
Lesson By: Andrew Terranova, Westchester High School, Los Angeles

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<th>Grade Level/Subject Areas:</th>
<th>Class Size:</th>
<th>Time/Duration of Lesson:</th>
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<tr>
<td>11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Grade US History</td>
<td>Any</td>
<td>2—90-minute class periods</td>
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<td>12&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Grade Government</td>
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Guiding Questions:

* Why is it important to remember Barbara Johns's leadership in the struggle that eventually brought about the Brown decision? What about her leadership particularly significant?

* How did the outcome of Mendez v. Westminster affect the outcome of Brown v. Board? How does the expansion of rights for one oppressed people affect all other oppressed peoples? (i.e. the relationship between civil rights and gay/lesbian rights)

* How do these two struggles contribute to a fuller understanding of how Brown v. Board of Education came to be?

Lesson Abstract:

This lesson is about challenging and expanding our historical memory. It argues that social change is inspired by countless acts of individual resistance that slowly lead to an overall shift in consciousness and material conditions. This counters a telling of history that focuses almost exclusively on “great leaders” and “watershed moments.” Specifically, the lesson focuses on recovering the histories of two of the lesser-known antecedents to the historic Brown v. Board of Education decision. In 1946 Gonzalo Mendez filed a lawsuit in Federal Court on behalf of 5000 Mexican-American students forced to go to segregated “Mexican schools” in Orange County, California. His case helped establish legal precedence for the latter Brown case. A few years later in Virginia, 16-year old Barbara Johns organized a walk-out and student-strike against her segregated high school. Her case became one of the four cases that was part of the Brown litigation itself.

Lesson Content:

Together with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the US Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education is widely considered to have begun the modern Black Freedom Struggle. In reality however, both of these struggles greatly benefited from countless individual acts of resistance that have been largely left out of the historical narrative. In losing our memory of these lesser-known acts of resistance, we also an accurate understanding of how social change is made. It is essential that we recover this if we are to be able to encourage our students to be social actors in the world, rather than mere spectators. This lesson is an attempt to recover some of the antecedents of Brown v.
Board in order to provide us with this understanding.

The 1954 Brown v. Board decision struck down the earlier "separate but equal" decision issued by the Court in its 1896 decision Plessy v. Ferguson. In Brown, the Court declared that segregation in education was inherently unequal and a violation of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution which guarantees to "all citizens equal protection of the laws."

Brown v. Board of Education was not the first challenge to segregation in public education. As far back as 1849, Benjamin Roberts and other Black parents fought for the right to enroll their children in Boston public schools. In Kansas alone, there were eleven school integration cases between 1881 and 1949! These struggles, though often unsuccessful, were important in terms of mobilizing the black community to fight for their rights (Cases in Prelude to Brown).

One little-known forerunner to the Brown decision was the Mexican-American battle to desegregate public schools in Orange County, California. The Mendez v. Westminster case began when tenant-farmer, Gonzalo Mendez moved his family to the predominantly white district of Westminster in Orange County and his children were denied entrance to the schools there. As early as 1855, California law made state funding for education only available to white students. Educational code specifically denied Black, Asian, and Native students access to an equal education. While the code didn't specifically single out Mexican-American students, local custom dictated that they were either to be educated in segregated classrooms within white schools, or segregated schools altogether (Teacher's Domain: Mendez v. Westminster).

Ironically, the Mendez family's move to Westminster was made possible by the opportunity to lease a 60-acre farm from a Japanese family that had been interned during World War II. With the money earned from operating this farm, Gonzalo Mendez was able to hire an attorney and pursue a lawsuit. Together with four other parents, they launched a class-action lawsuit on behalf of the 5000 Mexican-American students in four different Orange County school districts (Mendez v. Westminster, DVD).

Unlike the lawsuit in Brown v. Board, the Mendez lawsuit argued that students were being segregated based on national origin. Interestingly, several organizations joined the lawsuit filing Amicus briefs, including one by the NAACP, represented by none other than Thurgood Marshall. In 1946, the US District Court ruled that the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment applied to education. The following year, California Governor Earl Warren—who would later go on to be the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court that decided Brown—signed a law which repealed the remaining segregation statutes in the California Education Code. Within the next two years, Texas and Arizona followed California's example (Teacher's Domain: Mendez v. Westminster).

While Mendez v. Westminster did not directly tackle Plessy v. Ferguson's "separate but equal" clause, it did establish an important legal precedence and struck a blow against segregation in education. Teaching about this history is important because it can provide
our students with the understanding that movements for liberation can benefit each other. Just as today, the US-born children of undocumented immigrants benefit from the citizenship rights that were won in the Black struggle to establish the 14th Amendment, so to did the Black struggle against segregation in public education benefit from the success of this important Mexican-American struggle. In the context of so much "Black/Latino" violence in our schools today, this example holds forth a much different possibility for our students.

The story of Gonzalo Mendez is not the only antecedent of Brown v. Board of Education that receives scant attention in our traditional narrative. Brown v. Board took its name from Oliver Brown, whose daughter Linda was forced to travel by bus to a black school rather than attending the white school which was within walking distance from her house in Topeka, Kansas. In reality, though, Brown was one of over 200 plaintiffs in the case from five different states; in fact, the reason he became the lead plaintiff was a simple strategic decision borne out of the belief that it would be more effective to have a man's name listed first on the plaintiff roster (Cases in Prelude to Brown). Sadly, the stories of the other plaintiffs have been relegated to the footnotes of history. Barbara Johns is one of those plaintiffs, and unfortunately, her story is arguably the best equipped to "hook" our students' interest in Brown v. Board.

A junior at Robert R. Morton High School in Farmville, Virginia, Barbara was incensed with the inequality in her education and the county's delay in the long-promised construction of a new "negro" school. Morton High was tremendously overcrowded and students had classes in tar-paper shacks that were heated by old fashioned wood-stoves. Meanwhile, the white school in Farmville had a gymnasium, cafeteria, locker rooms, and an auditorium with fixed seats (Payne, p. 20 & Wormser, p. 1).

On April 23, 1951, Johns put a clever plan into effect. First, an urgent phone call was made to the Principal of her school tricking him into leaving the building and going downtown. Next, a note, purportedly from the Principal, was delivered to each classroom summoning the whole school to an emergency assembly in the makeshift auditorium. Taylor Payne recounts the story in his monumental study Parting the Waters:

All 450 students and twenty-five teachers filed into the auditorium, and the buzz of gossip gave way to shocked silence the instant the stage curtain opened to reveal not the principal, but a sixteen-year-old junior named Barbara Johns. She announced that this was a special student meeting to discuss the wretched conditions at the school...Some [teachers] moved to take over the stage, whereupon Barbara Johns took off her shoe and rapped it sharply on the school bench. 'I want you all out of here!' she shouted at the teachers, beckoning a small cadre of her supporters to remove them from the room. (Payne, p. 19-20)

Johns noted to her fellow students that the change they sought might come too late to benefit them directly, but that if they were successful, it would benefit their younger siblings. She then led students in a walkout and "strike."
Johns appealed to NAACP lawyers, who were initially reluctant to deal with the young students. As Payne continues, "When the lawyers told a mass gathering of one thousand Negroes that any battle would be dangerous and that the strike was illegal, it was the students who shouted that there were too many of them to fit in the jails" (Payne, p. 20). The students were eventually successful in challenging the conservative leadership that had held sway in their community and marshalling adult support for their cause. One month after the students began their strike, the NAACP filed in Federal Court with the Morton High School case as one of the four suits that made up the historic Brown v. Board of Education case.

Barbara Johns's incredible story contains many important lessons for our students. It's a story of ingenuity, courage, and sacrifice. It's a story that teaches students that sometimes they need to challenge adults when they become too complacent. Johns's mischievous creativity in pursuit of justice will no doubt capture our students' imaginations. The most important lesson is that this is a story of successful movement for change that was led by students themselves; teaching it automatically calls into question its omission from textbooks. Are these really the lessons that schools want their students to learn?

It is very important for us as teachers to ground the successful victories of the Black Freedom Movement in the often unsuccessful struggles of those who came before. Our students need to understand that for every Dr. King or Thurgood Marshall who are remembered in the history books, there are hundreds of Barbara Johns's and Gonzalo Mendez's who in their own ways made those better-known successes possible. When we as teachers challenge this dominant, "Great Leader" narrative of history, we are able to open up the possibility for our students to view themselves as important historical actors in their own right.

And if we win in the ages to come
We'll have a chapter where the history pages are from
They won't never know our name or face
But feel our soul in free they taste
Feel our passion
When they heat they house
When they got power on the streets
And the police don't beat 'em about

--Boots Reilly (The Coup) "Heaven Tonite"

State Content Standards:  (California State History Standards)

11.10.2 Examine and analyze the key events, policies and court cases in the evolution of civil rights including...Brown v. Board of Education
Students summarize landmark U.S. Supreme Court interpretations of the Constitution and its amendments.

**Materials Needed:**
- "Heaven Tonite" by The Coup
- Handouts of "Barbara Johns Leads a Student Strike"
- Copy of PBS: *Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*
- Handout version of "Cases in prelude to Brown 1849-1949."
- Copy of Mendez v. Westminster DVD

**Possible Teaching Activities:**

**Day 1: Part I—(Warm Up)**

Have students write a journal on the question: "Would you take a risk to do something that is right, even if you know that you will never get the credit?" Share out student responses and discuss.

Read the following quote from Boots Reilly of the hip-hop group "The Coup":

> And if we win in the ages to come  
> We'll have a chapter where the history pages are from  
> They won't never know our name or face  
> But feel our soul in free food they taste  
> Feel our passion

> When they heat they house  
> When they got power on the streets  
> And the police don't beat 'em about

Engage class in a discussion of how history is made by the masses of people, not only by important leaders. Ask students, “Why is it important to engage in struggles even if the history books will "never know our name or face"?"

**Part II: Barbara Johns and Brown v. Board of Education**

Have students read “Barbara Johns Leads a Student Strike” in pairs and then watch the clip on Johns from *Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*. Have students write a one-page response to the following questions:

* Why is it important to remember Barbara Johns' leadership in the struggle that eventually brought about the Brown decision? What about her leadership particularly
significant?

* Why do you think Johns is not mentioned in most history textbooks' discussions of Brown v. Board of Education?

**Day 2: Part III—Mendez v. Westminster's influence on Brown**

Briefly introduce students to a few excerpts from "Cases in Prelude to Brown: 1849-1949" and discuss.

Then watch excerpts from *Mendez v. Westminster* and have students write a one-page response to the following questions:

* What were some of the specific connections between Mendez Westminster & Brown v. Board? (ie: legal issues, people, organizations)

**Part IV:**

Discuss how Mendez v. Westminster illustrates the point of how the expansion of rights for one oppressed people affects all other oppressed peoples?

For homework have students read, "14th Amendment R.I.P." and write a reflection on the application of the 14th Amendment's applicability to the issue of Gay Marriage.

**Bibliography:**

"Cases in Prelude to Brown: 1849-1949" & "Background Overview & Summary"


“Mendez v. Westminster: Desegregating California's Schools.”


