

RACISM IN RULES AND LAWS



ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How have rules and laws been created in our country based on race?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define the concepts of segregation and integration.
- Explain the significance of *Brown v. Board of Education*.
- Describe how school segregation harms all members of a community.
- Identify examples of individual and institutional racism.
- Generate ideas for making their community welcoming for people from all backgrounds.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

45–60 minutes



MATERIALS

- *The School is Not White!* by Doreen Rappapo (book)
- *Individual Acts or Government Acts?* handout (one per pair or small group)
- *School Segregation Today* handout (one copy to project or multiple copies for small groups)
- AV equipment to show a video (optional)



VOCABULARY

Brown v. Board of Education

institutional
integration

race
racism

segregation

Procedures

1

PART I

Individual and Institutional Racism (30–40 minutes)

- 1** Tell students you will read aloud a story titled *The School is Not White!* that took place in 1965 in Mississippi, just 11 years after an important court case called *Brown v. Board of Education*. Before reading the book, have students do a turn and talk where they share any prior knowledge about “schools in the South in the 1960s” and “*Brown v. Board of Education*.” (Write these phrases on the board.)
- 2** Discuss students’ responses and help them clarify ideas. Explain that for most of our country’s history, Black people were forced to attend separate schools from white people, but that in 1954 an important court case called *Brown v. Board of Education* ended school segregation. Post and review the definitions of segregation and integration.
 - Segregation: The act of keeping different groups separate from each other
 - Integration: The act of bringing together separate people or things
- 3** Read *The School is Not White!* by Doreen Rappapo (if you do not have the book, a read-aloud is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DNhkejN4NE>). Discuss some of the following questions as you read:
 - How did the plantation boss stand in the way of the family’s plans to attend the all-white school? Why do you think he felt angry about their desire for a better education?
 - The book talks about how the Carter children were “going off to war.” How was the experience of the Carter family like going to war?

NOTE

If you have not taught Lesson 2, “The Social Construction of Race,” review the definitions of *race* and *racism* with students prior to conducting this lesson (see the Unit 1 Glossary). Highlight that racial categories don’t come from science or nature, but were created by people to make sense of their world.



- Even though other Black people did not send their children to the all-white school at first, how did the community participate in integration and support the Carters?
- The Carter children struggled daily at school. What were their experiences and reactions, and how did they affect them?
- Matthew (the dad) tells his children: “We have to show others it can be done and maybe they will stop being afraid.” What personal qualities do you think it took for this family to be first, and to not give up?
- What does Mae Bertha (the mom) mean when she says: “The school is not white, it’s brown brick”?
- Mae Bertha says, “people who hate cannot feel good.” How does this apply to both the people who behaved in racist ways and Mae Bertha’s own children?

NOTE

Several of the examples on the handout might be interpreted in different ways. For example, “The principal wouldn’t let a White girl talk to Deborah” could be seen as an individual act of racism or a government sponsored act, since many schools are public institutions and principals are in positions of power. Encourage students to discuss these nuances as they work. The overall goal is for students to begin to think about how racism is not simply spontaneous, but often perpetrated through deliberate policy and through people with power or authority.

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Distribute copies of the handout *Individual Acts or Government Acts?* and review the instructions with students. Provide clarifications and examples as needed so students understand the distinction between the two different forms of racism. Have students complete the activity in pairs or small groups. Provide access to copies of the book and/or the online read-aloud as needed.

5

Discuss how groups categorized the acts of racism from the story and any additional examples they identified. Debrief using the questions below. Emphasize that racism isn’t just carried out by individuals, but also through the rules and laws of governments and people in power.

- How does it affect people differently when racism is part of a government rule or law, as compared to when it is an individual act?
- How does it affect people differently when a leader—like a principal or a boss—treats people unfairly, as compared to when an ordinary person does it?
- School segregation is an example of racism that was once a part of rules and laws. Can you think of other examples of this kind of racism, either in the past or now?

- 6** Ask students: “Do you think school segregation is still a problem today, even though it is no longer part of our country’s rules and laws?” Project the handout *School Segregation Today*. Review the graph and together answer the two questions. Alternatively, provide copies of the handout to students and have them analyze the graph in small groups. Then discuss the following questions:
- What might be some possible reasons for the rise in school segregation since the 1990s? (*E.g., the neighborhoods where children live are more segregated, governments are carrying out fewer rules and laws that promote integration.*)
 - What problems happen when there is a lot of school segregation? (*E.g., kids from different backgrounds don’t learn as much about each other, stereotypes and prejudice might increase, kids in different schools may not have the same opportunities and resources—some groups may get more than others.*)

PART II

All are Welcome Here (15–20 minutes)

- 7** Comment that treating people differently because of their race is one way people might feel different or excluded in a school community. Ask them:
- What other identities have been used to make people feel unwelcome, either in our community or in other communities (e.g., gender, religion, immigration status, sexual orientation, etc.)?
 - What might it feel like to be left out because you are different from other people?
 - Have you ever been left out of something because of who you are?
- 8** Remind students that all are welcome in your school, that it is the law and the right thing to do. Write “All are welcome here” on the board. In pairs or small groups, have them brainstorm ways that groups who might experience exclusion can be made to feel welcome in the community. Discuss ways to implement one or more of their ideas in the future.



Discussion Questions

1

What are examples of government rules and laws that have been created based on race?

2

How do racist laws harm Black people and other people of color? How do they harm everyone?

3

How is racism in rules and laws different from racism carried out by ordinary people?

4

Why was *Brown v. Board of Education* an important court case? How did it change our country?

5

What can we do to fight against rules and laws that harm people because of their race or other identities?

6

How can we make our school and community more welcoming for all kinds of people?

Lesson Extensions

- Have students plan and implement one of the “All are welcome here” ideas identified in the last step of this lesson plan. For example, they might create a buddy system for welcoming new immigrant students into the community; encourage more mixed-gender sporting or other events at their school; or work to get more books in the school library about same-sex headed families. Students can focus on an issue that is most relevant to their community and plan concrete ways to create a more welcoming environment.
- Have students research *Brown v. Board of Education* in order to learn more about the importance of this landmark decision. After gathering facts about Linda Brown and her family, and their experience in Kansas’ segregated schools, have students create a poster, dramatization, short video or other project demonstrating what they learned.
- Have students interview a trusted family member or friend over the age of 60 about their experiences with the lesson theme of school segregation. Have students report back on the interviews. Sample questions might include:
 - a Where did you grow up and go to school?
 - b Did you have classmates or friends of other races?
 - c Was your school or community affected by school segregation or other types of racism?
 - d What are your memories of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s? Did you participate?
 - e How do you think people’s attitudes about race have changed since that time?
 - f Why do you think U.S. schools are becoming more segregated today?
 - g What do you think our country should be doing today about problems like segregation?
 - h Do you think it’s important for people of different races to interact? Why?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Nast, Phil. “K–5 Brown vs. Board of Education and School Desegregation Teaching Resources,” NEA, <http://ftp.arizonaaea.org/tools/lessons/brown-vs-board-teaching-resources-gradesK-5.html>.
- + “Resources for Welcoming All Families,” Welcoming Schools, <https://www.welcomingschools.org/resources/school-tips/diverse-families-what>.
- + State Bar of Georgia. “Brown v. Board of Education (1954)—Separate Is NOT Equal,” YouTube video, 8:04, May 21, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aX9Dmo24_cc.