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Interviewee – Robert Trumbull, Prince Edward County School Board
Interviewer – Elizabeth Hurdle
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Elizabeth Hurdle: Okay. My name is Elizabeth Hurdle and I will be interviewing you

for an oral history project for my Sociology of Education class. It will be about

the integration of the schools. Could you please state your name for the record?

Mr. Trumbull: Uh, my name is Robert Trumbull.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Thank you. Okay, now we will begin. Where did you grow up?

Mr. Trumbull: Uh, Roanoke Virginia.

Elizabeth Hurdle: What made you decide you wanted to teach? For example, was there a
certain event that took place that influenced your decision?

Mr. Trumbull: Well, actually yes. Um, I began college life as a liberal arts major and,
you know, being of a practical vent, if that is a proper way of phrasing that, I…

You know, you have to have something consequential to be used to earn a living
and I really didn’t know what I wanted to do. So after two years of essentially
liberal arts studies, I decided that I would major in business administration and I
transferred from what was a branch of the University of Virginia at the time to
Richmond Professional Institute in Richmond. It is now Virginia Commonwealth
University. As a business administration major, and as a…sort of a destitute
student, I needed a job. I worked while I was in college and after a couple of
short term jobs, one in the toy department at Thalheimer’s, a department store that
was operational at the time, I got a job at Virginia Treatment Center for Children.
It's a hospital that was part of the medical college of Virginia Commonwealth University's medical complex in downtown Richmond. Anyway, I took a job there. In all honesty, for the money. You know, I knew several people who worked there and if you had exams they would work with you on that and let you off. If you...even if you were busily studying for an exam or something like that, they would give you time off. So, I really took that job because I needed the money. I really, in all honesty, at the time, and it sounds a little odd to say from a person who's spent a life in education, but I could really have cared less about those kids, when I began work there. But after working there for several months, I sort of found the work to be really satisfying and I concluded that I had missed my calling. So anyway, at that point, I was a first semester senior in college and really, frankly, did not have the money to start over. So, I finished the degree in business administration and enrolled in a Masters Program, and my Masters Degree is in education. I never regretted it. The business administration background has been tremendously beneficial during my career as a building principal and currently as a finance director for the school system. Yet on the other hand, the education degree gave me a little bit better understanding in regard to working with children, the concept of what made a good teacher and what didn't. So it's a little bit better combination than I would have envisioned upfront. I sort of thought, well when I start teaching, I'll never need the business background. But in fact, it's not worked out that way.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Okay. Where and when did you begin teaching?
Mr. Trumbull: I was in graduate school at Virginia Commonwealth University and had been working...continued to work at Virginia Treatment Center and there was a position open at John Marshall High School. Interestingly enough, it was an Earth Science position and they had several teachers in the position, none of whom had been very successful. There were a lot of discipline problems and the last teacher quit and they could not keep substitutes in the position for more than two or three days. So I took the position.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Describe the school you began teaching in. For example, what was the approximate teacher to student ratio?

Mr. Trumbull: Oh, anywhere from 25 to 30.

Elizabeth Hurdle: What were your feelings about the Brown decision at the time that it came in?

Mr. Trumbull: I never really thought a lot about it. Of course, that was well after the Brown decision, but it was also...you know, there were lots of delays following the Brown decision. It was, at that time, it was really during the very early days of integration, so I didn't really give the Brown decision a whole lot of thought.

From my point of view, I saw children as children. I didn't see color, I saw kids.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Were you aware of the events in Prince Edward County surrounding integration? If so, what did you think about it?

Mr. Trumbull: Yes, I was aware of it. As a youngster, growing up in Roanoke, I graduated from high school in June of 1962 and at that time Prince Edward County schools were closed and I knew that. I knew then. I grew up in a white society when I was kid. The society was not integrated. I did not attend integrated
schools. As a matter of fact, I never actually sat in a classroom with a person with
an African American background until I was in graduate school. And, I don’t
know that I had given it a whole lot of thought. I remember watching news on
television and I did think it was deplorable. I always thought it was deplorable.
There were marches for integration. Police with clubs and firehouses and dogs,
and I thought that was absolutely deplorable. You know even though I didn’t live
in an integrated society, it was just not the right thing to do.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Were you teaching in the high school that you began teaching in when
the integration began? Was it that same high school?

Mr. Trumbull: The high school was integrated when I went there. They were phasing it
in and it was a grades nine through twelve high school. Ninth grade was pretty
heavily integrated, and tenth grade was. The junior and senior years had very few
African American children.

Elizabeth Hurdle: And since you were teaching that Earth Science class, was that any
grade or was it a certain grade that took that class?

Mr. Trumbull: Mostly ninth graders.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Ninth graders. What were the general feelings between the races in
that county?

Mr. Trumbull: That’s sort of a complex question. The children themselves, in general,
got along quite well. You know there were incidents here and there, but they
weren’t necessarily racial incidents. You know kids don’t always get along and
color sometimes has a bearing on that, or did then and perhaps still does, but often
times it doesn’t. You know, it’s two kids who really can’t get along with each
other. During those early years, I really saw more issues with the adults in the system than I did with the kids. You had a lot of the teachers with substantial experiences in a mid to late point in their career and they really did not accept it very well. I think there were more faculty problems than student problems. There were also issues and, perhaps I shouldn’t say this because of concerns. But, generally, teachers that were African American were very hesitant to discipline white youngsters and white teachers were very reticent to discipline black youngsters because they were concerned that it would be construed as a racial incident. That did not help the situation. If the kid is wrong, he needs the discipline whether he’s white or black or whether the teacher is white or black. It’s not of consequence.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Um, was integration openly opposed in the county you were teaching in? Was the community opposed to it? The parents?

Mr. Trumbull: Probably. It’s not a very definitive answer. [Pause] Probably, there was resistance. You know, there weren’t demonstrations, nobody tried to block the schoolhouse door and that sort of thing, but there was resistance to it.

Elizabeth Hurdle: What kind of resources did your school have? For example, did the community consider your school a “good” school or a “poor” school?

Mr. Trumbull: Historically, probably a “good” school.

Elizabeth Hurdle: What was done in the county to achieve integration? For example, were school districts redrawn or any new schools built?

Mr. Trumbull: Well actually, that first position only extended from November until June, so my background was relatively limited there. The city of Richmond did do
across town busing. The particular school that I worked in was on the Northern side of the city and I don’t think that to integrate that particular school required
across town busing, but they did use that as a tool to integrate schools, in general.

Elizabeth Hurdle: When did the schools actually integrate? When would you say that integration was complete?

Mr. Trumbull: Well, I don’t know. I don’t know that I can really give you an answer to that.

Elizabeth Hurdle: How did integration of the schools affect you personally? Such as…

[Several words inaudible]

Mr. Trumbull: That’s a tough question. In most respects it didn’t. I think that the more I worked in the situation, the stronger I felt about those kinds of issues. As far as fair play and that sort of thing was concerned.

Elizabeth Hurdle: How do you feel integration affected classroom curriculum? For example, did you have to revise your lesson plans or change your classroom strategies in any way?

Mr. Trumbull: No, I didn’t.

Elizabeth Hurdle: How were parent/teacher relations affected by integration? Were there tensions?

Mr. Trumbull: With my personal experience. Probably, not a lot… but here and there. This was an issue that occurred later on, but occasionally you would have a parent that would allege that there was a racial motive in how a certain situation was handled. [Several sentences inaudible] Sometimes white parents would allege that you were showing favoritism [toward African-American children]. “You’ll
let them get away with bloody murder, but you punish my child.” That sort of thing. Sometimes you would find African American parents who thought that some circumstances weren’t necessarily fair. Generally, as people got to know you though, those issues, especially from the African American perspective, declined. If they saw you as a fair person, then they took your word. They trusted you. They took your word that what you were doing was fair. And that’s not well put, particularly, but I guess it makes the point.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Describe the racial composition of the school before integration, both students and faculty.

Mr. Trumbull: I really don’t know, for that particular school. I couldn’t answer that.

Obviously before integration, the entire staff was white, other than perhaps custodians or cafeteria workers and the entire student body was white. It would be sort of obvious now... As the school began to integrate, that particular school had a substantially greater white faculty. There were only a few African American teachers, although the population of the student body was shifting fairly dramatically.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Was that typical in that area, to have mostly a white composition?

Mr. Trumbull: My guess is that it occurred because of the circumstance. If you were a white youngster being bused to a school that had been traditionally African American, my guess is that the vast majority of the faculty in that school would have been African American. Or if you were an African American child being bused to a school that had been Caucasian, predominately white previously, then
that faculty would be white. I don’t think there was any particular design in that, I
think it just happened.

Elizabeth Hurdle: How quickly did this composition change? Was it a quick process of
integration or did it take a very long time?

Mr. Trumbull: I don’t know that I could give you a definitive answer on that. Gradually,
the faculties were integrated. The pace of integration occurred more rapidly with
students than it did with faculty, I think.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Um, as you were talking about earlier, there were more issues with the
staff than there were with the students?

Mr. Trumbull: In the first school, John Marshall, was that way. I left there at the end of
the year and took a teaching position in Chesterfield County. It was in a school
that was relatively new. I think the... Although there were some teachers with
some experience in the building, the average age of the faculty was probably
around 25 or 26 and in that perspective it was different. That school, at that point,
had fewer African American children than the school in Richmond where I had
previously worked. It was, you know, in the process of integrating, and I think it
was accepted better there.

Elizabeth Hurdle: In Chesterfield it was?

Mr. Trumbull: Yes, among the faculty.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Either at John Marshall or the school in Chesterfield, do you remember
any specific comments that any of the faculty or staff made about the process?

Mr. Trumbull: Not well...no.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Or students?
Mr. Trumbull: People really didn’t discuss it to any extent. It was just a fact of life.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Right. Were any special measures put into place in the school because of integration, such as increased security?

Mr. Trumbull: I didn’t notice it particularly at John Marshall. In Chesterfield, I think maybe among some parents there was more opposition to integration and often times attitudes of children reflect the attitudes of their parents. So, there were some incidents during the early years of integration in that particular school and I do recall on numerous occasions escorting African American youngsters to buses. There were some misguided fellow students around who wanted to throw eggs, or apples, or this, that and the other, or make rude remarks, especially at bus loading time. It was not observed in the halls of the school or anything like that and it was a well-run school and there weren’t a large number of incidents of that nature, but they did occur and they were unfortunate.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Was there a difference in the response to integration from Caucasian parents and then from African American parents? Were the African American parents more opposed or more for integration?

Mr. Trumbull: My perception was that Caucasian parents were more opposed to integration than African American parents. Although, opposition to integration was not a trait that was solely characteristic of white parents or solely characteristic of black parents. There were African Americans who would have preferred to maintain the status quo and there were Caucasian parents who strongly preferred to maintain the prior non-integrated circumstance.
Elizabeth Hurdle: Were there any... I know in a lot of areas, there were white parents who would relocate just so they could send their students to a school that was not as far into integration. Was that an issue? Were there any relocations?

Mr. Trumbull: I didn’t have any direct contact with that sort of an approach to avoid to integration, but I do know, in fact, that it did occur.

Elizabeth Hurdle: How do you think the school systems have changed since integration?

Mr. Trumbull: I think these days it’s a non-issue. Or, if it is an issue, it’s marginal to nearly every other issue facing public education.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Can you think of anything that would have made desegregation easier in any area, specifically in yours?

Mr. Trumbull: No, I couldn’t really answer that. [Pause] Well, I suppose I could. If people were to look at each other for the content of their character rather than the color of their skin, life would be much simpler and that would have been beneficial to that process.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Well, that is the end of my list of question, per say. But I was wondering, is there anything else that you would like to talk about or discuss about the process or your teaching career?

Mr. Trumbull: Well, I don’t know. I worked in Chesterfield County schools 4 or 5 years and then relocated to Prince Edward County as an assistant principal to a school system that was, at the time, substantially African American. I think the ratios were around maybe 8% Caucasian when I came here and for me, I have taken great satisfaction in watching the changes that have occurred in Prince Edward Schools. The school system has gained broad public support. It is a school
system that, probably one of the few in the country, where there has been an
influx of whites back into a school system that was largely African American. I
think that that pleases me greatly. I have seen the quality of education improve in
this county. I’ve seen the availability of resources in the school system expanded.
For this particular county, I think things have gone well. And I think you know
that Prince Edward County Schools was a part of the Brown decision and as I
gather, I really can’t speak definitively about what has gone on elsewhere, but
there were two other counties that participated in the Brown decision and the
process of integration and the quality of schools there didn’t, well maybe I should
rephrase that... We seem to have achieved gains here that have not been achieved
elsewhere and that pleases me. I think there has been a commitment in this
county to make integration work. [Pause] You know, it has not been a problem
free experience, but I think Prince Edward schools... Our schools are excellent
schools and I think we have done quite well here with integration. I don’t know
what other comments I could add to that but I’ve been pleased with the progress
in this particular county and I’ve been pleased to have been a part of it.

Elizabeth Hurdle: Well thank you very much; I am going to turn the tape off now.