the summer. And then when they were gettin’ ready to integrate Central High. The editors decided that I would go out there and get in the school because they weren’t lettin’ any reporters in the school. And since I looked so young, I put on my National Honor Society pin and got my bobbysocks on and some books. And the editors of the paper did not think the blacks were gonna show up that day. And they got me out there late. So by the time I got there, they had guards on all the doors, and students who had left could not go back in. And so I went, and I said, “Can’t”—you know, “Can’t I go to my locker?” And they said, “Nobody can go in.” So I stayed and covered the mob, which was amazing. They were, you know, yellin’ and carryin’ on. [...] And got in line to call in my story. And the people in the line said, “Who are you with?” And I said, “I’m with the Democrat.” And they said, “Well, it’s a good thing. If you were with the Gazette, we wouldn’t let you use the phone.” You know, that was going on. But these people, we’ve talked about it a lot. These people didn’t look like Little Rock people. They were people from out in the state that somebody stirred up like Jim Johnson or somebody, you know, got ‘em to come to Central and act up. And they did.

More than what we perceive from photos, when listening to the voice of someone who witnessed this series of events, we can sense the irrationality of people who felt attacked by the mere idea of racial and cultural integration. The day Phyllis Brandon witnessed the uprising against Integration was the same day that the National Guard had been removed. It was found that, according to her description, the Little Rock police force was torn between supporting the demonstrations and complying with their duty, which, as it turns out, was more to protect the protesters than the students who were starting the Integration process. Brandon would further add that “the crowd was so angry that day, that they chased the blacks away. And it was then that Eisenhower sent the national troops to escort black students to their classrooms and make everything ‘semi-normal’”.

The Crisis at Central High and the aggression against the nine students who had been selected to start integration was the trigger for Eisenhower to sign the Civil Rights Act of 1957 in 1957. This act was marked for being the first federal law to prevent acts of segregation and the reduction of rights based on color. In Arkansas, with such a signature, the president ordered the use of national troops to make integration through the education system happen.

The memory of one of the nine students, Melba Pattilo, has been safeguarded inside the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, stating that they did not go: “to Central High to sit next to the whites as if they have a kind of magical dust or something like this. I wouldn’t risk my life to sit next to a white person... We went to Central for the opportunity”. It is clear from this statement that the guiding principle for African Americans was not confrontation, as advocates of segregation propagated, but rather equal opportunities and the struggle for quality education.

As Lisa Corrigan points out<sup>17</sup>, the nine from Little Rock found “a phalanx of hatred and fear of change, the nine, in this scenario, would have had the courage to enter school, showing that Integration was possible and necessary”. When analyzing the speech of the nine, at the event celebrating the 60th anniversary of Integration at Central High, Corrigan notes that, in the speech of the gentlemen and ladies who in the past were the beginning of change in Little Rock, they do not consider themselves heroes. However, evoking the idea of the first

17 Lisa Corrigan. <<The (Re)segregation Crisis Continues: Little Rock Central High at Sixty>>. *Southern Communication Journal* 83, n° 2, (2018): p. 71 - 72.

pilgrims, Minnijean Brown-Trickey claims that they were catalysts in a process of change, but that the most important thing is “to remind themselves and the world that the work, started by the nine, is not complete until there is truly a real integration”.

Thus, the opportunity sought by young people in the 50s and 60s is still a cause for struggle, since integration has not been completely achieved. Despite the climate of racial tension in the town of Little Rock today being completely different from that of 1957, the conflict has not been easily resolved.

As Dorothy Gillam recalls, she was right in the middle of all the hustle and bustle, one of her neighbors worked at Central High and she “used to give him a ride to Central, and had to be careful about where to stop, be very careful. I still remember the guards and all that movement going on. Those were crazy times”. If for adults who witnessed all this transformation and struggle it was not easy, what can be expected from the young people who featured as protagonists in that moment in Little Rock?

One of the nine in Little Rock was looked after by Mrs. Gillam, as their families were friends. She remembers the tension that parents felt with the moment and the concern for their children. The young student she cared for was Minnijean Brown-Trickey, the only one of the nine who was expelled from Central High after being offended and attacked (physically and psychologically), while the maximum punishment for her attackers was a two-day suspension.

Minnijean Brown would tell the following about the experience of having been one of nine: “I was one of the children ‘approved’ by school officials. They told us that we would face many problems and warned us not to return aggressions if they happened. A girl said to me ‘I am happy that you are here. Shall we have lunch together?’”, But in the end she would never see the girl again. It is clear that prejudice was imbued in the environment and that even those who would seek to overcome the barriers created by segregation were attacked in such a way as to set aside interest and the search for true integration.

The difficulty suffered by the young Linda Brown, as well as the torment suffered by Elizabeth Eckford portrayed earlier, denotes the tension and the inhumanity with which these young people were treated when they became a symbol of combating the oppressive and excluding system. Each of the nine went through a similar torment, but all overcame the barriers imposed by society, proving, through their efforts, that segregation was based purely on racism and that cognitive justification does not provide validity.

Christopher Mercer Jr., one of those responsible for transporting the nine students, says the following, about the experience he had when accompanying five of the young people:

I drove five of the Little Rock Nine to school every day, picked ‘em up every morning, took ‘em to school, picked ‘em up at school and took ‘em back home. [...] It took some courage because I would drop them off on the 14th side of the school, and they would get out of the car [...], and that’s where I’d pick ‘em up. And of course, this was an exit and an entrance [...] was where most of the school students went in rather than the front [...] And there was a stream of kids going in and out, and they would heckle us every day. Throw rocks at the cars, spit on the car [laughs], do that sort of thing. And it was an exercise in patience to control yourself enough to not get out there and do something physical. And of course, back at that time —I guess I was crazy—I—my attitude was that I was not afraid of anything. But you had to exercise patience [...] Once or twice I let my emotions get the best of me, and I did snap

back at them—you know, they—when they were spittin’ on my car or throwing debris on the car<sup>18</sup>.

The Central High Crisis caused a mobilization of the community, led by parents, youth, as well as members of organizations that fought for equality. Throughout all the narratives, there is an emphasis on responding to the aggressions and attitudes that support the persistence of segregation by exercising patience and defending their rights despite being attacked.

As Christopher says, many of the young white students were just as terrible as their parents and the adults who supported segregation, due to the example of disparagement of the other that they witnessed at home. The attitude of resilience, exemplified by the nine young people from Central High and the community that supported them, enabled them to overcome prejudices and demonstrate that, as was advocated in the Brown vs. Kansas Board of Education, a segregated education will only harm people before doing any good.

The real battle for the end of legislated segregation only ended in 1968, eleven years after the Central High Crisis and 14 years after the Supreme Court decision in the Brown case. In a way, we can say that the ultimate conflict for an equal education was fought by nine young people in Arkansas, who overcame aggression while fighting for qualified education.

This statement is based on the perspective that the Little Rock scenes became a symbol of the struggle against segregation across the country. Equality in the field of education came together as one of the flags of the civil rights movements of the 50s and 60s, as a conquered right, but that – like others – required improvement. The way in which the aggression against African American children was presented generated a reflection and a struggle for real and effective change, which in the 1960s was strengthened by the broader civil rights movement that seethed across the country.

The battle won by the Brown Case trial, as well as the beginning of Integration in Little Rock, are symbols that it is not possible or fair to live in a divided society. These struggles exposed the problems of racism and prejudice and gave strength to the equality movement. However, did all the people who lived in that context realize the impact of what would have happened, as well as what was made and achieved?

### **Education in Arkansas after the Central High Crisis**

Janis Kearney was born in 1953, a year before the Supreme Court decided on the Brown case, in a small town in southern Arkansas. Throughout her childhood, she listened to stories about her parents and family who claimed to have lived under Jim Crow Laws throughout much of their lives. Her parents and siblings encouraged a strong interest in education, and she chose to volunteer for the Integration process in the city of Gould. Kearney reports her experience in the 1960s:

It was different. Very different. I write about how the first day that I went to a “white school,” for want of a better word to describe the fact that I had never been around that many white people before.[...] So it was an amazing thing to get off the school bus and go on into the school where it was all white students except for a few blacks who, you know, chose to do the freedom of choice thing. So it was one of those culture shocks. [...] It was a challenge for us because we felt that we were not wanted there. That the students were not, you know, mentally or whatever it was— prepared to accept us as students there.

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18 MERCER, Christopher. Interview Transcription from Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. [August 25, 2006]. Interviewer: Scott Lunsford.

And the teachers weren't ready to accept us for the most part<sup>19</sup>.

Even in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, there was still an atmosphere of prejudice that prevented a decision that had taken place eleven years ago. Janis Kearney attended an integrated school in 1965 and experienced issues as serious and problematic as her ancestors and the nine students who started integration in Little Rock.

As a student, Janis wondered if the way Integration was being implemented would ever result in an improved reality or remain as a mere illusion. In an interview in 1967, she commented that although it was possible to affirm that the education system was completely integrated, it was a theory much more than a reality.

In this sense, it is important to note that the problem of the 1960s persists until the present. This affirmative comes from the speech of Terrence Roberts, one of the nine from Central High, when reflecting at the celebration of the 60th anniversary of Integration in Little Rock, in which he stated "I am not here to celebrate, that time has not yet come. I've been waiting for that moment for 75 years [Roberts' age in 2017]. For a good part of these 75 years, I was attentive, aware of the need for real change".

Roberts' speech in 2017 corroborates the memory that Janis Kearney has of her first years in school. The education system was integrated in theory but not in practice, families that supported and wanted segregation just removed their children from public schools and took them to private schools.

This evasion from white families from public education highlights the fact that racial prejudice had become something structural, requiring a constant battle for acceptance of the other. As Kearney narrated, "integration in the South, or certainly in Gould, Arkansas, was not true, as schools ended up becoming 95% African American." Due to these structural prejudices, the growing movement in defense of civil rights was strengthened throughout the 1960s and persisted even into the 1970s, focusing on the need for change and equality.

What happened in Little Rock and Arkansas was a pivotal event that increased the number of integrated schools. Although it was not the only school to refuse Integration, Central High has become a symbol of the defense of human rights. Today, however, almost 70 years after the Supreme Court's decision, the United States school system persists in a great division. As pointed out by a Times magazine report, "the number of schools isolated by racial and economic perspectives has more than doubled in a period of 13 years, according to a study conducted by the Federal Government Audit Office in 2016"<sup>20</sup>.

The report, presented by Lina Mai, would bring the perspective that schools with the lowest rates of achievement and continuity (college entrance fees and good jobs) would be those for blacks, Latinos and poor students. Today, that prejudice, in addition to remaining

19 KEARNEY, Janis. Interview Transcription from Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. [February 27, 2006] Interviewer: Scott Lunsford.

20 Lina Mai. <<"I Had a Right to Be at Central": Remembering Little Rock's Integration Battle>>. *Time Magazine*, New York, 22 de setembro de 2017. Acessado em 06 de outubro de 2020, <https://time.com/4948704/little-rock-nine-anniversary/>

on the racial issue, has advanced to include an economic element. Now education is going through a new phase of segregation, based on cultural differences and financial possibilities.

The struggles developed throughout the 1950s and 1960s were focused on a series of social rights that were denied to black communities. When aspects of these rights were granted, an expansion of the meaning of the civil rights movement began. Today, a diffuse field of struggle for rights that bears its importance in every aspect and in every voice, should turn its eyes to the cause that strengthened it all: education. If integration has gained prominence due to the educational field, we must reflect on where we are today, whether we find ourselves in a better or worse situation, and what can be done to further develop what was started by Integration, but perceived as incomplete.

Today, the question remains regarding the success that has been achieved within the educational field that was the focus of social integration throughout the 1950s and 1960s. As already stated, there was a principle of improvement that ended up being set aside by a series of new implications and realities. As an example, we have the continuous transformation of urban space and the paradigms arising from the different migratory waves to the different parts of the United States.

For the reflection on the current impacts of integration policies, we use a proposed study by the Civil Rights Project, conducted from Harvard University, which presents the year of 1988 as the peak moment of real integration practices in the educational field. The educator Jonathan Kozol notes in a study carried out in 2005, that the proportion of African American students in mostly white schools was at the lowest level since 1968, 14 years after Brown's decision.

One of the main points dealt with by Kozol<sup>21</sup> is that although reality is changing, this change is not part of the interest of African American communities. It is believed that the process of desegregation, started in the 1930s and "completed" in the 1960s, has improved education possibilities for blacks as well as having positive results in combating racist practices from white communities. As presented in his work, "among young adults, 60% believe that the Federal Government should make public schools in fact integrated; the same number of people believe that an integrated education is not only correct but absolutely essential".

Some integration practices end up being responsible for creating impacts that move in the opposite direction of integration. It can be noted that the defense of such a model means a denial of the inclusion of all voices and equal future possibilities. The simplification of the issue by those in favor of segregation is centered on prejudices regarding the perceived problems the Other will bring to the lives of the white students as noted by Kozol making to the study carried out in 1995 by educator Gary Orfield.

The integration of students from different backgrounds, classes and realities may be perceived as an immeasurable challenge by many white parents, however when analyzing this issue from the point of view of education it becomes a potential tool that allows greater co-existence and knowledge of the world, as well as respect for the Other. It is noted throughout

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21 Jonathan Kozol. *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005.

our text how prejudice against the Other was constructed in the United States, from the time of slavery to the period of civil movements, in the second half of the 20th century.

With the advancement of desegregation policies throughout the 1970s and 1980s, many of the changes proposed and carried out became commonplace and issues of inequality soon failed to be noticed with the same focus as before. The current problem is how to reinforce this in its past, but which in the present has started to weaken. For many, the issue of segregation is a dilemma of the past, however if we consider the structure of our schools and education in ways that divide human beings “into castes”, we must reflect on where lies the root of the problem.

As pointed out by Kozol, part of the problem that makes the 21st century carry a new perspective of segregation, although no longer legislated, is in the new context and diversity of many cities across the United States, whether due to migration issues or due to urban mobility. If there is a perception regarding the reduction of the effectiveness of an integration policy, it is necessary to reflect on the expansion of results. As sociologist Amy Stuart Wells says, “the original intention for the desegregation was to enable blacks to access important social institutions and opportunities in order to improve their lives when thinking about a long term”<sup>22</sup>.

We believe that the proposed policies aiming at integration that were instigated in the 1950s and 1960s, were not designed to solve a problem quickly, rather in a continuous way working towards the possibility to overcome a social problem, making society more egalitarian. If we go back to the model from the past, when the reasoning of fathers and mothers were related to the learning difficulties of different children - we must keep in mind that the mistake was in forcing a division before working for a qualification of the educational system.

In memory spaces, such as the Civil Rights Museum<sup>23</sup> and the Central High Museum<sup>24</sup>, we are prompted to reflect on how arduous the battle for equality was between the different “races”. However, we are lured to one of the worst considerations that we can have as individuals and historians: this is the past, it is no longer part of our reality. This thought can cause the great problem that we can perceive in the United States: even though we have advanced in many aspects, we are returning to a perspective of separation, which permeated the actions of the past.

## Conclusion

At the entrance of the Central High Museum, in addition to the 14th Amendment, we are

22 Amy Wells, Amy. <<The “Consequences” of School Desegregation: The Mismatch Between the Research and the Rationale>>. *Hastings Constitutional Law Quarterly* 28, n° 4 (2001): p. 778.

23 The museum is in the city of Memphis, Tennessee. The memory space was built in the place where Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered and became a place to reflect on the horrors committed by social “minorities” - resuming the history of several struggles that African American communities led in search of a society in which they did have a voice.

24 It is located opposite Central High School in Little Rock. As part of its collection, it goes back to the post-independence period of the United States, showing how segregation was being built even after the abolition of slavery. After this introduction, we have the resumption of the story of Brown vs. Board of Education, showing its effects in Arkansas and the way nine students started the integration process in Little Rock.

presented with two quotations. The first, by Daisy Bates, states that “what is happening in Little Rock transcends the idea of segregation and integration - it is a question of what is right and what is wrong”. The second from Melba Pattilo, one of nine at Central High, states that “after three full days inside Central, I know that Integration is a much bigger word than I had thought”.

Both lines complement each other. While Bates talks about the importance of the movement for racial equality, highlighting the differentiation between right and wrong, about how changing paradigms was and continues to be necessary so that everyone can have a voice and rights, Pattilo presents the difficulty of not giving up a fight, an ideal and above all, a right.

Daisy Bates and Melba Pattilo complement each other, pointing out that change does not come about in a simple or easy way, but that it is necessary to persist for it to happen and become real. Throughout our work, we realized how segregation was built as State policy in the United States. It is noted that the division between races encapsulated a past that divided the nation through the Civil War. With the end of the conflict fundamental differences were not resolved remaining open for future generations to overcome a series of serious dilemmas.

By exploring the case of Arkansas and “the struggle” in the capital, Little Rock, it is possible to reflect on what were the motivations for the state to maintain segregation, as well as what motivated individuals to remain with the notions obtained through structural racism. We demonstrated how actions that worked to resist integration continued until the Civil Rights Act was approved, pointing out the wave of aggressions towards the Other. The biggest negative impacts of such attitudes was its direct attack on children and young people who had only one objective: to have a quality education.

With the reports collected by the Pryor Center, it is remarkable to note how “ordinary people” became involved with actions to end segregation and the first effects of policies and the period that followed. It was noted that the transformation offered by integration was broad and positive, but we felt that when they reached their goals, throughout the 1960s with the last Civil Acts, the struggle faded because it was believed that the objective has been achieved.

This feeling was part of the perspective of the students who became known as the Little Rock nine, as well as by the people who supported the integration movement. Such a statement is made reflecting on the work of Lisa Cirrigan, who presented the speech of eight of the nine, in the event of 60 years of Integration in Central High. All speeches noted the need to continue fighting for equality as it is still something to be achieved.

Through the narrative and perspectives that formed part of the Brown vs. Kansas Board of Education case, the impact that segregation had on young people, both children and adolescents, was studied and analyzed. With the speech of those interviewed by the Pryor Center, we realized the impact that these practices had from birth, on simple everyday activities such as a purchase in a store, and what struck our attention most; the educational environment. In such a way, it is impossible to deny that there is a formidable impact on young people who have had a segregated school imposed on them. The fight started with the conquest of vacancies in universities and protests in the streets and within politics, subsequently the battle for a quality basic education was included as well. From the 1970s there was a fading of the intensity of the struggle for civil rights in the educational sphere.



While in the 1950s and 1960s civil movements were characterized by the struggle for equality based on the notion of different races, in the 70s and 80s such symbolism was expanded to include the fight for gender equality and the LGBTQ community. To this multiplicity of movements, we now have deeper global issues such as migratory crises and polarizations of communities; in this sense, we experience a variety of differences that are much more complex and noticeable.

We note that the return to a social division that culminates in educational segregation today is due to this multiplicity of people, cultures and worlds - making it impossible to define one perspective or the other, since each case has its own solution. In a perfect world, the measures taken with the signature of the Civil Acts would have bequeathed a stable and profound impact, but this was not the reality that unfolded in the 21st century.

Today the effects of the new segregation are felt by numerous people, no longer by a concentrated axis. This poses a serious problem as communities are in an atmosphere of exclusion and interaction is restraining the possibilities relationships between different. In such a way, it is noted that the issue, now, is no longer centered in a legislation that oppresses part of the population to the detriment of another part but is located in the unjust distribution of income and opportunity, for all people.

As the main result of this analysis, in which we recount how a segregated horizon was overcome only to find it under a new orientation, we defined that the best way to overcome the problem is not to attack it from the top to the bottom, but to propose changes that influence the youngest and then reflect on the whole. Changing the way in which the initial teaching classes are educated, allowing coexistence between differences is the best way to overcome barriers that are created and expanded by thinking of people who already have a structured experience and formed thinking.

The integration of the 1950s and 1960s was fundamental and has meant that today hundreds of people have a real opportunity for personal and professional development. However, now, it is necessary to reflect on how society differs from this past, so that a new Integration policy can be developed, allowing students to have at least an opportunity of basic and equal quality education.

An integration starting at the base of society has a greater chance of influencing the whole, since the youngest will be responsible for tomorrow, as well as the catalysts for changes still in the present. By combating segregation and transforming the reality of the young, we begin to build a new horizon, where when looking at the past we know how far we have advanced. If such an idea resembles a utopia, we must reflect that every change must be idealized before it is realized and through our reflection, we believe that this is the best way for an effective integration of education, in the 21st century.

As the aforementioned Terrence Roberts said, the time to celebrate has not yet come, there is a long way to go to achieve the conclusion of the process started in the 1950s. Little Rock has become a symbol of integration, but like any symbol, we must analyze the details of such an idea, listening to those who experienced the event to reflect that the path to be followed is long, but possible to be achieved.

Moreover, it is precisely by reflecting on the words of Terrence Roberts, that the time

to celebrate a society that is in fact integrated has not yet arrived, that we justify our analysis as consistent with the practices of public and oral history. The use of interviews and testimonies clearly justifies the orality of our analysis materials, but the public question is justified from the perspective of giving voice to characters that are part of archives, seeking to expand the scope of their voices and experiences. The struggle for integration is not over yet, in this sense it is important to approach and understand the experience of those who in the past fought for the changes that are still needed in the present. The public history in this case is based on the recovery of an archive, aiming to disseminate the experience contained therein - from a narrative that seeks to point out what happened at Central High, while indicating the need for an improvement in the present time - as indicated by the experience of the nine at Central High.

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