

First Graders' Inquiry into Multicolored Stories of School (De)Segregation

Sohyun An

Terrie: Mommy! Guess what I learned today?

Me: Seems like something exciting!

Terrie: Yes! Mamie Tape! Look at this. She is like me! Well, she is Chinese, and I am Korean, but she has the same hair and eye color as me. She was brave like me, too! She said, “Hey, it’s not fair that I have to go to a segregated school!”

Me: I see. So Mamie was like Ruby Bridges, Sylvia Mendez, and Alice Piper—the girls you’ve learned about so far from your teacher?

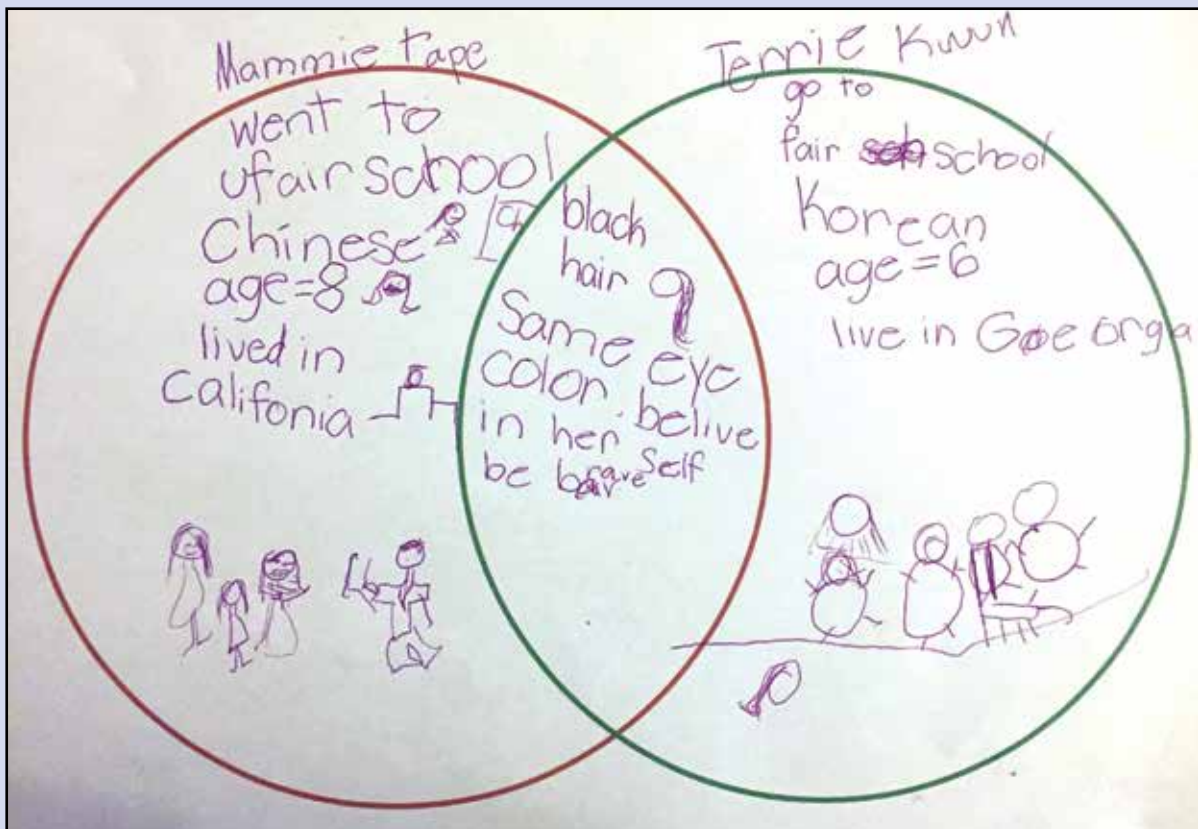
Terrie: Yes! Like other girls, Mamie had to go to an unfair school because she was not white!

Me: Gotcha. By the way, why did you pick Mamie for your Venn diagram? (Fig. 1)

Terrie: Well, I like all the stories, but I like Mamie’s the best because she looks like me!

I am the mother of Terrie, a Korean American girl in Ms. Amber King’s first-grade classroom in a public school in Georgia.¹ I am also a scholar of social studies education. My hope as a mother-

Figure 1.



scholar is that all children, including mine, will be excited to learn about U.S. history because they can see people like themselves in the story of their country. As you can tell from the vignette, Terrie was excited to learn about Mamie Tape, a Chinese American girl who fought against school segregation in the 1880s, because Mamie looked like her.

Such excitement from making a personal connection to social studies lessons is unfortunately rare for many children across the country.² Decades of curriculum research have uncovered a persistent trend: white people are depicted as dominating the history of the United States, whereas communities of color and their experiences are omitted or misrepresented in social studies textbooks and curriculum standards.³ The message the resulting curriculum sends to children is that the United States is a country of white people, and people of color have little or no place in it. I seek to dismantle this harmful message through my work as a mother, scholar, and educator of elementary teachers. I am an advocate of anti-racist social studies education.

Earlier 2018, I worked with a local school district on its professional development day. My session was for the first-

grade teachers regarding their upcoming unit on Ruby Bridges, one of the historical figures included in the state's first-grade social studies standards. My goal was to bring silenced stories of various groups of color into the teaching about Ruby Bridges. I introduced a multicolored history of school segregation with a focus on three additional girls: Alice Piper, Sylvia Mendez, and Mamie Tape—Indigenous, Mexican, and Chinese American, respectively, who fought against segregated schooling. To my surprise, Ms. King was one of the teachers who attended my session. This meeting led to our collaboration to develop a unit in which first graders would explore the “school journey” of Ruby Bridges as well as that of Alice Piper, Mamie Tape, and Sylvia Mendez. Through teaching this unit, we hoped that all students in Ms. King's classroom would see examples of children their own age who bravely stood up against racism and recognize the contributions of various groups of color to bring social change. The mother-child conversation in the opening vignette was one positive result of this collaboration.

In this article, I present Ms. King's unit primarily as she taught it, with a hope that other teachers will also bring a mul-

The Struggle to Overcome Segregation in Education

Mamie Tape (1876–1972)

Since they first arrived in the United States, Asian Americans have fought hard against blatant discrimination. Chinese immigrants were initially welcomed as a cheap labor source during the California Gold Rush in the 1840s and the transcontinental railroad construction of the 1860s. However, they were soon viewed as a “yellow peril,” a threatening group of people who stole jobs from whites.¹⁰ Perceived as a foreign threat, early Chinese immigrants found themselves excluded from land ownership, voting, employment, interracial marriages, naturalization, and education.¹¹

Mamie was born in San Francisco, California. Her parents were immigrants from China. Joseph Tape was a businessman and interpreter, and Mary Tape was an amateur photographer and artist. In 1884, the Tape family went to Spring Valley Elementary School to enroll Mamie. However, they were told that Mamie was not allowed to attend the school because she was of Chinese descent. Although the California school law at that time guaranteed all children admission to public schools, the city of San Francisco had excluded Chinese children from public schools for many years. Mamie's parents took the issue to the California Supreme Court, arguing that the school's decision violated state law.

In 1885, the court decided in Mamie's favor in *Tape v. Hurley*. Upon learning of the court's decision, however, the superintendent of San Francisco schools lobbied the state legislature to amend the law so that “trustees shall have

the power...to establish separate schools for children of Mongolian or Chinese descent.”¹² Mamie's mother wrote a letter, published by a local newspaper, expressing her frustration at this result and at the racist board of education (excerpted here):

*Dear Sirs, I see that you are going to make all sorts of excuses to keep my child out of the public schools. What right have you to bar my child out of the school because she is of Chinese descent? ... You have expended a lot of the public money foolishly, all because of one poor little child. ... I will let the world see, sir, what justice there is when it is governed by the race of prejudice men! ... I guess she is more of [an] American [than] a good many of you that is going to prevent her being Educated.*¹³

Despite her protest, the school board opened a school for Chinese children and ordered Mamie to attend that school.¹⁴

ticolored history of school (de)segregation to their students. First, I explicate why it's problematic to leave the multicolored history of school segregation out of social studies curriculum. Then I provide a brief overview of the multicolored history of school (de)segregation with a focus on three of the girls incorporated into Ms. King's unit. Last, I describe Ms. King's unit, with some instructional resources included in the **Pullout** of this issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner*.

The Danger of a Single Story

In overturning the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision as well as its “separate but equal” doctrine, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision is often regarded as “the watershed constitutional case of the twentieth century.”²⁴ Indeed, the *Brown* decision is included more frequently than any other U.S. Supreme Court ruling in social studies standards and receives prominent attention in social studies textbooks.⁵ Yet the exclusive focus on *Brown* in teaching about school (de)segregation may incur the dangers of summarizing history in a single story narrative. According to Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,

telling a single story is dangerous because it makes the story the only story and, thus, presents an incomplete story.⁶ Among the stories lost if we focus only on the *Brown* case are the struggles and actions of Indigenous, Asian, and Latinx communities regarding schooling. Although their struggles are not widely known, Asian, Latinx, and Indigenous children are no strangers to the history of school (de)segregation.⁷ For example,

- Mamie Tape was an eight-year-old Chinese American girl who was denied attendance at a San Francisco public school because of her Chinese descent. In 1884, Mamie and her family went to court to fight against discrimination.
- Alice Piper was a fifteen-year-old Paiute girl who was denied entrance to the Big Pine public school in California because of her Native American descent. Alice and her community protested this unjust action by taking the case to the California Supreme Court in 1924.

The Struggle to Overcome Segregation in Education

Alice Piper (1908–1985)

Indigenous sovereignty—Native nations’ “right to self-govern, establish its own laws and citizenship, practice traditions and lifeways, and determine its own future”—is upheld and affirmed by the U.S. Constitution.¹⁵ Throughout history, however, the federal government has more often ignored and suppressed than respected Indigenous sovereignty.¹⁶ Regarding education, the responsibility of the federal government to provide education for Indigenous peoples arose out of treaty obligations.¹⁷ Yet, the education offered to Indigenous children did not promote Indigenous sovereignty; instead, it functioned as a primary institution to strip away Indigenous cultural and social systems. According to Indigenous scholar Sandy Grande, “Indian education was never simply about the desire to ‘civilize’ or even deculturate a people, but rather, from its very inception, it was a project designed to colonize Indian minds as a means of gaining access to Indian land, labor, and resources.”¹⁸

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, many types of schools were established for Indigenous children, including Indian day schools, boarding schools, and public schools. Regardless of the type, the schooling of Indigenous children had the goal of assimilating them into the culture of the dominant social group while erasing their own heritage, which today we would recognize as “cultural genocide.”¹⁹ In the words of Richard H. Pratt, the founder of the first off-reservation Indian boarding school, the goal of Indian schools was to “kill the Indian

and save the man.”²⁰ In the boarding schools, students were forbidden to speak their native languages or practice their religions. Besides basic English and mathematics, schooling focused on manual labor and domestic skills. Indigenous children experienced physical abuse, harsh discipline, and hard labor, which caused immeasurable damage to their culture and cultural identity.²¹

Alice Piper’s story unfolds in this context. In 1923, Alice, a fifteen-year-old Paiute girl, was denied attendance at the Big Pine School in California on the basis of her Native American descent. At that time, California educational law prohibited Indigenous children from attending a public school if a government-run Indian school had been established within three miles of the public school. Alice, along with six other students, sued the district for the right to attend the school because the local Indian day school only offered education up to fifth grade and lacked many basic resources. Also, as the daughter of taxpaying parents who did not belong to a tribal group in treaty relations with the United States, Alice qualified as an American citizen under the Dawes Act of 1887 and could not be denied her right to an education in the public schools. For the Piper family and the six other families involved in the case, their fight was about access that was deserved rather than access that required surrendering their Indigenous identities and communities. The California Supreme Court ruled in her favor in the 1924 case *Piper v. Big Pine*.²²

- Sylvia Mendez was a Mexican American girl who was forced to attend a segregated school for Mexican children in Westminster, California. Sylvia’s and other Mexican families fought against discrimination by filing a group lawsuit against the school district in the 1940s.

The stories of these three girls are among more than one hundred school (de)segregation cases in state and federal courts that began as early as the 1840s and involved various groups of color. In sum, an exclusive focus on *Brown* in teaching about school segregation hides the long multicolored history of school

(de)segregation and may produce a false perception that fighting against school segregation was a matter of white–black relations only. This binary thinking “tends at best to marginalize and at worst...eliminates other positions and voices in the ongoing dialogue about race in the U.S.A.”⁸ Furthermore, by not learning about the long civil rights struggles and activism across various groups of color, children may uncritically accept racial stereotypes that permeate through the larger society today (such as Asian Americans as foreigners, Mexican Americans as illegal immigrants, or Native Americans as uncivilized or extinct). These racist beliefs, which persist from our collective

The Struggle to Overcome Segregation in Education

Sylvia Mendez (1936–)

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 granted U.S. citizenship to the former Mexican citizens in areas of the Southwest that were conquered by the United States. Mexican Americans, however, were not afforded the same rights as whites. Instead, they were targets of *de facto* (in practice, not by law) segregation. Segregated housing and employment discrimination became the reality for most Mexican Americans.²³ Regarding education, most Mexican American children were relegated to segregated, unequal schools where the purpose was to rid them of their native language and culture and teach them nonacademic subjects. Mexican Americans fought hard against such discrimination. The legal struggle for school desegregation was initiated in a series of court cases in Arizona, Texas, and California in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁴

Sylvia Mendez’s story fits within this historical context. Sylvia was born in 1936 in Santa Ana, California. Her family moved to a farm in Westminster, California, when she was ten. In 1943, her aunt went to register her own daughters, along with Sylvia and Sylvia’s two brothers, at the nearby Westminster School. Sylvia’s light-skinned cousins were allowed to register at Westminster, but Sylvia and her two brothers were told to go to Hoover School, a segregated school for Mexican children.

Sylvia’s and other Mexican families decided to sue Westminster and four other Orange County districts. They argued that their children and many others were unfairly



Sylvia Mendez was a guest speaker at the 2019 NCSS Annual Conference in Austin, Texas, where she received the the Spirit of America Award.

photo by Rich Palmer

placed in inferior schools. The court legally recognized Mexican Americans as racially white, and thus, they could not be segregated from other white students. Dissatisfied with the court decision, the Orange County school districts appealed to the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court. Finally, in 1947 (seven years before the *Brown* decision), the court upheld in *Mendez v. Westminster* the original ruling that the Orange County schools had violated the state law (which did not explicitly mandate Mexican American student segregation). However, the court upheld “language segregation,” ruling that the “English language deficiency” of Mexican American children justified separate treatment in separate classrooms, which led to the continued segregation of some Mexican American children long after the *Mendez* decision had affirmed that segregation must end.²⁵

past, are especially harmful to children from marginalized communities. Such beliefs inhibit all children from appreciating people from different racial and historical backgrounds and the contributions they have made, and make today, to our world.

Adding Chinese, Mexican, and Indigenous peoples' struggles for equal education to our teaching of history would not diminish the importance of *Brown* as the groundbreaking Supreme Court decision in this area. Instead, it would be an exercise in telling multiple truths to reveal the complicated yet connected narratives of various groups and their efforts over more than a century.⁹ The sidebars on pages 4–6 provide brief overviews of three important stories in the struggle for equal education in the United States. Pages P3 and P4 of the Pullout offer elementary versions of these stories, plus the story of Ruby Bridges, which is better known.

As the opening vignette shows, Terrie came home with her Venn diagram featuring Mamie Tape, depicting how she had made a personal connection to the girl from history. She was so

excited to see a girl like her in the story of her country. I hope Ms. King's instruction and its powerful impact on children like Terrie will inspire other teachers to bring multicolored stories of the United States to their own classrooms. ●

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1. This article stems from my research on parents' participation in their children's education regarding issues of race and racism.
2. Dario Almarza, "Contexts Shaping Minority Language Students' Perceptions of American History," *Journal of Social Studies Research* 25, no. 2 (2011): 4–22; Terrie Epstein, *Interpreting National History: Race, Identity, and Pedagogy in Classrooms and Communities* (New York, Routledge, 2009); Tiffany Lee and Patricia Quijada Cerecer, "(Re)claiming Native Youth Knowledge: Engaging in Socio-culturally Responsive Teaching and Relationships," *Multicultural Perspectives* 12, no. 4 (2010): 199–205.

Contents of the "Opening Up History" Folder for Students

Ms. King created a folder for each student containing materials about each of the four historical figures, as well as worksheets. Some of those materials are the basis of the **Pullout** in this issue, but there are additional images that are available free on the Internet, with links provided here, if teachers wish to include them in their lessons.

Mamie Tape

Mamie Tape and family, chineseamerican.nyhistory.org/we-have-always-lived-as-americans/

Chinese railroad laborers, www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf3q2nb5qk/?order=1

Segregated school for Chinese children, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oriental_Public_School#/media/File:Chinese_Primary_School,_916_Clay_Street,_San_Francisco_\(cropped\).jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oriental_Public_School#/media/File:Chinese_Primary_School,_916_Clay_Street,_San_Francisco_(cropped).jpg)

Mary Tape's letter of protest to the newspaper, academic.oup.com/maghis/article-abstract/15/2/17/942655?redirectedFrom=PDF

Alice Piper

Alice Piper and her Native American community, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_Piper

Typical activities at an Indian boarding school, www.motherjones.com/media/2017/10/native-american-boarding-schools-shadows-of-sherman-institute/ or oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/indian_boarding_school/#.Xaix8iV7nUo

Statue of Alice Piper, californiaeducator.org/2019/05/17/june-2-is-alice-piper-day/

Sylvia Mendez

Sylvia Mendez, sylviamendezinthemendezvswestminster.com/contactus.html

Mendez's parents, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felicitas_Mendez

Mendez receiving Medal of Freedom, educationpost.org/71-years-ago-this-case-ended-segregation-in-california-and-made-brown-v-board-of-education-possible/

Ruby Bridges

Ruby Bridges, www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/ruby-bridges

Ruby escorted by U.S. marshals, www.usmarshals.gov/history/bridges/bridges.html

Mrs. Henry and her student, Ruby, socialstudiesforkids.com/articles/ushistory/rubybridges.htm

Ruby Bridges today, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruby_Bridges



3. Barbara Cruz, "Don Juan and Rebels under Palm Trees: Depictions of Latin Americans in U.S. History Textbooks," *Critique of Anthropology* 22, no. 3 (2002): 323–342; Sarah Shear, Ryan Knowles, Gregory Soden, and Antonio Castro, "Manifesting Destiny: Re/Presentations of Indigenous Peoples in K–12 U.S. History Standards," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 43, no. 1 (2015): 68–101; Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant, "Race, Class, Gender, and Disability in Current Textbooks," in *The Politics of the Textbook*, Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 78–110; Julian Vasquez-Heilig, Keffrelyn Brown, and Anthony Brown, "The Illusion of Inclusion: A Critical Race Theory Textual Analysis of Race and Standards," *Harvard Educational Review* 82, no. 3 (2012): 403–424.
4. Bernard Schwartz, *A Book of Legal Lists: The Best and Worst in American Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 50.
5. Diana Hess, "Moving Beyond Celebration: Challenging Curricular Orthodoxy in the Teaching of Brown and Its Legacies," *Teachers College Record* 107, no. 9 (2005): 2046–2067.
6. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story" (TED Ideas Worth Spreading, 2009), www.ted.com.
7. Joy Ann Williamson, Lori Rhodes, and Michael Dunson, "A Selected History of Social Justice in Education," *Review of Research in Education* 31, no. 1 (2007): 195–224.
8. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 154.
9. Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).
10. Frank Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
11. Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998).
12. F. P. Deering, *The Codes and Statutes of California, as Amended and In Force at the Close of the Twenty-Sixth Session of the Legislature, 1885* (San Francisco: Bancroft-Whitney Co., 1886), 289.
13. Franklin Odo, "Letter from Mary Tape, April 8, 1885," in *The Columbia Documentary History of the Asian American Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 72–73.
14. For the Mamie Tape's story, see Meyer Weinberg, *Asian American Education: Historical Background and Current Realities* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997).
15. Sarah Shear, Leilani Sabzalian, and Lisa Buchanan, "Teaching Indigenous Sovereignty in Elementary Civics Education," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 31, no. 1 (2018): 12–18.
16. David E Wilkins and Tsianina Lomawaima, *Uneven Ground: American Indian Sovereignty and Federal Law* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).
17. Mike Charleston, "Toward True Native Education: A Treaty of 1992," *Journal of American Indian Education* 33, no. 2 (1994): 1–56.
18. Sandy Grande, *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers); Joel Spring, *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012).
19. Spring, 2012.
20. Richard Pratt, *Battlefield and Classroom: Four Decades with the American Indian, 1867–1904* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964).
21. David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience 1875–1928* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995).
22. For Alice Piper's story, see Nicole Blalock-Moore, "Piper v. Big Pine School District of Inyo County: Indigenous Schooling and Resistance in the Early Twentieth Century," *Southern California Quarterly* 94, no. 3 (2012): 346–377.
23. Ariela Gross, "Texas Mexicans and the Politics of Whiteness," *Law and History Review* 21, no. 1 (2003): 195–205.
24. For Sylvia Mendez's story, see Philippa Strum, *Mendez v. Westminster: School Desegregation and Mexican American Rights* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010); Michelle Bauml, "The Mendez Family Opens a School Door for All," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 30, no 2 (November/December 2017), 12–16.
25. Strum, 2010.
26. Other components of this lesson plan included benchmarks from the C3 Framework: D2.His.2.K-2. "Compare life in the past to life today"; D2.Civ.2.K-2; "Explain how all people, not just official leaders, play important roles in a community"; D2.Civ.8.K-2. "Describe democratic principles such as equality, fairness, and respect for legitimate authority and rules"; D3.1.K-2. "Gather relevant information from one or two sources while using the origin and structure to guide the selection." Learning goals for this lesson: Compare school experiences of the four girls of color. Identify the causes and effects of segregated schooling on children of color. Explain how children of color and their communities challenged unequal education.

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