

Middle School Lesson (Grades 6 to 8): Brown v. Board of Education

Overview

This middle school lesson plan, Brown v. Board of Education, was used with students who had already learned and used the Questions for Life model in this classroom and others. The lesson plan assumes a certain amount of preparation given by the teacher, who had delivered brief lectures and provided background information about discrimination against African Americans in the United States. The teacher brought to life the important historical events that had led up to the Supreme Court decision on May 17, 1954.

Their understanding of these events set up the lesson for students who read the story “Brown vs. Board of Education” by Walter Dean Myers in the anthology *Out of Tune*. The teacher used Questions for Life questioning strategies to guide students’ thinking about the content of the reading.

Purpose

The purpose of having middle school students read the story “Brown vs. Board of Education” by Walter Dean Myers was to help them understand the experience of African Americans who were discriminated against and deprived of the rights and privileges afforded others in the United States.

Using the cue words from the Questions for Life model, the teacher formulated and asked questions following a silent reading of the text.

Prior Knowledge

Before students read Myers’ story about the Brown v. Board of Education decision, the teacher introduced and led a discussion on how the Supreme Court is empowered to interpret the United States Constitution and determine the constitutionality of laws passed by Congress and state legislatures.

Teacher and students also researched and discussed the Fourteenth Amendment, which states that all American citizens have equal rights under the law. The teacher related the story of Thurgood Marshall, an African American, who became an influential attorney and then sat as a Supreme Court Justice from 1967 to 1991. As a young boy, Marshall, the great-grandson of a slave, read the words of the Fourteenth Amendment and wondered how segregation could exist when the Constitution promised everyone equal rights.

Students learned that in many parts of the United States African Americans had once been referred to as “coloreds.” Historical photographs showed that they were not allowed to eat at the same restaurants as white people and that they were forced to sit at the backs of buses, use separate restrooms, and drink from water fountains marked *colored*. They were often deprived of the right to vote.

Questions for Life: Analysis

“Define what freedom meant to the Africans who were captured and brought to the United States in slave ships with their wrists chained.” (Analysis)

“Define the meaning of *freedom* as it had changed for African Americans by the 1900s.” (Analysis)

"The ruling of the Supreme Court in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case stated that it was legal to have facilities that were 'separate but equal.' *Analyze* the effect this Supreme Court ruling had on African Americans." (Analysis)

Questions for Life: Perception

A short visualization using Perception followed the Analysis questions so students could better understand the meaning of segregation:

Linda Brown, a third-grade African-American student, was told she could not attend her neighborhood public school in Topeka, Kansas. *See* the disappointed look on her face as she walks a mile through a railroad switchyard to get to the bus stop for the ride to the Monroe school where all the children are Black. *Notice* how dilapidated the school is. *Observe* the broken ceiling tiles, crumbling floors, unplastered walls, and smashed windows.

"How would you *feel* about having to attend a different school from the one other children attend because of the color of your skin?"

Questions for Life: Induction

"What *generalization* might Linda Brown make as she *sees* that she is separated from white children in the neighborhood and *observes* the condition of her school compared to that of the white children's school only a few blocks away?"

Questions for Life: Insight

"Let's pretend that a law is passed that would prohibit any male or female with brown eyes from entering a football stadium. What *insights* do you have concerning this law?"

Questions for Life: Analysis

"*List* what values Thurgood Marshall and his family considered important in life."

"*Cite reasons* why Thurgood Marshall and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) wanted segregation to end in education."

Questions for Life: Evaluation and Analysis

"In your *opinion*, was Thurgood Marshall a good choice to head the legal team that argued that segregation was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment in Brown v. Board of Education? *Cite reasons* for your answer."

Questions for Life: Summary

"*Summarize* how Kenneth Clark's study of African-American children helped to prove the harmful effects of segregation."

Questions for Life: Appraisal

"*List and prioritize* in order of importance three reasons why Brown v. Board of Education is one of the most important cases ever to come before the Supreme Court."

Questions for Life: Prediction

“Predict how your life and the lives of other students would be different if the Supreme Court had not ruled against segregation in 1954.”

Questions for Life: Action Activities

As a follow-up activity, students were asked to select and complete one of the activities listed below. Each is based on Questions for Life Action questioning strategies.

Giving students an Action activity in the classroom empowered them to transfer the Questions for Life thinking skills to real life. Guided by their progression through the Questions for Life thinking strategies, students were more comfortable taking Action because they had a deeper knowledge of the events described in the reading and the lesson.

Prior to beginning work on their Action activities the students were asked to list the Questions for Life thinking processes they would need to use in order to complete the assignment successfully. This served as a plan to set up the Action activity and became a useful tool for the thinking involved in planning and developing their work.

*“If you were Thurgood Marshall, what would you say in presenting your case to the Court? **Draft** a response as though you were speaking to the Justices.”*

*“Research and **write** about the life of Linda Brown after the Brown v. Board of Education ruling. Did she continue to be involved in the Civil Rights Movement?”*

*“Research the important dates in the life of Thurgood Marshall and **construct** a timeline.”*

*“**Write** a brief magazine article about the life of Thurgood Marshall. Include his greatest accomplishment and the qualities he possessed that helped him to overcome the various challenges he faced.”*

Reference:

Barkley, S. G. (2009). *Questions for life: Powerful strategies to guide critical thinking* (pp. 161-166). Cadiz, KY: Performance Learning Systems.