

Plessy v. Ferguson and *Brown v. Board of Education*: Looking At Primary Source Documents

By John Cartaina

Overview

Plessy v. Ferguson and *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* represent two dynamic turning points in the political and social history of race relations in America. The Plessy case legalized Jim Crow practices, and *Brown* broke the dam of segregation in schools and public facilities. Students will compare and contrast these two historic decisions within the cultural fabric of the times. They become true historians by evaluating an historic event within the context of the period. They also learn to be informed citizens equipped with the skills to understand and evaluate significant events in their own lives. This lesson is a culminating activity of a series of projects and assignments.

Curriculum Standards

For a list of standards that this unit addresses, [click here](#).

Time Required

The projects and research should be assigned at the beginning of a marking period. While the actual culminating lesson requires one class period per group, the researching end of the project could encompass weeks, with the teacher periodically checking students' progress. A "debriefing" period should take place on the day following the lesson to review the evaluations.

Materials Needed

- PBS series, *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow: Program One, Jim Crow Comes to Town (1917-1939)*
- The following web sites to research:
 - Majority and minority opinions of both Supreme Court cases:
<http://www.law.cornell.edu/topics/topic2.html> or
<http://www.constitutioncenter.org>
 - Biographies of **W. E. B. Du Bois** and **Booker T. Washington**
 - Geography of Court Cases from the **Supreme Court Cases Map**

The Lesson

Anticipatory Set

1. During the week before this lesson, segregate the class-seating chart in various ways. One day, sit the girls on one side of the room and boys on the other. You may continue with other groupings based on age, height, etc. Ask the students for their feelings during each of the segregating experiences. Then, ask them to suppose what it was like when school lunch lines and water fountains were segregated.
2. Read the following quote from Booker T. Washington delivered in Atlanta in 1895: "In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." Pose the questions:
 - What was Washington's message in this quote

- Do you agree with him now?
- Would you have agreed with him in 1895?

Procedures

1. Hand out the essay, **Different Beginnings/Different Ways** and have the students read this introductory material on the conflicting philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.
2. Divide the class into two groups and have them research the lives and philosophies of **Booker T. Washington** and **W. E. B. Du Bois**.
3. Have each research group create two timelines of the political, cultural, and economic events between 1865-1896 and 1896-1954, using "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow" video and the jimcrowhistory.org web site and other research. Students should also access the **jimcrowhistory.org Gateway** for additional web sites. The Booker T. Washington group will create the first timeline, and the W. E. B. Du Bois group will create the second one.
4. Have the:
 - Booker T. Washington group research the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case and carefully read the majority and minority opinions of the case.
 - W. E. B. Du Bois group research the *Brown v. the Board of Education* case and carefully read the majority and minority opinions of the case.
5. Then, divide each group into two subgroups and assign each one the task of arguing for or against one of the two Supreme Court decisions. Each subgroup must prepare a five-minute argument to present on the day of the lesson.
6. Assign a person from each subgroup to read significant sections of the majority or minority opinions of the cases.
7. Assemble a panel of judges from the administration, staff, and community.
8. Have students use the rubric to evaluate the presentations.

Procedures for the Debate and Recitation

1. Choose a room that would lend itself to a "court" environment.
2. First have the Booker T. Washington group present its arguments on *Plessy v. Ferguson* in five to ten minutes. The judges then have five to ten minutes to ask questions of each subgroup after the presentations.
3. Then have the W. E. B. Du Bois group present its arguments on *Brown v. the Board of Education* using the same procedures.
4. After both groups have completed their presentations and question and answer periods, have a student from each group recite sections from the opinions.
5. Summation: Spend the last 15 minutes of the period discussing, with the students, the decisions as they relate to the time periods in which they occurred. For instance, discuss these questions:
 - Why is it important to relate the decisions to the historic periods?

- How do the differences in Washington's and Du Bois' political stances relate to the decisions?

Assessment

1. The class evaluates the presentations based on this **New Jersey Speaking Rubric**.
2. Students then write a position paper on each decision. Compare and contrast the majority opinions reflecting the political and social climate of the era. They should consider whether the opinions correctly interpret the Fourteenth Amendment?

Related Works

Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Soul of Black Folks*

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