Inez Beverly Prosser (ca. 1895–1934) was arguably the first African American woman to earn a doctorate in psychology. Her dissertation, completed in 1933, examined personality differences in black children attending either voluntarily segregated or integrated schools and concluded that black children were better served in segregated schools. This research was one of several studies in the 1920s and 1930s that was part of the debate on segregated schools as maintained in the United States under the “separate but equal” doctrine of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). This article examines the life and career of Prosser in the context of educational barriers and opportunities for African Americans in the early part of the twentieth century and explores the arguments that pitted African Americans against one another in determining how best to educate black children, arguments that eventually led to the desegregation decision of Brown v. Board of Education (1954). © 2005 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

The story of her life is biography most improbable. Born into a family of 11 children at the end of the nineteenth century in south central Texas and educated in its “colored” schools, she would teach for 18 years and, in 1933, would earn a doctorate in psychology, arguably the first by a woman of her race.¹ The following year she would be mourned by family, friends, and students at her burial in San Antonio, Texas. She was 38 years old. Her name was Inez Beverly Prosser.

Thirty years ago, African Americans were wholly absent from the histories of American psychology, a situation altered by the publication of Robert Guthrie’s important book, Even the Rat Was White: A Historical View of Psychology (1976). Guthrie’s consciousness-raising volume addressed the history of racial and racist views in psychology, providing, as the subtitle of the book implied, a different historical view of psychology, one that was missing from the textbooks of the time. Also included in Guthrie’s book were approximately 20 brief biographical sketches of the earliest African American psychologists,

¹. There are several published sources that list Ruth Winifred Howard (Beckham) (1900–1997) as the first African American woman to receive a doctorate in psychology, earning a PhD at the University of Minnesota in 1934 with a dissertation on the development of triplets (Guthrie, 1998). Howard’s priority is valid if one defines a psychologist as someone whose degree was earned within a psychology department. Yet such a requirement would disqualify most of the first and second generations of American psychologists. Typically, Prosser has been listed as the first African American woman to earn a doctorate in educational psychology when she graduated from the University of Cincinnati in 1933. Prosser’s dissertation research was in psychology, her doctoral mentor and other members of her committee were psychologists, and much of her coursework was in psychology. She was a psychologist interested in educational psychology in the same way that Howard was a psychologist interested in developmental psychology.
no doubt providing most readers with their initial exposure to the priority of Francis Cecil Sumner (1895–1954) as the first African American to earn a doctoral degree in psychology (at Clark University with G. Stanley Hall), and the role he played in the production of black psychologists as head of the psychology department at Howard University from 1928 to 1954. When Sumner received his PhD in 1920, he was the eleventh African American to receive a doctorate from an American university (Guthrie, 1998). To understand how truly small that number was, consider that between 1876 and 1920, approximately 10,000 doctoral degrees were awarded in the United States. In the next 30 years, the numbers for African American psychologists would grow, but slowly, at the rate of about one per year, reaching a total of 32 by 1950 (Guthrie, 1998).

Among that number was Inez Prosser (ca. 1895–1934). Her biographical sketch was one of the score included in the book, a brief sketch of approximately one printed page accompanied by a photograph of a young, attractive woman whose enigmatic facial expression added to the mystery of her brief life. Although she died at 38, a year after receiving her doctorate, she had been a teacher at the secondary school and college levels for approximately half of her life. Her dissertation research, although unpublished and largely unrecognized by later researchers, addressed issues that would become central to the debates on school desegregation that led eventually to the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision of the U.S. Supreme Court (see Jackson, 2001; Kluger, 1975).

Because of her early death, Inez Prosser had no opportunity to amass a record of accomplishments in psychology that might have made her a part of the contemporary histories of American psychology. In reality, even if she had lived another 30 years, her race and gender would have worked against her securing the kind of position that would have allowed her to achieve such recognition. Yet her life is instructive in reminding us of the substantial social and legal barriers that prevented African Americans from enjoying the substance of the American dream, and how resourceful, persistent, and resilient they had to be to overcome those barriers. Her story is also instructive in understanding how African American educators wrestled with the issues of segregated versus integrated schools, seeking to understand those conditions in which African American children could flourish, both in terms of their education and their identity. Our purpose in this article is to fill in the spaces of Inez Prosser’s life, as best we can, and describe her life and work in and about education in the historical, social, and educational contexts of her times.

**PROSSER’S EARLY LIFE**

Origins are rarely unequivocal. Such is the case for Inez Prosser. Almost all published sources on Prosser (e.g., Guthrie, 1976, 1998; Tate, 1996; Warren, 1999) list her birthplace as Yoakum, Texas, and her birth year as 1897. Yet both of those are probably incorrect. What is certain is that she was born Inez Beverly, the second of eleven children (and the first daughter) to Samuel Andrew Beverly (1871–1949) and Veola Hamilton (1874–1971). Inez’s mother was a homemaker and her father was a waiter, usually at hotel restaurants, typically as headwaiter.

Family recollections suggest that Inez was likely born in San Marcos, Texas, then a small town on the main road between Austin to the north and San Antonio to the south. The family did not move to Yoakum, a smaller community in the southeastern coastal bend area of Texas, until 1900. The reason for the move is not known, but the year would coincide with the time that Inez and her older brother Leon would likely have started school, and it is possible that there were better educational opportunities in Yoakum for African Americans than would have been the case in San Marcos.
In 1900, opportunities for schooling were generally not very good for African Americans in much of the South. In rural areas, where African Americans often worked as laborers, many whites actually preferred their laborers illiterate, or semiliterate at best, and viewed formal education as a needless distraction for school-age laborers (Anderson, 1988). Teachers and students at “colored” schools in the South, as they were called, often faced harassment, particularly in the several decades following the Civil War. Groups such as the Ku Klux Klan often threatened teachers and burned down schoolhouses. Some white Texans supported efforts to educate black children and donated land on which to build schools. And some churches, both black and white, lent classroom space (Winegarten, 1996). Yoakum had black schools and, unusual for such a small community, they continued through high school, with the highest grade being grade 11.

The actual day of Inez’s birth, December 30, is not in dispute, but the year is. As we have indicated, most contemporary published sources list the year 1897. We have been unable to locate a birth certificate, and it is probable that one was never filed with the county records office, a common situation for African Americans even in the early twentieth century. Her transcript at the University of Colorado lists 1894. Her death certificate lists 1895, and her mother was present at her death in Louisiana and perhaps would have provided information for that certificate. Her application for a General Education Board fellowship, written in her own hand, lists 1896. There is no birth date on her headstone. We have accepted 1895 as the most likely date.

In 1907, the Beverly family moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, on the Gulf Coast. Inez and Leon attended school there for one year and then moved back to Yoakum, apparently because there was no black high school in Corpus Christi. She and her brother lived with a relative of their father’s until their graduation from the Yoakum Colored School in 1910, with Inez as valedictorian of the class. Inez expressed a strong desire to attend college. Her parents were conflicted, feeling they could support only one of their children and believing Leon should be the one. But Leon said, “Send Inez. If she doesn’t go, she’ll die. I don’t want to go. I want to get married” (Bernice Beverly Arbor, personal communication, December 16, 2002). So Inez enrolled at Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College (now Prairie View A&M University) in Prairie View, Texas, a small community about 45 miles northwest of Houston.

Prairie View was established in 1876 as Prairie View A&M College (its original name), the black counterpart of Texas A&M College that was founded in the same year by the Texas Legislature. Both schools were established under the provisions of the Morrill Act as land-grant colleges. As a land-grant college, the emphasis was on practical education, typically agricultural and engineering studies. But such training was typical of many black colleges, land grant or not. These black colleges, such as Hampton Institute and the Tuskegee Institute, emphasized the trades and certain professions—namely, agriculture, industrial arts, home economics, and teaching. African Americans often “accepted the industrial focus because, despite its limitations, it would permit them to upgrade the quality of their lives” (Neverdon-Morton, 1989, p. 11). Some black scholars, such as Booker T. Washington, argued that a liberal arts curriculum was a practical education only for white students; consequently, it was rarer at black colleges (Neyland, 1991). Yet other black scholars (e.g., W. E. B. Du Bois, Horace Mann Bond, Roscoe Conkling Bruce, and Charles H. Turner) argued that liberal arts courses were important if African Americans were to move beyond the lowest echelons of the labor force. In 1889, Prairie View changed its name to Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College to reflect its growing role in training teachers for black schools (Heintze, 1985). Inez was enrolled in the normal school program, finishing its two-year teaching certificate program in 1912, again graduating at the head of her class.
Inez Prosser began teaching in a black elementary school in Austin, Texas, probably in 1912 or 1913, where she earned an annual salary of $540 (Fellowship Application Blank, 1931). After two years at the elementary school, she took a job as assistant principal of the Clayton Industrial School (a vocational school) in Manor, Texas, a few miles east of Austin. She worked there for two years before joining the faculty at Anderson High School, a black high school established in 1889. At Anderson, her responsibilities centered on teaching English and coaching the girls for the spelling competitions of the Interscholastic League, a league that sponsored statewide events among black high schools in athletic and academic contests. Shortly after moving to Austin, Inez met Allen Rufus Prosser, who at the time worked as an elevator operator in an Austin department store. They were married in Austin on June 4, 1916.

Inez Prosser taught at Anderson High School until 1927. Facilities were poor, equipment was mostly nonexistent, and salaries were much lower than those earned by white counterparts. When one of the black teachers at Anderson, a colleague of Prosser’s, complained to her principal about the disparity between the salaries of black and white teachers, she was told that “it didn’t cost as much for Negroes to live as it did for whites.” The colleague replied that she was not aware that being black entitled her to discounts at stores (Shipp, 1971, p. B1).

During her time at Anderson, Prosser was busy working on her college degree. Although she had completed some courses earlier, she began in earnest in 1921, working toward a bachelor’s degree in education at Samuel Huston College, a black college in Austin, founded by the Freedman’s Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which had begun offering college courses in 1905 (Heintze, 1985). She completed her Bachelor of Arts degree there in 1926, graduating with distinction, with minors in English and psychology. At the time, she was one of 13 faculty members at Anderson, six of whom held a college degree, all from historically black colleges. And while she worked on her degree, her husband earned his high school diploma. With that credential, he began a successful career in the insurance business.

Graduate Study at the University of Colorado

In her last three years at Anderson, Prosser began work on a master’s degree, even though all requirements for her undergraduate degree had not been completed. Graduate education in the state of Texas in the 1920s would have been unlikely, if not an impossibility, for African Americans, so they were forced to go out of state—in Prosser’s case, to the University of Colorado. Prosser actually began that work in the summer of 1924, taking four undergraduate courses—two in English, one in abnormal psychology, and a required course in physical education—all to make up for what Colorado considered to be deficiencies in her record at Samuel Huston. She completed several courses from Colorado by correspondence and returned to Boulder for each of the next three summers, concentrating her graduate work in education and English courses, graduating with her Master of Arts degree in education in August 1927.

Colorado was similar to other western states in that it accepted women and minority students into its institutions of higher education as early as the 1880s, although there was not a degree awarded to a black female until 1924, the year Prosser began her work there. During the 1920s, the attitude of the university toward ethnic minorities has been characterized as “passive egalitarianism in a racially segregated society” (Hays, 1996, p. 1). There was a clear conflict between expressed ideals and realities in the treatment of minority students. For instance, school publications often included depictions of racial stereotypes in cartoons and advertising. Housing was a problem. Black students could live on campus in the residence halls.
but only in single rooms and with a separate bath. The university was sensitive to the prejudices of white students and parents and saw that their prejudices were accommodated. Many black students avoided the hassles by finding rooms in boarding houses off campus (Hays, 1996), which is what Prosser did during her summers in Boulder.

Prosser’s coursework at Colorado included three classes that were particularly important for her master’s thesis: a course on mental tests, one on tests and measurement, and another on research methods. Her thesis was directed by Harry M. Barrett in the College of Education and was entitled “The Comparative Reliability of Objective Tests in English Grammar.” It was designed to investigate the reliability of four types of English grammar tests that had been created by Prosser. The grammar tests were designed during the summer and fall of 1926 and used material drawn from an analysis of English grammar textbooks, the grammar standards proposed by the National Education Association, the grammar standards for the Austin public schools, and material drawn from Prosser’s own lesson plans. The four test types were a) true-false, b) multiple choice, c) completion, and d) matching questions. Each test was developed from the same content domain and included equal numbers of factual and reasoning questions within each test (Prosser, 1927).

Prosser administered the four grammar tests to 303 students in grades eight through eleven at Anderson High School during the 1926–1927 academic year. Her statistical analyses were sophisticated for her time, drawing, for example, on the work of Henry Garrett (1926), Karl Holzinger (1923), Truman Kelley (1921), and Donald Paterson (1925), and allowed her to measure reliability both within and between tests. Split-half reliabilities were quite high, ranging from .91 to .93 for the four tests, whereas the intercorrelations among the various tests ranged from .55 to .65, with one outlier of .19 (true-false and matching). These results led her to recommend that a battery of test types be used in assessing grammar, believing that each test type measured somewhat different skills, perhaps even different intellectual abilities (Prosser, 1927). Although this unpublished thesis did nothing to change the course of the assessment of grammar, it seems likely that it served to kindle a desire in Prosser to further her education, and it may have been a significant factor in furthering her interests in psychology.

It is not known how the thesis idea was generated but certainly the issues of teaching and learning grammar were central to the work Prosser was doing at Anderson High School. In reading the thesis, there is a sense that this was not a perfunctory exercise being performed to complete the requirements for an advanced degree. Instead, one senses that the author was imbued with a genuine desire to answer some questions critical to the success of her work as a teacher and the success of her students as learners. The coursework she had completed in tests and measurement and research methods had provided her with a way to approach problems scientifically, and her thesis research, including the construction of her own instruments, was the proof of the value of that work.

**College Teaching**

After completing her master’s degree, Prosser left Anderson High School in 1927 to take a position on the faculty of Tillotson College, a black college in Austin. Her salary increased from $900 to $1,250 a year (Fellowship Application Blank, 1931). Tillotson, founded by the American Missionary Association, began offering classes in 1881. It had been coeducational since its founding but in 1926, the year before Prosser arrived, it had become a women’s college (Heintze, 1985). Prosser was only at Tillotson for three years, but they were eventful ones for her and for the college.
Small colleges are small communities, and students and faculty alike are expected to play multiple roles. At Tillotson, Prosser principally taught classes in education and psychology. In her first year, however, she found herself involved in myriad activities beyond the classroom. She worked on the college catalog, helped with admissions, worked on the class schedules, and developed programs for the college literary society. In the following year, the college catalog listed Prosser as “Dean, Registrar, and Professor of Education,” second only to the president of the college in terms of administrative authority (Tillotson College, 1928–1929, p. 7). In her final year at Tillotson, Prosser had the honor of coordinating a visit to the college by George Washington Carver. He addressed the school on February 11, 1930, as a guest of the college’s science club, appropriately named the Carver Science Club (Tillotson College, 1930).

In the summer of 1930, Prosser left Tillotson to join the faculty at Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Mississippi, on the outskirts of Jackson. The reasons for the move are unknown. Moving to Tougaloo meant Prosser was moving further away from her many family members, something that was likely evaluated as a negative factor given her close ties to family. However, one of Prosser’s sisters, Katharine, was about to begin a librarian position in a black school in Mississippi, so it is possible that her presence there was an attraction. Tougaloo was a smaller institution; its enrollment was approximately 86 students, compared to the 150 at Tillotson at the time (Du Bois, 1933). However, more than Tillotson, Tougaloo had a commitment to a liberal arts education, and that feature may have been more appealing to Prosser (Wilson, 1947/1974). Further, Tougaloo offered a four-year college degree plan, whereas Tillotson had become a junior college by 1930.

Prosser’s move to Tougaloo College was actually a transfer (Ward, 1934). Like Tillotson College, Tougaloo was founded by the American Missionary Association (AMA) in 1869 (Tougaloo College, 2003). Thus, they were sister institutions, two of ten black colleges founded by the AMA, an antislavery organization that had begun in 1839 defending a group of African slaves being tried for mutiny after taking over the ship, the Amistad, from their Spanish “owners” (Beard, 1909; Johnson, 1989). The AMA was founded officially in 1846. Prior to the Civil War, its activities were focused on the abolition of slavery. After the war, the association set about creating educational opportunities for all African Americans, but especially for freed slaves in the South (Richardson, 1986). In the 1920s and 1930s, hiring of faculty for the AMA colleges was done not by the presidents of the colleges but by the AMA itself. Technically, teachers held a contract with the AMA and not with the college, explaining the meaning of “transfer” in describing Prosser’s move to Tougaloo.

In addition to Prosser’s appointment as a faculty member in education and registrar for the college, she also was made principal of the Tougaloo High School, an AMA school affiliated with the college. In 1931, the high school was granted full accreditation by the Mississippi Department of Education and the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools (American Missionary Association, 1933; Campbell & Rogers, 1979). Such accreditation was rare for black schools at that time and was the first in the state of Mississippi. It provided graduates automatic admission into many colleges that admitted African American students. It is possible that Prosser played a role in that accreditation, but we have not been able to verify her involvement.

In Prosser’s initial year at Tougaloo, she applied for a General Education Board fellowship. The General Education Board (GEB) was established by John D. Rockefeller in 1902 to support education in the United States “without distinction of race, sex, or creed.” In fact, however, the “emphasis was on the South and the education of Blacks” (General Education Board Archives, 2003, p. 1). Students at Tougaloo had received aid from the GEB as early as 1903. As the pro-
gram emphases in the South expanded, the GEB set up regional offices in Richmond, Virginia, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to be in closer contact with southern schools.

Prosser’s application to the GEB in 1931 was to pursue doctoral study in educational psychology. She wrote, “I am interested in that type of research which will lead to better teaching in elementary and high schools” (Fellowship Application Blank, 1931, p. 3). Her application was approved and she was granted the sum of $1,000 to fund one full year and one additional summer of doctoral work. Thus, after working at Tougaloo College for a single year, she was off to the University of Cincinnati for the fall term, funded by the GEB.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

Prosser spent the 1931–1932 academic year in residence at the University of Cincinnati (UC). In her GEB fellowship application, she had given her reasons for choosing to study in Cincinnati. “I think in as much as Cincinnati has a large Negro population, I should be able to find numerous problems of value in preparing student teachers for work here in the South. Many of the larger institutions are considerably removed from anything which would be of service in training teachers for smaller schools” (Fellowship Application Blank, 1931, p. 3).

Cincinnati had a large African American population in the 1930s, in part because it had been one of the stops on the Underground Railroad leading runaway slaves to freedom in the North. It had also been a hotbed for abolitionist fervor, emanating especially from the Lane Theological Seminary founded in Cincinnati nearly a century earlier. Yet it was also a site of serious racial turmoil, especially as the rising tide of African Americans in the 1820s began to alarm Cincinnati’s white citizens. The population of blacks in the city rose from around 600 in 1826 to more than 2,400 by 1829. Whites worried about threats to the social order of the city and about the loss of jobs to black workers. Attacks on the black community came to a head in 1829, resulting in murders and the burning of houses (Woodson, 1919). Some historians have characterized the attacks as an orchestrated effort to rid Cincinnati of its black citizens, and indeed, nearly half of the population—more than 1,000 blacks—left the city in 1829, many of them emigrating to Canada, where they settled in the community of Wilberforce, Ontario (Winks, 1997). Some historians have argued that the migration was an initiative of Cincinnati’s blacks who had given up on the city as a place where they could enjoy the rights of citizenship, and the evidence for that interpretation is strong (Taylor, 2002; Winks, 1997). Further attacks on the black community occurred in the 1830s and 1840s and then intensified again after the Civil War. Unfortunately, that history of racial tensions continues in the city today. When Prosser arrived in 1931, however, the city was in an era of relative calm, with blacks and whites occupying largely separate geography.

It is possible that Prosser knew something about the ongoing research program at UC in the 1920s and 1930s that focused on African Americans in different school environments. That program likely would have been an attraction, because it was a good fit with her career aspirations as expressed in her GEB application. It is also possible she was attracted to the university because of its smaller size and its proximity to the South. At the time of Prosser’s arrival at UC, approximately 100 African Americans were enrolled in the largely white university, almost all of those in undergraduate programs (Du Bois, 1933). African Americans, although never great in number, had been among the student body from its beginnings, an opportunity that would have been denied to them directly across the Ohio River in the southern state of Kentucky. One such student, William H. Parham, received a law degree in 1874 (Grace & Hand, 1995). Another, Charles Henry Turner (1867–1923), an African American zoologist sometimes considered one of the pioneer comparative psychologists because of his
extensive work on behavioral research in invertebrates, completed his bachelor’s degree at Cincinnati in 1891 and his master’s degree there the following year, working with Clarence Luther Herrick (Abramson, Jackson, & Fuller, 2003).

Although around 100 African Americans were enrolled at UC in the early 1930s, the university, like the city, hardly provided a welcoming atmosphere. Historians Kevin Grace and Greg Hand (1995) have described the racial environment at UC in the 1930s:

[R]acial segregation at UC was palpably real. African American students could not enroll for engineering or business degrees because co-op education coordinators said industry would not hire them. They could not live in dormitories or participate in many extra-curricular activities other than sports. The YMCA pool was off-limits, and some professors even required minority students to sit in the back of classrooms. Though the university never prohibited African Americans from enrolling, equality was entirely another matter. UC, like hundreds of other colleges and universities across the United States, allowed institutional segregation and The Cincinnatian, The Bearcat and other student publications throughout the early 1900s up until World War II often contained offensive caricatures and parodies of African American life and dialect. (p. 131)

When Prosser arrived in this environment in 1931, she was a woman on a mission, and although such blatant prejudice no doubt offended her (given passages in her dissertation), it did not seem to interfere with her goal to further her education. She was enrolled in a Doctor of Philosophy program within the College of Education headed by Dean Louis Augustus Pechstein (1888–1978), a psychologist who had earned his doctorate at the University of Chicago in 1916 with a dissertation comparing whole and part learning (Pechstein, 1917), and whose books focused on the nature of educational practices in primary and secondary schools (Pechstein & Jenkins, 1927; Pechstein & McGregor, 1924).

Pechstein came to UC from the University of Rochester in 1922, hired as the new dean of the College of Education, and he remained in that job until 1947 (McGrane, 1963). His home state was Missouri, a nonslave state. He had an interest in the public school education of African Americans and supervised approximately a dozen theses and dissertations on that topic in the 1920s and 1930s, many of them conducted by African American students. One of those students was Jennie Davis Porter (1876–1936).

Porter earned her PhD at UC in 1928, the first African American female to earn a doctorate at the university and only the fourth in the country to do so. Pechstein supervised her dissertation, which was entitled, “The Problem of Negro Education in Northern and Border Cities” (Porter, 1928). Porter had become the first black principal in the Cincinnati public schools in 1914, founding the Stowe School (in honor of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin), a school solely for black students and staffed by black teachers. She was characterized as “an unyielding advocate of segregated education, believing all-black schools with black teachers could best provide the skills black students needed to survive in a society where most faced limited opportunities. . .; [she] argued that segregated schools, by insulating black students from white abuse, were crucial to the formation of black identity and could become unifying community centers” (Horstman, 1999, pp. 1–2).

Wendell Phillips Dabney, editor of a weekly black newspaper in Cincinnati and head of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), “derisively labeled Porter ‘Jubilee Jenny’ and railed against what he saw as educational precepts destined to perpetuate black subservience” (Horstman, 1999, p. 1). Dabney was one of many black leaders who feared that the Stowe school would serve not only to justify the maintenance of segregated schools but would lead to discrimination in other areas as well (Horstman, 1999).
Porter’s dissertation was the fifth study, along with four master’s theses, directed by Pechstein between 1924 and 1928 that dealt with the question of segregated and desegregated schools in the North. He published a summary of the results of those five studies in an article using the title of Porter’s dissertation: “The problem of Negro education in northern and border cities” (Pechstein, 1929). Pechstein (1929) began the article by stating that the studies were undertaken to answer the question: “Shall negroes in the North be educated in separate negro schools or in mixed schools?” (p. 192). After reviewing the data of the five studies, Pechstein (1929) concluded: “The aims of education may be best realized by negroes in separate public schools . . . Greater inspiration, greater racial solidarity, superior social activities, greater retention, and greater educational achievement are possible for negroes in separate public schools than in mixed schools” (p. 198). He added that whereas he believed that separate schools should continue through high school, universities should be mixed in terms of race. He also argued that segregated schools should exist only where such segregation is voluntary. It was into this program of research that Prosser arrived in the fall of 1931.

**Prosser’s Doctoral Research**

Prosser’s dissertation was designed as a companion study to an earlier doctoral dissertation completed in 1931 by Mary Crowley entitled “A Comparison of the Academic Achievement of Cincinnati Negroes in Segregated and Mixed Schools.” When Prosser began her data collection in November 1931, Crowley was serving as assistant superintendent of schools for Hamilton County, Ohio, and she aided Prosser in getting the same schools to cooperate in her research. What Crowley found in her study of African American children was that there were essentially no differences between the academic achievements of children in mixed versus segregated schools, based on a series of achievement tests. Perhaps those findings were disappointing to Pechstein because they did not mesh with the results of some of the other (more poorly controlled) studies he had supervised earlier. Yet there were other variables to study. Prosser’s research would ask the same question about school type but investigate its effect on nonacademic variables such as personality, interests, social skills, and activities, research questions suggested by Crowley in her dissertation.

In her research, Crowley (1932) had matched pairs of students (fourth through sixth graders) in the Cincinnati schools: one student who had always attended segregated schools (black students, black teachers) and one student who had always attended mixed schools (black and white students, white teachers). Students within each pair were matched in terms of chronological and mental age and school grade and were then assessed in terms of several standardized measures of achievement. Prosser (1933a) used 64 of those same students (32 pairs), then two years older, for her research.

Prosser’s personal interest in this problem, she wrote, “grew out of a desire to determine objectively, so far as possible, the degree of truth in the often repeated statement that the Negro child develops superior character traits, more racial self-respect, and a greater share of the other concomitants of a well-rounded education when he is placed under the direction of Negro teachers during his formative years” (1933a, p. 3). Yet the effect of black versus white teachers for black children was not the whole story; part of the equation was the nature of the student body as well, consisting of only black students in the segregated schools and both black and white students in the integrated schools. Furthermore, it was not possible to separate cohort effects from teacher effects, because only white teachers taught in the mixed schools, whereas only black teachers taught in the segregated schools.
Prosser stated the purposes of her study as follows:

(1) to measure vocational interests, leisure interests, play interests, social participation, emotional or neurotic tendencies, social distance, ascendancy-submission, overstatement, introversion-extraversion, and general personality adjustment. . . , (2) to ascertain the difference, if any, that exists in these traits, and (3) to determine whether one or the other of these schools is better fostering growth in personality in so far as it can be determined by the available techniques. (p. 32)

The dependent variables, as described in (1) above reflect the range of the nonacademic measures Prosser wanted to assess, including a measure of vocational interests adapted from Lewis Terman (1926); a measure of general interests adapted from Douglas Fryer (1931); the measure of social distance created by Emory Bogardus (1927) and adapted by Rose Zeligs (1931) in her master’s degree research at UC; several measures of personality, including one developed by Robert Woodworth and Vernon Cady (see Terman, 1926) and another by Carl Rogers (1931); measures of play and sociability developed by Harvey Lehman (Lehman & Witty, 1927); and a structured psychological interview designed by Reginald MacNitt (1930).

Whereas Crowley (1931) had focused on academic measures, Prosser investigated variables she believed were indicative of personality. Her hope for her outcomes is evidenced in several places in the introduction to her dissertation. Acknowledging the failure of Crowley to find academic differences, Prosser (1933a) wrote, “Mere knowledge of books, however profound, cannot compensate for a warped, maladjusted personality embittered by unhealthful contacts” (p. 15). The real danger in mixed schools, she warned, was the irreparable damage to the child’s psyche. She argued, “Proper adjustment to one’s environment, healthy attitude toward life, happiness in school relationships as well as those of the larger environment, are generally believed to be of infinitely more worth in building character than academic training” (Prosser, 1933a, p. 15).

From her battery of tests, Prosser concluded that African American children fared better in segregated schools. She reported that black children from the mixed schools were more introverted and more likely to spend their time daydreaming. She determined that they experienced more social maladjustment, felt less secure in their social relations, and had less satisfactory relationships with their families. They were more likely to feel inferior at school. They had less satisfactory relationships with their teachers, and they were more eager to leave school early and begin working (Prosser, 1933a).

Prosser’s dissertation was planned as an intensive study, using a diverse range of personality inventories and other tests to measure a large number of personality and social variables. The sample size was small (32 matched pairs of students). Some of the differences she noted between groups were based on probability values that could be interpreted as failing to reach statistical significance. As a result, some of her conclusions were likely based on small differences resulting from sampling error. Prosser admitted that some of her differences were small and nonsignificant but justified them anyway, noting that “[s]mall differences in personality or character loom large because of the dangers that lurk behind warped and unhappy personalities” (Prosser, 1933a, p. 178).

Although Prosser interpreted much of her data as supporting the superiority of the segregated school, she did not conclude it was a better alternative in all situations. She believed that her research demonstrated that some personality types could do well in mixed schools, whereas other types would benefit from the more nurturant (and especially, she believed, the more affectionate) environment of segregated schools. She cautioned, “Pressure should not be brought to bear to prevent a child or his parents from selecting either type of school that he desires, but a wise adviser should tactfully point out reasons why certain schools should or
should not be selected, and which type of personality should select certain types of schools” (Prosser, 1933a, p. 179).

Prosser described the type of child she felt would do well in a mixed school, and her description of that child is particularly revealing of what she viewed as the barriers for most African American children in such schools. She wrote that the type of child who might be recommended for a mixed school would be one:

with a tendency toward introversion, academically inclined, who would not suffer mentally because of any possibility of not being able to participate fully in many of the activities of the school; one who has but little liking for extra-curricular activities, who has an attractive, likeable personality, not over-sensitive to real or imagined slights, little racial hatred or prejudices, whose parents are financially able to keep him on a level with his classmates; one who would be able to assimilate what the mixed schools have to offer because of his being a member of a cultured, refined home . . . (Prosser, 1933a, p. 180)

Prosser believed most black children would not fit that description and thus would benefit more from a segregated school with black teachers and black administrators. She believed that such an education was especially important for children whose self-confidence was low and who were particularly in need of regular displays of affection. She wrote, “Whatever else the Negro child gets in the mixed school, it seems fairly safe to assume that he gets little, if any, real affection. The younger the child the more felt is this need, and if home and school affection is lacking, there is grave danger of the child's developing real social inferiority” (Prosser, 1933a, pp. 179–180).

That conclusion came in part from her data, especially the interviews she conducted with the children. It also came from a number of studies and books in the late 1920s and early 1930s that pointed to the widespread belief among whites of the inferiority of blacks (e.g., Brown, 1931; Hendrickson, 1927; Hoffman, 1931; Lasker, 1929; Moton, 1929). In short, Prosser was well aware of the contemporary scientific literature on racial prejudice and cited much of it in her literature review for her dissertation. She also was aware of its history in Ohio, describing the Constitutional Convention of 1803 that questioned what to do with blacks after Ohio had abolished slavery in 1802. She was aware of its history in Cincinnati, describing the 1829 mob actions that caused half of the black population of the city to flee. She wrote that in the schools, racial attitudes were manifested in both obvious and subtle ways and concluded that as long as white teachers and administrators regarded blacks as inferior, it would not benefit black children to be educated and socialized in such an environment, even if it denied them access to better academic programs: “A far more vital and subtle issue than the problems of segregation . . . is that of attitudes built up by certain races against other races. As long as feeling tones are highly colored, whether justly or unjustly, racial contacts will be unsatisfactory” (Prosser, 1933a, p. 17).

This belief was shared by many black parents and teachers, who nevertheless understood the psychological message inherent in segregation, especially when mandated. They argued that “black students in black schools could generally avoid the hostility, insults, and stereotyping they usually had to endure from white teachers and white students in integrated schools. [Further] black schools offered more sympathetic portrayals of black history and black culture” (Klarman, 2004, p. 147). In short, there were many who shared Prosser’s belief that black children would be more likely to thrive, psychologically, in a segregated school.

Inez Prosser returned to Tougaloo College as a faculty member for the 1932–1933 academic year, during which time she worked on her dissertation. It was approved by her committee in June 1933. Pechstein wrote to William Holmes, president of Tougaloo College:

Mrs. Prosser was accepted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Ed. last week . . . Mrs. Prosser developed into a first-rate graduate student, a very keen and penetrating
thinker, and will in our judgment, be a fine leader in the educational work with Negro college students. I am glad to give her my special commendation for it is never an easy task for a member of her race to pursue successfully the arduous course attending securing the doctorate degree. This she has accomplished with dignity and credit. (Fellowship Record Card, 1931–1933, p. 2)

When Prosser went for the fitting of her cap and gown prior to the graduation ceremonies, she entered the room where the fitting was to occur and was told by two degree candidates that she was in the wrong place and that the room was for doctoral candidates only. She is said to have replied, “Yes, I know. That’s why I am here” (Beverly, 1974, p. 3). The magnitude of this accomplishment within the African American community was evidenced by a photograph of Prosser in cap and gown that was featured as the August 1933 cover of the magazine *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, the official organ of the NAACP, edited by W. E. B. Du Bois (1933).

REATIONS TO PROSSER’S DISSERTATION

At the time of Prosser’s dissertation, there was considerable controversy over segregated schools among blacks and whites, a debate that had begun even before the U.S. Supreme Court rendered its “separate but equal” doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), a decision that was the foundation of school segregation in 17 states, mostly southern, and the District of Columbia. In actuality, as evidenced in Cincinnati, segregated schools were prominent in the North as well, commonly drawing from different black and white neighborhoods, and from the fact that many black parents wanted their children to be in schools with other black children and taught by black teachers. Mandatory segregation clearly stigmatized blacks, promoting a dogma of black inferiority. Furthermore, the equal part of “separate but equal” was never a reality, as evidenced in many ways, including a lack of black high schools, meaning that six to eight grades might be the educational limit for many black students or, where black schools existed, the great disparity of funding when compared to white schools. Finally, critics of segregation, both black and white, noted that segregated schools prevented children—black and white—from experiences that could promote better understanding of the races and thus lead to improved racial harmony. But segregated schools meant jobs for black teachers who could not get jobs teaching white students, and, as Prosser understood, those schools provided a more nurturant environment for black students, away from the daily examples of prejudice and discrimination from white students and teachers (Klarman, 2004). The theses and dissertations emanating from Pechstein’s students at the University of Cincinnati supported the greater value of segregated schools for black students, a view echoed by many black scholars in both the North and South, such as Charles Campbell, Charles Johnson, Kelly Miller, and Carter Woodson, and even by W. E. B. Du Bois (1935), who reluctantly decided in favor of segregated schools as preferable until the prejudicial attitudes of whites changed. But there were many critics as well.

Black scholars, such as Gordon Victor Cools, Wendell Dabney, William Pickens, and Howard Long, opposed segregated schools on numerous grounds, believing, for example, that such schools provided a rationale for segregation in other parts of society, that the separation fostered a belief in inferiority, and that segregation violated the very fabric of American ideals of liberty and freedom (see Bullock, 1967; Scott, 1997). The AMA had always opposed segregated schools and maintained integrated faculties in most of its black colleges and some of its black high schools (Joe Richardson, personal communication, August 16, 2003).

Prosser (1933a) was well aware of these debates and reviewed much of the controversial literature on both sides in the introductory sections of her dissertation. She recognized the dis-
FIGURE 1.
Inez Beverly Prosser on the cover of *The Crisis* magazine following her 1933 graduation. The author wishes to thank the Crisis Publishing Co., Inc., the publisher of the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, for the use of this material first published in the August 1933 issue of *The Crisis*. 
tinction between mandatory and voluntary segregation and cautioned that her research dealt only with the latter form. She wrote:

The word “segregated” is fraught with connotations that the Negro has been taught to resent. This fact accounts for much of the feeling shown against the segregated school. Long accustomed to education adapted to individual as well as group needs, certain northern school systems have opened special schools for special classes. Here it seems proper to make a distinction between mandatory and voluntary segregation. As generally understood, mandatory segregation has as its expressed purpose the isolation of an undesirable element in the population; on the contrary, special schools based on voluntary segregation have as their expressed purpose fitting education to the needs of the group under consideration. (pp. 6–7)

As noted earlier, Pechstein (1929) made the same arguments in his writings, arguing that segregated schools were desirable and beneficial when they were voluntary. Whereas the distinction between mandatory and voluntary segregation was broadly understood, there were still many who objected to segregated schools on any grounds. One of those was J. St. Clair Price (1934) who reviewed Prosser’s dissertation for The Journal of Negro Education in an article entitled “The Problem of Voluntary Race-Segregation.”

St. Clair Price’s (1934) review began by noting that Prosser’s study was the third dissertation from the University of Cincinnati in recent years that supported the greater benefits of segregated schools for black children, and he commented briefly on the earlier studies by Porter and Crowley. About Prosser’s work he wrote, “To those who are opposed in principle to the policy and practice of segregation on the basis of race for purposes of education Dr. Prosser’s results are upsetting, until they have been scrutinized. Then they become not only questionable but insidious because, in all good faith, they are quite apt to be used as evidence, prima facie, by those who not only mould public opinion regarding Negro education, but who determine social policy as well” (p. 270). His criticisms of the study were essentially two. He argued that the differences obtained on the various tests were small, which they were. Second, he noted that Prosser’s assumption was that the differences she obtained were the differential effects of the schooling experiences, whereas another possibility, which he believed more likely, was that the differences reflected a selection bias by the parents in sending their children to segregated versus mixed schools. That selection bias might have indicated different personality types in the parents that would have produced children of differing personalities, or it could have been that parents, in assessing their children’s personality, decided that one type of school would be more beneficial. He suggested that the tests Prosser gave her students should have been given to the children when they started school and then administered some years later. He argued that such a longitudinal comparison would have provided better evidence for the impact of the schools on the personalities of the children.

Howard Hale Long, who received his doctorate in educational psychology at Harvard University in 1933 (Guthrie, 1998), and was working as a high school principal in Washington, DC, also criticized the Cincinnati studies in an article in the same journal the following year. The purpose of his article (Long, 1935) was to document some of the psychological problems (he used the word “psychogenic”) created by segregated schools, and he began by reviewing and critiquing the doctoral studies of Porter, Crowley, and Prosser. Regarding Prosser’s work, he wrote, “The sample suffers from selection and approaches the lower limit of the number required for even the crudest statistical inference” (p. 340). Like St. Clair Price, Long worried that the interpretations of the Cincinnati studies would provide ammunition for the advocates of segregation. In contrast, his article provided a catalog of “psychogenic hazards” for children educated in segregated schools, although citations to empiri-
cal work were few. Indeed, his concerns were more philosophical than experimental. “The total setting of the segregated school literally forces a sense of limitation upon the child,” he wrote (Long, 1935, p. 343). He argued further that those limitations began to have their effect immediately: “To look forward to a life apart from the general populace in the midst of which one must live with limited choice and opportunity, regardless of ability, is a dysgenic factor of first importance. It chills ambition in embryo” (p. 343).

Long (1935) focused his remarks on the development of feelings of racial inferiority in black youth who were schooled separately. It was part of the argument for what historian Daryl Michael Scott (1997) has called the “damaged Black psyche.” Scott noted that the three Cincinnati studies were used by proponents of segregation to argue that segregated schools should be seen “as a place of refuge [rather] than a mental health hazard” (p. 38), but he cites no evidence of those studies being used in that way, nor could we find any evidence of such use.

THE ROAD TO BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION

In the 1930s, racial attitudes were undergoing significant changes. Psychologist-historian Franz Samelson (1978) has documented what could be seen as a paradigm shift in psychology in the 1930s that moved psychologists from studying racial differences alleging inferiority of blacks to studying racial prejudice. Klarman (2004) has described how these scientific studies, including work from anthropology and sociology, began to change racial beliefs:

A final factor contributing to the changing racial attitudes of whites was the gradual erosion of Jim Crow’s basic premise: that the black and white races were fundamentally different. By the 1930s, most scientists had repudiated theories of biological racial differences. By the 1940s, this shift in scientific paradigms was filtering down to popular opinion, assisted by widespread revulsion against Nazism. (p. 188)

Even with change in the air, the idea of ending mandatory segregated schools seemed impossible, if, not at some level, undesirable. With regard to “separate but equal,” the NAACP focused its efforts not on separation, but on equality of schools, which meant equal pay for black teachers, comparable public funding of school transportation, comparable buildings and equipment, comparable access to quality higher education, and equality of per capita expenditures on black students (Baker, 1998).

There was a recognition among the black leadership in America in the 1930s that school segregation was not a change that could be made in the South, either legally or practically. The agenda for the NAACP and other black leaders was for “voting, ending police brutality, securing decent jobs, and receiving a fair share of public education funds, [rather] than in desegregating grade schools” (Klarman, 2004, pp. 391–392). However, the service of white and black Americans in integrated military units in World War II and experience with the peoples of foreign lands in that war would bring dramatic changes to the racial attitudes of soldiers and sailors and, in turn, to their families. At home, there were new scientific investigations that examined the effects of segregation on black children, especially the doll studies of Mamie and Kenneth B. Clark (Clark & Clark, 1939, 1940). Those studies provided evidence to support Howard Long’s (1935) beliefs about the “psychogenic hazards” for black children educated in segregated schools (see Steele, 2004).

Citing the work of the Clarks and others, the Social Science Statement submitted to the U. S. Supreme Court in the Brown v. Board of Education case noted that “as minority group children learn the inferior status to which they are assigned—as they observe the fact that they are almost always segregated and kept apart from others who are treated with more
respect by the society as a whole—they often react with feelings of inferiority and a sense of personal humiliation” (Appendix to Appellants’ Briefs, 1952, p. 4). The tide was indeed turning in racial attitudes, and the NAACP felt emboldened to make a frontal assault on *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In the late 1940s and early 1950s the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, principally under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall, built a strategy that challenged the legality of a “separate but equal” doctrine by arguing that black children suffered serious and possibly irrevocable psychological damage as a result of forced segregation and using recent social science evidence to support that claim (see Jackson, 2001; Kluger, 1975; Williams, 1998). It was a bold approach that ultimately proved successful in making segregated schools illegal in arguably the most important Supreme Court decision of the twentieth century, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Not surprisingly, none of the Cincinnati studies were mentioned in the social science brief filed with the Supreme Court (Appendix to Appellants’ Briefs, 1952).

THE FINAL YEARS AT TOUGALOO

Prosser had spent the academic year 1931–1932 in residence at UC, completing her coursework and collecting the data for her dissertation. She returned to Tougaloo for classes in the fall term of 1932 and spent her spare time that year completing the writing of her dissertation. In the summer of 1933, she returned to Cincinnati for her graduation ceremonies. In her last year at Tougaloo, she continued to serve as registrar and assistant professor of education and as principal of the high school.

While in Mississippi, Prosser was active in advancing teacher training in the state’s many black schools. She conducted frequent workshops, mostly in summer programs for teachers, and she organized a summer school program for teachers at Jackson College in 1934. In 1933 and 1934, she published a series of seven articles on teaching English in the *Mississippi Educational Journal*, subtitled “A Monthly Magazine for Teachers in Colored Schools,” the official organ of the Mississippi Association of Teachers in Colored Schools. Among her topics were letter writing, English literature, composition, vocabulary building, and grammar (Prosser, 1933b, c, 1934a, b, c).

After the conclusion of the Jackson summer school program in 1934, Prosser went to Texas to visit her family. On August 28, Prosser, her husband Rufus, and her sister Katharine Beverly (who was then a librarian in Vicksburg, Mississippi) were returning to Mississippi by automobile when they were involved in a head-on collision near Shreveport, Louisiana. Inez Prosser was thrown through the windshield. The newspaper accounts of the accident are confusing about who was injured and how seriously (see “Condition of Negress,” 1934; “Injured Negro is in Critical Condition,” 1934; “Nine Injured in Greenwood Road,” 1934; “Nine Persons Injured,” 1934). Family recollections are ambiguous as well. Rufus was driving; all three were injured, but Prosser’s injuries were the most serious. She was transported to the Tri-State Sanitarium in Shreveport where she died on September 5, 1934 (Certificate of Death, 1934).

Prosser’s body was taken to her parents’ home in San Antonio for the funeral service and for burial in that city on September 8, 1934. Among those attending were the president of Tillotson College and the chaplain from Tougaloo College. A memorial service was held for her at Tougaloo College on October 14, 1934, beginning with the singing of her favorite hymn, “Day is Dying in the West” and continuing with tributes from colleagues and students, including the reading of moving letters from Louis Pechstein and from Dudley Smith, who had been her teacher in the one year she attended school in Corpus Christi, Texas (“Memorial
Service,” 1934, p. 1). Pechstein would later contact Rufus Prosser about publishing Inez’s dissertation, but it was the middle of the Great Depression and the expenses involved were prohibitive (Bernice Beverly Arbor, personal communication, December 16, 2002).

In Southern Memorial Park, an African American cemetery on Roland Road in San Antonio, the inscription on Inez Prosser’s headstone reads, “How many hopes lie buried here.” She lived less than 39 years, yet her life was one of considerable achievement. Her accomplishments go beyond her rather remarkable achievements in higher education for a person of her gender and race in her time. She had a reputation for service to others, especially in encouraging African Americans to pursue education.

Prosser was clearly a mentor to her younger siblings, several of whom lived with her and her husband in Austin during the summers. She offered to pay for the college educations of her brothers and sisters. All ten of her siblings finished high school, and five of them would earn college degrees, all with the help of Prosser. She gave them money and books and advised them about what courses they should take. She was described as helpful without being controlling.

Inez Prosser helped others as well, promoting education and encouraging black students to go to college. She helped them locate and apply for scholarship funds. People would later tell the Beverly family about how she had helped their lives. They would say, “Well, I’m able to teach now because she helped get me into Prairie View and helped me finish college.” The Beverlys understood the extended impact of such actions. Bernice described it as follows: “therefore that particular person . . . was able to get a job and help the rest of her family, so it’s like a snowball getting larger and larger as it went” (Bernice Beverly Arbor, personal communication, June 22, 2003).

Inez Prosser was black and female, growing up in the American South when opportunities for advancement of one’s station in life were few to nonexistent for her gender and race. Where such opportunities existed, the door to them was education. Historian Cynthia Neverdon-Morton (1990), an authority on African American women in the South, has written that African Americans “saw education as a means of escaping poverty, enhancing their ability to secure employment, and redressing social inequalities and injustices” (p. 163). At the turn of the twentieth century, African American women were at the forefront in pressing for education of the black masses: “[T]he women hoped that their efforts would have a multiplier effect in the black community. Once the individual matured and prospered, her knowledge, energy, finances, and time could be utilized to further the goals of the entire race” (p. 163). There can perhaps be no better description of what Prosser did for her family and for her race with her brief life.

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