

Who Was Linda Brown?

GRADE LEVEL: Grades 8-10; Adjustable for Upper Elementary Grades 4-6

SUBJECT: Linda Brown; *Brown v. Board*; English Language Arts; Sociology; U.S. Government

TIME REQUIRED: Planned for 90 minutes

This lesson explores the life of Linda Brown before and after *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.

RATIONALE

This lesson develops historical empathy and a deeper understanding of the role of Linda Brown as a young girl and through her life in the fight for desegregation. The goal is to understand the perspectives and experiences of people in the past through literature and source material.

NOTE: While this lesson is intended for a 90-minute class session, it could be paced for more time, or activities could be cut to accommodate a shorter class period.

This lesson plan and materials needed to teach it can be found at the Thurgood Marshall Institute: <https://tminstituteldf.org/>

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. How does one person make a difference?
2. How does change last?
3. What is activism, and how might it affect people?

OUTCOMES AND OBJECTIVES

After the lesson, students will...

1. Describe Linda Brown's contributions through her adolescent and adult life.
2. Explain persistent activism and how it might support sustained social change.
3. Make inferences about major themes in Linda Brown's life.

PREPARING TO TEACH

Review the materials section below. Be sure you have access to the text(s) for students to use, especially the book *Linda Brown, You Are Not Alone* by Joyce Carol Thomas (author) and Curtis James (illustrator).

Review the pacing of activities and activity structure, in particular jigsaw (<https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/eal-programme/guidance/classroom-guidance/great-ideas/jigsaw-activities/>).

SCAFFOLDS AND ACCOMMODATIONS TO SUPPORT LEARNERS

Reading supports are built into the task descriptions. Notable scaffolds for reading include:

- Setting a clear purpose for the students using the prompts provided and clear expectations for the phases of the tasks.
- Tampering with complex texts by offering everyday language alternatives to more complicated phrases in the reading materials.
- Using a structured highlighting strategy for students as a pre- or during reading activity can add time but serve as a valuable support (ex. highlight blue anything confusing; highlight yellow anything that's related to the prompts; highlight purple anything you understand clearly but is new learning for you).

Adjusting for upper elementary grades 4-6:

- The book *Linda Brown, You Are Not Alone* is a grade level 5 and up/10 years old and up text (Lexile measure 560L). To adjust for grades 5-6, we recommend eliminating the NPR task and focusing on first establishing the context with students, including reviewing some key vocabulary that might be challenging.
- Modifying prompts to make sure the language is accessible for the students you are working with will help scaffold for access and clarify what is expected.
- Extended time for the jigsaw activity will compensate for removing the NPR reading task and offer students additional sense-making time. If the extra time is not needed, using the alternative assessment where students respond to the prompts by either writing a short piece or designing an informational pamphlet about the life of Linda Brown would make for enriched assessment and formative learning.

INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES SEQUENCE

1. Review *Brown v. Board of Education* (see short summary in materials section) – 10 min.
 - This could be done as a quick Q&A if material has already been learned or a more detailed PowerPoint for direct instruction.
 - Alternative review: Print out the summary with some key words removed and replaced with a “_____” (blank space) for students to fill in. This is also a nice reading support for students.
2. Read NPR article about the life and death of Linda Brown and discuss/respond to the following questions with evidence from the article – 25 min.
 - a. Who was Linda Brown?
 - b. How did she feel about the persistence of segregation in Topeka schools (and schools throughout the U.S.)?
 - c. What do you think Linda Brown's legacy is?

Example structure of response: Linda Brown was an activist for desegregation, put at the center of the fight as a child during the *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954 case without really knowing

what it was about. **Evidence from NPR article:** “*Brown v. Board of Education* involved several families, all trying to dismantle decades of federal education laws that condoned segregated schools for black and white students. But it began with Brown’s father, Oliver, who tried to enroll her at the Sumner School,” and a quote from Linda Brown, “My parents tried to explain this to me, but I was too young at that time to understand.”

Note: This activity could be structured in different ways. However it is structured, be sure to press students to have varied answers and reference parts of the article to support what they think. You might also talk about sourcing and the quality of an NPR article as opposed to another source like an op-ed piece or a blog post about her life.

- Students could read on their own, then discuss the questions and highlight or make note of evidence in the text for their responses.
- Reading supports could include a small group read-along or reading as a whole class (pre-recorded audio to listen together can help with this too), followed by a small or whole-class discussion of the questions.

3. Jigsaw activity to read selected excerpts from *Linda Brown, You Are Not Alone* Select chapters for the student groups in their first group (expert group) to read together. This serves as a reading support as well as positions students in a particular role with responsibilities for group two (teaching group), where they will explain their chapter themes, ideas, and outcomes to the group.

Group one (expert group): For a class of 30 students, you would want the initial grouping to be five groups of six students. Each of these groups is assigned a chapter to read and be responsible for attending to the following:

- a. What is the chapter about generally?
- b. What do you think the major theme or main idea is?
- c. What did you learn from the chapter that you didn’t know before reading?
- d. What are the most important ideas to share with the rest of the class?

Group two (teaching group): For this grouping, ask students while in group one to number off by 1-6 within each group, then find their new group to teach each other about their chapters. This requires some moving around, so be ready with your typical procedures for changing seats or re-grouping.

ASSESSMENT

Exit ticket responding to the prompts from the jigsaw or written responses/notetaking during the jigsaw can serve as valuable assessment tools for this lesson.

Alternative: Students could write a short paragraph with support from their reading and groupwork in response to a prompt like: What was Linda Brown’s role in the fight for desegregation? How does her activism affect us today?

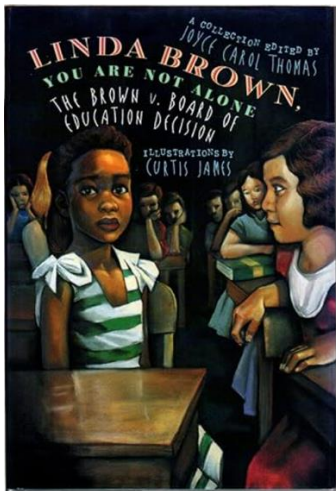
MATERIALS NEEDED

1. Review of *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954

Brown v. Board of Education was a landmark case in the United States that challenged the constitutionality of racial segregation in public schools. The case originated in Topeka, Kansas, where Black children were required to attend separate schools for Black students, which were often inferior in quality to those attended by white students. The plaintiffs argued that this segregation violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, which guarantees equal rights to all citizens.

The case reached the Supreme Court in 1954, and in a unanimous decision, the Court, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, declared that state laws establishing separate public schools for Black and white students were inherently unequal and unconstitutional. This decision overturned the precedent set by the 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which had upheld the “separate but equal” doctrine.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision marked a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement, as it laid the groundwork for desegregation efforts across the country and challenged the legal basis of segregation in other public facilities. It played a crucial role in the ongoing struggle for racial equality in the United States.



2. *Linda Brown, You Are Not Alone: The Brown v. Board of Education Decision* by Joyce Carol Thomas (author) and Curtis James (illustrator)

<https://www.amazon.com/Linda-Brown-You-Are-Alone/dp/0786808217>

This is a collection of short stories and poems about Linda Brown and related topics.

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3. NPR Article, "Linda Brown, Who Was At The Center of *Brown v. Board Of Education*, Dies" March 26, 2018 <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/03/26/597154953/linda-brown-who-was-at-center-of-brown-v-board-of-education-dies>

4/11/24, 11:42 AM

PLAYLIST

PLAYLIST

Linda Brown, Who Was At Center Of Brown v. Board Of Education, Dies : The Two-Way : NPR




DONATE

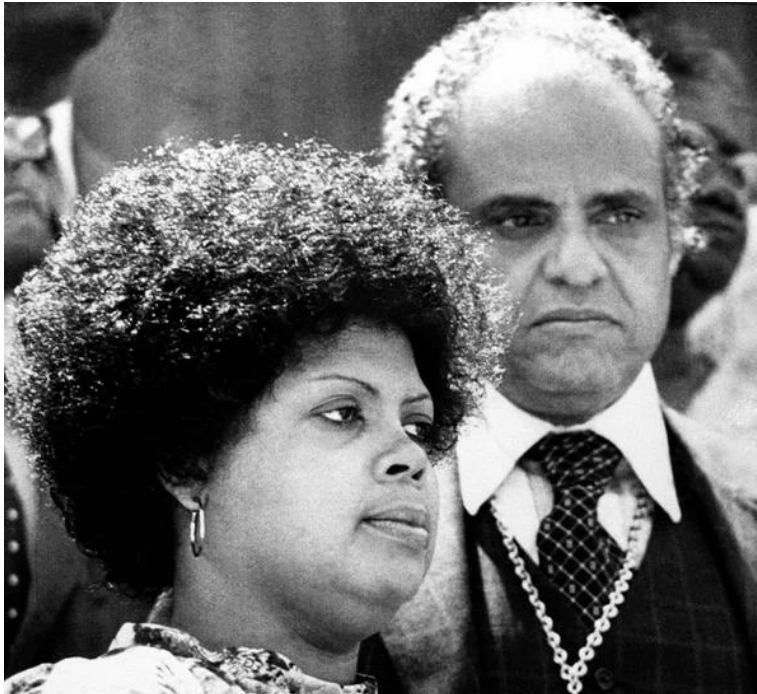
The Two-Way

AMERICA

Linda Brown, Who Was At Center Of *Brown v. Board Of Education*, Dies

MARCH 26, 2018 · 7:42 PM ET

 Vanessa Romo



<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/03/26/597154953/linda-brown-who-was-at-center-of-brown-v-board-of-education-dies>

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4/11/24, 11:42 AM

Linda Brown, Who Was At Center Of Brown v. Board Of Education, Dies : The Two-Way : NPR



Linda Brown, left, attends ceremonies in 1979 observing the anniversary of the Supreme Court's ruling in her father's class-action lawsuit against the Board of Education in Topeka, Kan.

AP

Updated at 2:00 a.m. ET Tuesday

Linda Brown, who as a schoolgirl was at the center of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case that rejected racial segregation in American schools, died in Topeka, Kan., Sunday afternoon. She was 76.

Her sister, Cheryl Brown Henderson, confirmed the death to *The Topeka Capital-Journal*.

The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, involved several families, all trying to dismantle decades of federal education laws that condoned segregated schools for black and white students. But it began with Brown's father Oliver, who tried to enroll her at the Sumner School, an all-white elementary school in Topeka just a few blocks from the Browns' home.

Sponsor Message

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/03/26/597154953/linda-brown-who-was-at-center-of-brown-v-board-of-education-dies>

2/17

The school board prohibited the child from enrolling and Brown, an assistant pastor at St. John African Methodist Episcopal Church, was angry that his daughter had to be shuttled miles away to go to school. He partnered with the NAACP and a dozen other plaintiffs to file a lawsuit against the Topeka Board of Education.

By 1952 the U.S. Supreme Court had on its docket similar cases from Delaware, the District of Columbia, South Carolina, and Virginia. They all challenged the constitutionality of racial segregation in public schools.

Two years later the court unanimously ruled to strike down the doctrine of "separate but equal." The justices agreed that it denied 14th Amendment guarantees of equal protection under the law.

**THE TWO-WAY****Jack Greenberg, Civil Rights Icon Who Argued Brown v. Board Of Education, Dies**

"I just couldn't understand," Brown told NPR 19 years after the milestone decision.

"We lived in a mixed neighborhood but when school time came I would have to take the school bus and go clear across town and the white children I played with would go to this other school," she said.

"My parents tried to explain this to me but I was too young at that time to understand."

In the same interview, Brown's mother, Leola Brown, said she and her husband tried their best to help their daughter understand why she wasn't allowed in the school. She broke it down in simple terms: "It was because her face was black. ... and she just couldn't go to school with the white races at that time."

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She said, "Her daddy told her he was going to try his best to do something about it and see that that was done away."

Recalling the day her father first walked her by the hand to Sumner School, Brown said, "I remember him talking to the principal and I remember our brisk walk back home and how I could just feel the tension within him."

When they got home, she said, her parents discussed what had gone on "and I knew that there was something terribly wrong about this," Brown said.

By the time the Supreme Court handed down its decision Brown was in junior high school and it was her mother who gave her the good news. "She was very happy," her mother said.

Brown never got the chance to attend Sumner. The family had moved out of the neighborhood during the lengthy case. But her mother said her younger daughters attended integrated schools, and one of them went on to become a teacher within the Topeka school district.

Even after the Supreme Court decision segregation in public schools continued for years. When finally nine black students enrolled at an all-white high school in Little Rock, Ark., in 1957, they had to be escorted onto the campus by federal guards.

The Topeka Capital-Journals reported:

"In 1979, Linda Brown, now with her own children in Topeka schools, became a plaintiff in a resurrected version of Brown, which still had the same title. Topeka Capital-Journal archives indicate the plaintiffs sued the school district for not following through with desegregation.

"Federal Judge Richard Rogers sided with the school district in a 1987 decision, but an appeals court reversed his ruling in 1989 and the Supreme Court chose

not to review that decision. Rogers then approved a desegregation plan for Topeka Unified School District 501 in 1993."

Kansas Gov. Jeff Colyer noted Brown's passing in a tweet Monday. "Linda Brown's life reminds us that sometimes the most unlikely people can have an incredible impact and that by serving our community we can truly change the world."

Sherrilyn Ifill, president of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, in a statement remarked, "Linda Brown is one of that special band of heroic young people who, along with her family, courageously fought to end the ultimate symbol of white supremacy – racial segregation in public schools. She stands as an example of how ordinary schoolchildren took center stage in transforming this country."

Eventually Brown became an educational consultant and public speaker.

When asked about her role in the historic case she told NPR it was her father who deserved the credit but added, "I am very proud that this happened to me and my family and I think it has helped minorities everywhere."

As a mother of two children who had attended racially diverse schools, she said, "By them going to an integrated school, they are advancing much more rapidly than I was at the age that they are now. ... And I think that children are relating to one another much better these days because of integration."

Correction

March 27, 2018