

EXCERPTS TO WRITE ABOUT

Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories

by Ellen Levine

- As you begin to read, ask yourself, "Is this a firsthand or secondhand account? How do I know?"

Read through one time and decide what topic or event this is discussing, then read through a second time and determine point of view about the events. Highlight words and phrases that help you determine the point of view, and jot down your thinking.

In 1954, in a case called *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the United States Supreme Court ruled that separating the races in schools deprives Negro children of equal educational opportunities. "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," Chief Justice Warren wrote. In addition, he said, school segregation creates in minority children "a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone." The Court declared school segregation law as unconstitutional.

The decision stunned and enraged southern segregationists. In March 1956 a group of U.S. Senators and Representatives from the eleven states of the Old Confederacy signed a statement called the "southern Manifesto." In it, they declared their opposition to the Supreme Court decision and urged that schools fight any attempts to integrate. As a result of resistance by segregationists, which was sometimes violent, most southern schools were not integrated until ten to twenty years after the Supreme Court decision in the *Brown* case.

Black children's experiences in segregated schools differed widely. In some classrooms, teachers were hesitant to talk about civil rights for fear of antagonizing the white establishment. In others, teachers instilled in their students a pride in black achievement. As in all schools, segregated or integrated, some teachers repeated past lessons so that few were inspired and most were bored. Others challenged their students to think, to stretch. . . .

But despite the limited resources, black children in segregated schools were at least in a safe environment. Their first experiences of integration were startling by contrast. Although none of them anticipated warm welcomes, neither did they expect the depth and extent of the hostility they encountered from white students and often teachers. Yet they persisted, and in that persistence exhibited an extraordinary strength and single-mindedness of purpose.

- Now read a different version of the same event. Notice the heading "Pat Shuttlesworth."

Is this a firsthand or secondhand account? How do you know?

Read through one time and decide what topic or event this is discussing. Read a second time and determine the point of view about the events. Highlight words and phrases that help you determine the point of view, and jot down your thinking.

In the fall of 1957 in Birmingham, less than a year after their church parsonage had been bombed, Reverend and Mrs. Shuttlesworth tried to enroll their two oldest daughters, Pat and Ricky, in the largest all-white high school in the city. Their son, Fred, was in elementary school at the time.

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Pat Shuttlesworth

We were told we were going to integrate Phillips. With Daddy being the leader, he wanted his first two kids to be involved. I'm not as patient and nonviolent as Ricky and Daddy are. If anybody hit me, I was ready to hit back. But I had been told you can't do anything but walk in the school. They prepared us.

The car pulled up, and there were mobs of people saying, "N— go home!" and shouting obscenities. All these vicious-looking people saying things you hadn't heard before out loud. It didn't make sense to me to get out of the car with all those people surrounding us. But Daddy was going to try to do it anyway.

They started to attack him. Then my mother got out because he was being attacked, and that's when she got stabbed in the hip. She was trying to tell us to stay in the car, but we didn't want to hear. We were going to go out to help our father. There was just so much confusion. Even though he had been beaten, Daddy had enough strength to work his way around and get back in the car. We sped off. Ricky got her foot slammed in the door. I never got out at all. At the hospital when we saw there was blood, we knew my mother had been stabbed. The hardest part was when my father was on that stretcher in the hospital, and he was telling us to be brave and that you have to forgive people.

I don't look at it now when it's on TV because it's painful. I can't watch it. I get angry all over again. I don't like crowds to this day.

- Use your notes and fill in the template with similarities and differences between the two accounts, then write a short compare/contrast piece.

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Note: Levine reports the history of the landmark Supreme Court decision that declared segregating children in public schools unconstitutional. She provides an overview of the aftermath of that decision, including details about the outrage and violence that ensued when Southern segregationists resisted the new law of the land. But it's not until Levine includes the firsthand account of a young black child that we can fully understand and empathize with the terror black students and their families encountered when attending formerly white-only schools, where crowds of angry whites let it be known with words and violence that they were opposed to integration. Suddenly, with the account of Pat Shuttlesworth, the harsh reality of the past comes flying forward, into the reader's consciousness. Notice the last line: To this day, Pat can't watch footage of those events, and she doesn't like crowds. With that one detail about crowds, we know she, like thousands of other innocent people, was traumatized by the events. This serves to remind us that history—*his-story*—is never really over, never fully "past"; it impacts its active and passive participants in profound ways.