

Elementary (3-6) Discussion

Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896)

To facilitate discussion on the 1896 court case, “Plessy v. Ferguson”, the basic idea of the case and results must be discussed with the children. Some key points to be addressed are:

- **What prompted the court case?**
The court case was prompted by the arrest of Homer Plessy (1862-1925) on June 7, 1892, which was part of a planned challenge to the 1890 Louisiana Separate Car Act.
- **What was the court’s decision?**
In *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the U.S. Supreme Court decided that a Louisiana law mandating separate but equal accommodations for blacks and whites on intrastate railroads was constitutional. This decision provided the legal foundation to justify many other actions by state and local governments to socially separate blacks and whites.

Some questions to ask the children that will help to gain their input and ideas on the case are:

1. **What were the results of the 1896 court case “Plessy vs. Ferguson”?**
 - Encourage children to talk about the case in their own words and you will gain a better understanding of their grasp of the case.
2. **What does the phrase “Separate but Equal” mean to you?**
 - Expect stories and tangents in this discussion. Encourage the children to respond to their classmates’ opinions, but remember to remind the children that there is not a “right” answer here.
3. **How did this ruling affect the lives of not only school children, but all citizens of the United States?**
 - Ask the children what their day would have been like under these new laws. The majority decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* served as the organizing legal justification for racial segregation for over 50 years..

Elementary Discussion

Brown vs. Board of Education

Remember, this collection of rulings took place over 50 years after “Plessy vs. Ferguson.” This should be stressed to the children so that they have an understanding that citizens of the United States lived like this for longer than most of their parents have been alive. Once again, remember to explain this case and ruling to the children before opening for discussion.

- **Who were the people involved in this case?**

The story of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ended legal segregation in public schools, is one of hope and courage. When the people agreed to be plaintiffs in the case, they never knew they would change history. The people who make up this story were ordinary people. They were teachers, secretaries, welders, ministers and students who simply wanted to be treated equally.

- **What was the court’s decision?**

The Supreme Court struck down the "separate but equal" doctrine of *Plessy* for public education, ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, and required the desegregation of schools across America.

Some discussion questions to prompt group comments and ideas follow. Remember that there are no real right or wrong answers to these questions. This is a group discussion. Encourage students to respond to each other’s comments.

4. **Picture yourself going to school in the late 1940’s. How would it make you feel to be taken to a different school just because of the color of your skin?**

Help the students to understand that these children had to on many occasions walk or be bussed miles to get to the ‘correct’ school.

5. **What was the result of the 1954 court case “Brown vs. Board of Education”?**

Encourage discussions on both legal and social issues affected by this case.

6. **How did this affect the lives of school children just like you?**

Encourage the children to put themselves in the place of the school children of that time period.