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2004 Volume I: The Supreme Court in American Political History

What's in a Word: Investigating the Language of the Brown v. Board Era

Guide for Curriculum Unit 04.01.09
by Mnikesa Whitaker

The state and national standards in the English curriculum (and the assessments that measure them!) are focusing more and more on students' fluency. That is, we are becoming more concerned with students' ability to *investigate* written material and to express their discoveries creatively and in a way that shows that they have thought through the material critically. This is a challenging process for students to master; a big part of the problem is that many people are simply not consciously aware of the power of "the word." As we look at one aspect of our country's political history, and the evolution of the language it has employed, we will develop a deeper awareness of *what's in a word* .

This unit will focus on what I have called the "*Brown v. Board* Era." That is, our study will be a comparative one that seeks to analyze the propaganda before, during and after this landmark decision. It is imperative to investigate the connection between language and *pictures* (That is, what pictures do an author's *words* conjure up and why? And what words do certain pictures conjure up?) To this end, we will look at advertisements from newspapers, magazines, and television; the transcripts of court proceedings; transcripts of radio broadcasts. What we must remember is that, regardless of our position on the issues surrounding this case, there are two sides-each seeking to persuade the other that their side proves the most beneficial. If we are able to analyze documents from all sides of this case, we will begin to see the shift in word choice. That is a key concept that I hope we can uncover together: words have power because authors have choices. The author dictates that choice and his choices are based on the message he wants to bring to a community.

(Recommended for English, Language Arts, and U.S History, grades 7 and 8.)

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