

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Child

By J. Patrick Lewis
2013

J. Patrick Lewis is an American poet and prose writer known for his children's poetry. In this poem, the speaker describes the experiences of Sylvia Mendez, an important Civil Rights activist of Mexican–Puerto Rican heritage. Mendez played an important role in the desegregation of schools in California, meaning that white and Mexican American students were no longer forced to go to separate schools based on their race. As you read, take notes on Sylvia's perception of the different schools.

- [1] Sylvia pushed into the wind,
Septembling the trees,
and hurdled over a railroad track
to a two-room shack
[5] that never read "Browns Only."
It did not have to.

- Under the billion-acre sky,
she wondered, Did white girls
at 17th Street Elementary really
[10] wear rainbow necklaces?

- Aunt Sally took her there once.
Eyes sharp as icepicks pierced
the windowpanes as if seeing
a Mexican for the first time.
[15] Every door was locked with a
secret combination of frowns.

- How can anyone ever get in?
Sylvia asked. Someone must know
who has the right key...
[20] She looked up at her mother.
Maybe me?



["20140924-DM-RBN-0539"](#) by U.S. Department of Agriculture is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

"The Child" from When Thunder Comes by J. Patrick Lewis. Copyright © 2013 by J. Patrick Lewis. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which sentence describes the theme of the poem?
 - A. Children can often be crueler than adults.
 - B. One person has the ability to cause widespread change.
 - C. Some people will always have access to better education than others.
 - D. People are often excluded from organizations based on the color of their skin.

2. PART B: Which detail from the poem supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Sylvia pushed into the wind, / Septembering the trees" (Lines 1-2)
 - B. "Eyes sharp as icepicks pierced / the windowpanes" (Lines 12-13)
 - C. "Every door was locked with a / secret combination of frowns." (Lines 15-16)
 - D. "Sylvia asked. Someone must know / who has the right key..." (Lines 18-19)

3. What does the speaker mean when they state "Every door was locked with a / secret combination of frowns" (Lines 15-16)?
 - A. Sylvia is physically locked out of the school.
 - B. Sylvia is not permitted or welcomed at the school.
 - C. Sylvia is sad that she isn't allowed to attend the school.
 - D. Sylvia is confused by why she isn't allowed in the school.

4. What do the final two lines of the poem suggest about Sylvia?
 - A. Sylvia doesn't think anyone has the key to unlock the doors.
 - B. Sylvia thinks her mom can unlock the doors to the school.
 - C. Sylvia thinks that she might be the one to create change one day.
 - D. Sylvia is doubtful that she will be able to help unlock the doors.

5. How does the school that Sylvia attends compare to 17th Street Elementary?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. According to the poem, Sylvia Mendez was not welcomed at 17th Street Elementary School. How did prejudice contribute to her exclusion from the school? How were students disadvantaged by being placed in separate schools because of their race? Does this type of prejudice occur in schools today? Cite examples from the text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
2. According to the poem, Sylvia Mendez is the one with the ability to create change. What challenges do you think she encountered as she helped to desegregate schools in California? What characteristics do you think Mendez needed to possess in order to overcome these obstacles? Have you ever been in a situation that required you to overcome an obstacle? What personal characteristics did you use to get through the situation?