

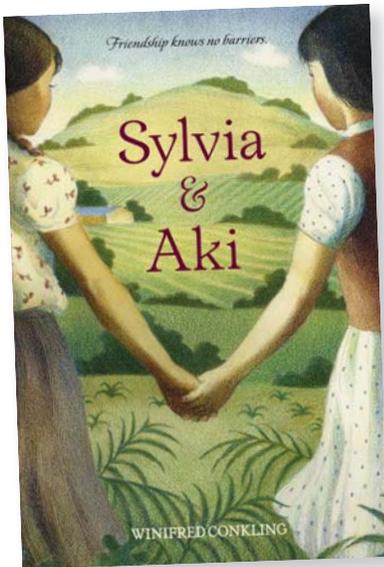
CURRICULUM GUIDE

SYLVIA & AKI

by Winifred Conkling

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Friendship knows no barriers.



Sylvia Mendez wanted to be like the other kids in her Southern California neighborhood—to attend her local elementary school, work hard, and go on to college. Aki Munemitsu was also just an ordinary girl who loved her parents and her school and life on her family’s asparagus farm. The two girls never expected to know each other, but their lives intersected during a tumultuous time in American history.

In early 1942, just after the Japanese bombed the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the U.S. government rounded up Japanese Americans and forced them into internment camps to live under guard while the country was at war. Aki and her family had to leave their farm and move with minimal belongings to a camp in the Arizona desert. The Mendez family rented the Munemitsu farm and Sylvia and her brothers tried to enroll in the local school, but they were turned away and forced to attend a “Mexican” school instead. The stage is set for Sylvia’s father to challenge in court the separation of races in California’s schools. Ultimately, *Mendez v. Westminster* led to the desegregation of California schools and helped build the case that would end school segregation nationally.

In *Sylvia & Aki*, Winifred Conkling brings to life the remarkable true stories of Sylvia Mendez and Aki Munemitsu—still friends to this day—who demonstrated persistent courage in the face of tremendous odds.

WINIFRED CONKLING has loved writing since the third grade when she taught herself to type. She went on to become a journalist and the author of more than two dozen nonfiction books for adults. She rediscovered her love of children’s fiction when she became a mother. She holds an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She lives in Northern Virginia with her husband and three children.

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BEFORE READING

- Ask the students to imagine that they observe a classmate being discriminated against by other students because of some physical attribute, such as skin color. What would they do? What could they say to the students who are being mean?
- What does it mean to be American? Collect pictures of Americans from newspapers and magazines. What qualities make a person American?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After reading *Sylvia & Aki*, discuss the following questions:

- Were you surprised that Sylvia could not enroll in Westminster School? How did Westminster School differ from Hoover School? Why do you think the parents of Hoover School's students didn't protest the lack of educational quality at the school? Why did Sylvia's father question the fact that his children could not attend Westminster?
- Re-read Chapter 11, the description of the court testimony in *Mendez v. Westminster*. What were the superintendent's arguments for keeping Mexican American children separated from the students at Westminster School? Are these valid? How does hearing his statements make you feel? Why do you think Aki was permitted to attend Westminster School but Sylvia wasn't?
- Were you surprised that Aki and her family were forced to move to Poston, Arizona? How did life at the internment camp differ from Aki's life on the farm? Why did the U.S. government fear Japanese Americans during the war? Was that fear warranted?
- Describe how Aki feels when she's able to return to the farm. How do you think the experience of being forced to live in an internment camp may have affected the rest of her childhood and adulthood?



AFTER READING

- Discrimination is a powerful theme woven through *Sylvia & Aki*. Hunt through newspapers, magazines, and online news sites for incidences of discrimination that are occurring today in our world due to racial, religious, and gender differences. As a class, discuss how the present-day battles with discrimination are similar to the battles Sylvia and Aki deal with in the novel.
- Create a dialogue folder using a 12" x 18" piece of white construction paper. Position the paper horizontally, and then fold the two shorter lengths together so that two flaps of equal width are formed. The folded paper will resemble double doors that meet in the middle; when the flaps are opened, a large blank space will be revealed. On the outside of the flaps create illustrations of the two main characters: one panel of Sylvia and the other of Aki. Write descriptions of each character on the interior of the two flaps. In the middle space in the interior of the folder write a dialogue between the two characters. Imagine what more Sylvia and Aki would discuss about the challenges and successes in their lives if given the opportunity. Remember to use quotation marks and dialogue tags when writing the dialogue.
- The author chose important Mexican and Japanese proverbs to begin each chapter. Complete the proverb worksheet (guide page 4) citing story events in the chapters that support the use of each proverb. Pick one of the proverbs and write a brief essay discussing it. Describe an incident from your own life that illustrates its meaning.
- Aki and Sylvia find a connection through their dolls. Each girl has a doll that represents her heritage. Research your heritage and create a clothespin doll dressed in clothing representative of the country of your ancestors. You will need round clothespins/doll pins (available in craft stores), scraps of fabric, embroidery floss or yarn, and glue to create your doll. Write a short description of the country and of the clothing on a 3" x 5" index card. Create a classroom museum of heritage clothespin dolls and place the index cards by each doll.
- Sylvia's father pursued fair access to a good education through the courts that resulted in *Mendez v. Westminster*. Several years later, the same issue of access was tried in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*. Research more about *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* and organize facts about both trials using a Venn diagram (guide page 5). Note what elements were the same in both cases in the overlapping portion of the two circles. Record facts that differed in the two cases in the parts of the circles that are not overlapping.
- Images can often take descriptions of historical events in novels to a more concrete level for students. In 2008, a documentary film called *Passing Poston: An American Story* was released. View the trailer for the film in your classroom at www.passingposton.com/trailer.php to see actual footage of the camp. The following website describes Poston and Gila River Relocation Center, another Arizona internment camp: parentseyes.arizona.edu/wracamps/index.html. Visit the "Camp Life" section of the website with your students to view many archival photographs. Have each student select a photograph and write an imaginary story about events depicted in the image for the *Poston Chronicle*, the camp newspaper written by the Poston internees.

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Sylvia & Aki: Mexican and Japanese Proverbs



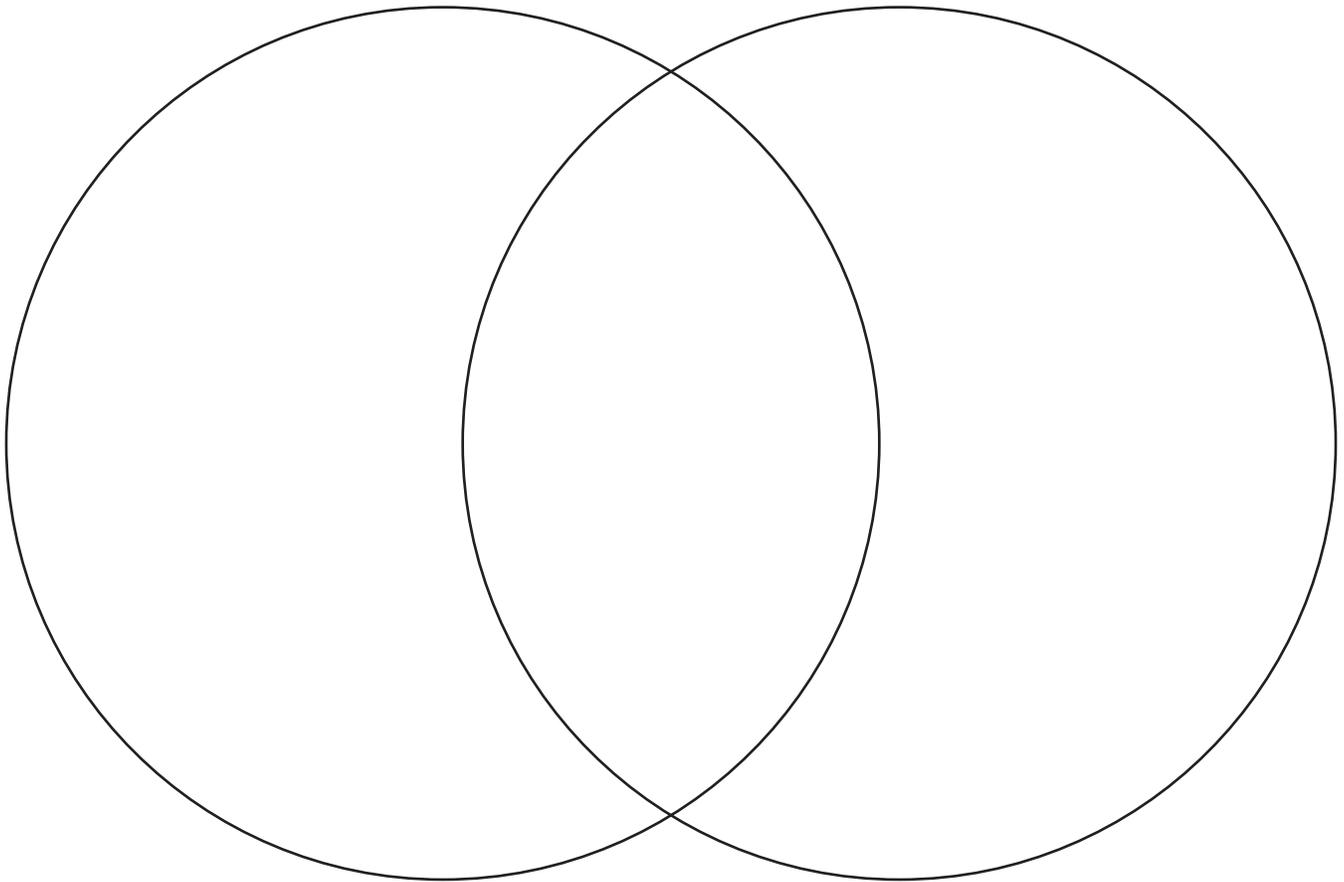
Winifred Conkling, the author of *Sylvia & Aki*, begins each chapter with a proverb. After reading the novel, think about why each proverb was selected. Complete the chart below with story events that are connected to each proverb.

PROVERB	STORY EVENTS
Ch. 1: He who doesn't look ahead remains behind.	
Ch. 2: Fall seven times; stand up eight.	
Ch. 3: He who labors and thrives spins gold.	
Ch. 4: If you stand up like a nail, you will get hammered down.	
Ch. 5: That which isn't in books, life will teach you.	
Ch. 6: Adversity is the foundation of virtue.	
Ch. 7: Do the good and don't look at who receives it.	
Ch. 8: One kind word can warm three winter months.	
Ch. 9: God does not hear if you do not speak.	
Ch. 10: Love and a cough cannot be hidden.	
Ch. 11: Talking about bulls is not the same thing as facing them in the ring.	
Ch. 12: Continuance is strength.	
Ch. 13: Hope dies last of all. / Bad and good are intertwined like rope.	

Name: _____

Venn Diagram

Compare Mendez v. Westminster with Brown v. Topeka Board of Education. What do these landmark court cases have in common? How are they different?



Mendez v. Westminster

Brown v. Topeka Board of Education