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HEADLINE: High-quality teachers transcended Brown case

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BODY:

AUGUST 1950, three years and nine months B.B. (before Brown vs. Board of Education): Freeman A. Hrabowski III is born in the segregated world of Birmingham, Ala.

December 1951, two years and five months B.B.: Gregory Kane is born in the just as segregated world of Baltimore, Md.

The story of the Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. Board of Education, which will have a 50th-anniversary something - celebration just doesn't seem quite the right word - on May 17 is, Hrabowski said at a University of Maryland, Baltimore County lecture Wednesday evening, history for those born in the '70s and '80s. For those of us born before the decision, it's in many ways our story.

For Hrabowski, the esteemed UMBC president who just happens to be African-American, the story begins in Birmingham's close-knit middle-class black community of the 1950s and 1960s. Angela Davis, the university professor and communist radical activist of the 1960s, came from that community. Davis is a brilliant scholar, no matter what you think of her politics.

National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice - her father was one of Hrabowski's teachers - came from the same neighborhood, as did a former director of the International Monetary Fund and a former chief executive officer of a New York financial institution. So did Alma Powell, wife of Secretary of State Colin Powell. And then there's Hrabowski, who was a precocious lad when he started kindergarten in September of 1954, a year before most kids start kindergarten. That was four months after Brown.

I was 33 months old then, still mastering the intricacies of spoons, forks and cups that could be tippy. I grew up in the rough working-class - I absolutely refuse to call them poor - neighborhoods of West Baltimore. My school days didn't start until September of 1956, when I entered kindergarten at P.S. 125, (I didn't know the official name was Furman L. Templeton) which still stands at the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Dolphin Street.

For years, Hrabowski's classes and mine had only black students. The Brown decision - that momentous thing that

had such supposedly great impact and which many will be effusively celebrating in nine days - had, for years, no impact on our lives whatsoever.

It wasn't until the early 1960s that Hrabowski - "a chubby kid who loved reading and math" as he described himself - entered a classroom with white students, and then it wasn't in Birmingham. It was at a summer enrichment class in Massachusetts, where his classmates didn't speak to him and the teacher never called on him.

My first integrated classroom was at Mordecai Gist Elementary School, P.S. 69, which I entered in the spring semester of the 1961-1962 school year. I was the kid with the large forehead who loved reading and math, who had constantly got his face punched by bullies in the all-black schools.

Integration only had one meaning for me: at Mordecai Gist, I got my face punched by bullies of two races.

Hrabowski's parents wanted to send him to a Birmingham high school that integrated in 1964, but the bottles and rocks hurled at black students by protesting white parents made the older Hrabowskis reconsider. (There may be something to Stokely Carmichael's claim that the only thing Brown definitely accomplished was to make many whites of the Deep South lose their minds.)

Only a year before that, I had returned to a segregated school. My mother had moved from Baltimore's Forest Park neighborhood back to West Baltimore, where I enrolled in Harlem Park Junior High School - now Harlem Park Middle School - in September of 1963.

Several things helped Hrabowski overcome whatever negative effects segregated schooling had. The first two were his parents and a community that provided what he called "supplemental activities" - music lessons, museum trips and other things that "strengthened our thinking and reading skills." And then there were the teachers in those segregated schools.

"They made it clear," Hrabowski said, "that hard work counts, and they made us feel good when we excelled. Those black teachers were very committed to giving us the best academic education they could provide. They had high standards, and expected us to meet those standards."

Hrabowski's teachers sound very much like Bill Golden, Bob Drain and Calvin Scott, the three most outstanding of a group of excellent black teachers I had at Harlem Park. There is much talk these days of a "resegregation" of American schools and of the achievement gap between the races. But Hrabowski's experience - and mine - makes me wonder if today's black students really need "integrated" education.

Or do they just need a crop of teachers like the ones Hrabowski and I had?

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