A School Year Like No Other

Eyes on the Prize: "Fighting Back: 1957-1962"

BY BILL BIGELOW

"A SCHOOL YEAR LIKE NO OTHER." That's the narrator's understated description of the 1957-58 school year at Central High School in Little Rock, Ark., in the dramatic episode, "Fighting Back: 1957-1962," in the PBS *Eyes on the Prize* series.

More than 50 years after heavily armed federal troops escorted nine African American students into Central High School, it's easy to scoff at the results of desegregation. So black children can go to public schools formerly reserved for whites. So what? Is life within integrated schools equitably structured? Has desegregation significantly reduced the achievement gap between black and white children? Have income disparities withered away? Can we even say that schools are less segregated than they were 50 years ago? This is not a lesson that attempts to analyze the ambiguous legacy of desegregation. Instead it celebrates the determination and sacrifice of those individuals who were the shock troops in this struggle. And, to a lesser extent, it attempts to examine some of the resistance to school integration. Students watch the video, but through writing they are also invited to "become" the individuals whose lives shaped and were shaped by these key civil rights battles.

Materials Needed:

- Video: *Eyes on the Prize:* "Fighting Back: 1957-1962;" Optional: copies of the Student Handouts: "Inside Elizabeth Ann Eckford;" and "In Their Own Words: *Eyes on the Prize:* Little Rock and Mississippi."
- [Optional.] A transcript of this episode of *Eyes on the Prize* can be found online at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/about/pt_102.html.

Suggested Procedure:

1. Explain to students that you'll be asking them to do some writing based on the events depicted in the video they're about to view. They'll have the choice of writing interior monologues, stories, poems, dialogue (two-voice) poems, diary entries, or letters. Ask them to write down incidents during the video that they find especially sad, inspiring, or outrageous. They might write their impressions of particular characters or events. Urge them to "steal" lines from the narrator or people interviewed. They'll be able to incorporate these in their writing.
2. Show the video. Over the years I've supervised a number of student teachers. It's interesting to watch how some of them use video in the classroom. At least initially, their strategy is to wheel the VCR-DVD and television to the front of the classroom turn it on and go back to their desk to watch or grade papers. Needless to say, this does not always result in students' rapt attention and full comprehension. I'm an interventionist when it comes to showing videos. Particularly with documentaries, which often require more context-setting, I sit by the television and stop it frequently to ask a question or point something out. I may rewind it to replay someone's comment or an

especially poignant scene. At times, I pause it to ask students to wonder what might be going through a person's mind at a particular point or to anticipate how an individual or group will resolve a dilemma. I try not to overdo it, and I have to confess that, at least at first, some students are annoyed by this practice. They have years of video-watching practice—staring at the screen—and don't feel that they need someone butting in to ask questions and make them mentally "talk back" and evaluate underlying messages. Generally, we reach a kind of negotiated middleground—somewhere between their desire to be left alone to enjoy or "veg-out" and my desire ask them to think about every last nuance.

3. Stop the video immediately after Elizabeth Eckford (one of the nine students chosen to desegregate Little Rock's Central High School) gets on the bus. Read aloud the dramatic account excerpted from NAACP leader Daisy Bates' *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*, included here as the Student Handout, "Inside Elizabeth Ann Eckford."
4. Resume the video.
5. Some questions for discussion afterwards:
   - The narrator in the video comments that because other forms of integration had been successful in Little Rock, some people hoped that the same would be true for school integration. Why wasn't this the case?
   - Why did President Eisenhower not act sooner to force Governor Faubus to allow the nine students into Central High School?
   - Eisenhower sends in the troops to protect the "Little Rock Nine." The *Eyes on the Prize* narrator comments, "The troops did not, however, mean the end of harassment; it meant the declaration of war." Who were the sides in this war? What were they fighting for?
   - Melba Pattillo Beals describes how she was tripped and fell onto broken glass. Why did the black students put up with all the abuse? Why not just say, "Forget it. I'm leaving"?
   - Look at the comments by the white student about Spanish and Chinese people on the "In Their Own Words" handout. When she declares that Negroes are "more different" than Spanish people, what do you think she's referring to?
   - Why does Melba burn her books?
   - Constance Baker Motley says that the Civil Rights struggles in the South created a "genuine revolution on the part of black people." Do you agree? How do you define "revolution"? What were the aims of this revolution?
   - Analyze the Ross Barnett quote from his speech at the Mississippi-Kentucky football game. Who are the "people" he refers to? What are their "customs" and "heritage"?
   - The reporter asks James Meredith if he felt guilty for the deaths at Ole Miss. Should Meredith have felt guilty? If Meredith hadn't been so diplomatic, how might he have responded?
6. Ask students to write from the video. One option is to postpone a discussion of the video until after students have written, and then to incorporate the above questions into a discussion that grows out of the writing. Allow students to choose how they respond to the video: interior monologues, stories, poems, dialogue poems, diary entries, or letters. Brainstorm possible topics with students. For example, they might write as James Meredith when the reporter asks him if he feels guilty; as Ernest Green when he walks across the stage to accept his diploma; as Melba watching her books burn; as Minnie Jean when she dumps chili on the head of the white boy who harassed her; as the all-black cafeteria workers watching and applauding. Students could write dialogue poems from the standpoint of black and white students in Central High School. [For examples, see "Two Women" in *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 1* or "Two

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Whites harass Elizabeth Ann Eckford, one of nine African American students attempting to begin the 1957-58 school year at Little Rock's Central High School.

Young Women" in *Rethinking Globalization*]:

I am a student
I am a student ...

Or students could write dialogue poems from the standpoint of white and black reporters about any of the events depicted in the video.

List students' writing ideas on the board. Encourage them to choose the form of writing that will best allow them to explore the emotions and ideas they had during the video. I always make sure to give students time to begin—if not finish—the writing in class, as I find that this results in students producing more and better quality papers.

7. Seat students in a circle and invite them to share their pieces in a read-around. Ask them to be alert to common themes in their writing. In my classes, some students focus on the hardships of the African American teenagers attempting to integrate Central High School, as does Lila Johnson in her poem:

I remember the mob
how faces became blurred shades
of light and dark
how fingers reached greedily for
a sleeve   an arm   a neck
how bodies formed
an intricate weave
and squeezed
in hopes of crushing
a young black girl

Frequently, students write from Melba Pattillo Beals' standpoint [see Linda Christensen's article at the Zinn Education Project website, www.zinnedproject.org, "Warriors Don't Cry: Brown Comes to Little Rock"] as she burns her books after that 1957-58 school year. Sarah Sherwood penned a bitter piece she called "The Fire in My Soul:"

I swore to myself I would never go back there again, that I would never put myself through that kind of humiliation again. I hated them; I hated them for making me hate. I told myself I would never become like them, but here I am wishing they were all dead.

And then she lights her books on fire:

I sat there and watched as my dreams, my hopes, burned away. I coldly stared at the flame. There were no more tears to cry.

AP Images/Fred Kaufman

Eight of the nine black students walk to their waiting Army station wagon, Oct. 2, 1957.

Despite the anguish in students' writing, perhaps the most common motif in their pieces is defiance. Alice Ramos imagines the thoughts of Ernest Green, the first African American to graduate from Central High School:

But I graduated from
your all-white, all-prejudice school

They didn't clap
When I went to pick up my diploma

But I didn't care
I don't need their clapping

I beat the monster
that day I stepped inside the school.

In fact, more than 50 years after *Brown*, we can see that the "monster" is more multifaceted, more complicated than it may have appeared to the NAACP activists who led the move to integrate Little Rock's Central High School. So we need to help our students reflect on alternatives that Civil Rights activists might have pursued 50 years ago, and let's help students probe the contemporary nature of the monster of racial inequality. But we can also offer students the opportunity to celebrate the courage and tenacity of the young people who risked their lives for a better education—for themselves and for those who would come after.

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Inside Elizabeth Ann Eckford

THAT NIGHT I WAS SO EXCITED I couldn't sleep. The next morning I was about the first one up. While I was pressing my black-and-white dress—I had made it to wear on the first day of school—my little brother turned on the TV set. They started telling about a large crowd gathered at the school. The man on TV said he wondered if we were going to show up that morning. Mother called from the kitchen, where she was fixing breakfast, "Turn that TV off!" She was so upset and worried. I wanted to comfort her, so I said, "Mother, don't worry."

Dad was walking back and forth, from room to room, with a sad expression. He was chewing on his pipe and he had a cigar in his hand, but he didn't light either one. It would have been funny only he was so nervous.

Before I left home Mother called us into the living room. She said we should have a word of prayer. Then I caught the bus and got off a block from the school. I saw a large crowd of people standing across the street from the soldiers guarding Central. ...

AP Images

Elizabeth Ann Eckford

[Little Rock School] Superintendent Blossom had told us to enter by the front door. I looked at all the people and thought, "Maybe I will be safer if I walk down the block to the front entrance behind the guards."

At the corner I tried to pass through the long line of guards around the school so as to enter the grounds behind them. One of the guards pointed across the street. So I pointed in the same direction and asked whether he meant for me to cross the street and walk down. He nodded "yes." So, I walked across the street conscious of the crowd that stood there, but they moved away from me.

For a moment all I could hear was the shuffling of their feet. Then, someone shouted. "Here she comes, get ready!" I moved away from the crowd on the sidewalk and into the street. If the mob came at me I could then cross back over so the guards could protect me.

The crowd moved in closer and then began to follow me, calling me names. I still wasn't afraid. Just a little bit nervous. Then my knees started to shake all of a sudden and I wondered whether I could make it to the center entrance a block away. It was the longest block I ever walked in my whole life.

Even so, I still wasn't too scared because all the time I kept thinking that the guards would protect me.

When I got right in front of the school, I went up to a guard again. But this time he just looked straight ahead and didn't move to let me pass him. I didn't know what to do. Then I looked and saw that the path leading to the front entrance was a little farther ahead. So I walked until I was right in front of the path to the front door.

I stood looking at the school—it looked so big! Just then the guards let some white students go through.

The crowd was quiet. I guess they were waiting to see what was going to happen. When I was able to steady my knees, I walked up to the guard who had let the white students in. He too didn't move. When I tried to squeeze past him, he raised his bayonet and then the other guards closed in and they raised their bayonets.

They glared at me with a mean look and I was very frightened and didn't know what to do. I turned around and the crowd came toward me.

They moved closer and closer. Somebody started yelling, "Lynch her! Lynch her!"

I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the mob—someone who maybe would 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.

They came closer, shouting, "No nigger bitch is going to get in our school. Get out of here!"

I turned back to the guards but their faces told me I wouldn't get help from them. Then I looked down the block and saw a bench at the bus stop. I thought, "If I can only get there I will be safe." I don't know why the bench seemed a safe place to me, but I started walking toward it. I tried to close my mind to what they were shouting, and kept saying to myself, "If I can only make it to the bench I will be safe."

When I finally got there, I don't think I could have gone another step. I sat down and the mob crowded up and began shouting all over again. Someone hollered, "Drag her over to this tree! Let's take care of the nigger." Just then a white man sat down beside me, put his arm around me and patted my shoulder. He raised my chin and said, "Don't let them see you cry."

Then, a white lady—she was very nice—she came over to me on the bench. She spoke to me but I don't remember now what she said. She put me on the bus and sat next to me. She asked me my name and tried to talk to me but I don't think I answered. I can't remember much about the bus ride, but the next thing I remember I was standing in front of the School for the Blind, where Mother works.

I thought, "Maybe she isn't here. But she has to be here!" So I ran upstairs, and I think some teachers tried to talk to me, but I kept running until I reached Mother's classroom.

Mother was standing at the window with her head bowed, but she must have sensed I was there because she turned around. She looked as if she had been crying, and I wanted to tell her I was all right. But I couldn't speak. She put her arms around me and I cried. ■

From Daisy Bates, The Long Shadow of Little Rock. *(New York: David McKay, 1962).*

In Their Own Words

Eyes on the Prize: Little Rock and Mississippi

Melba Pattillo Beals: "The mob was getting past the wooden saw horses, because the policemen would no longer fight their own in order to protect us. And so someone made the suggestion that if they allowed the mob to hang one kid they could then get the rest out. And a gentleman whom I believed to be the assistant Chief of Police said, 'How you gonna choose? You gonna let them draw straws?'"

Ernest Green, on the black students' first trip to Central High with federal troops: "Well, we got into the jeep, into the stationwagon, rather. And the convoy that went from Mrs. Bates' house to the school had a jeep in front, a jeep behind. They both had machine gun mounts. And then the whole school was ringed with paratroopers and helicopters hovering around. We marched up the steps in this circle of soldiers with bayonets drawn. I figured that we had really gone into school that day. And walking up the steps that day was probably one of the biggest feelings I've ever had. I figured I'd finally cracked it."

Melba Pattillo Beals: "You'd be walking out to the volleyball court, and someone would break a bottle and trip you on the bottle. I have scars on my right knee from that."

White reporter to white high school student: "Do you think you'll get used to going to school with colored children?"

White student: "Yes, sir. I think so. I mean if I'm gonna have to do it I might as well get used to it."

White student: "If a Spanish or a Chinese person come here it wouldn't be hard to get along with them. It's just that the Negroes are what you might say, more different to us than a Spanish person might be."

Melba Pattillo Beals: "By the time school had ended I had sort of settled into myself. And I could have gone on for the next five years—it didn't matter anymore. I was past feeling. I was into just that kind of numb pain where you say, 'Hey, I can make it. Do whatever you'd like, and it just doesn't matter anymore.' But I came home and by myself I walked to the back yard and I burned my books, and I burned everything that I could burn. And I just stood there crying looking into the fire. And wondering whether I would go back, but not wanting to go back."

Constance Baker Motley: "It was a genuine revolution on the part of black people."

White student, Ole Miss: "If the school is closed, we want the (football) games played anyway."

Ross Barnett, Governor of Mississippi, at Mississippi-Kentucky football game: "I love Mississippi. I love her people, our customs. I love and respect our heritage."

Burke Marshall, Assistant U.S. Attorney General: "In a way, Oxford had become the symbol of massive resistance in the final gasp of the Civil War."

White reporter to James Meredith after the riots and deaths at the University of Mississippi: "Sir, there's been a great deal of turmoil and conflict. Two people have been killed. Do you have any feelings of guilt? Have you given it any second thoughts?" ■

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