



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1996 Volume III: Race and Representation in American Cinema

Recognizing Stereotypical Images of African-Americans in Television and Film

Guide for Curriculum Unit 96.03.05
by Steven F. Gray

The practice of racial stereotyping through the use of media has been used throughout contemporary history by various factions in American society to attain various goals. Historically the people developed racial stereotypes were from literature and then radio. In contemporary American society the most effective way in which stereotypes are perpetuated is through the mediums of film and television. Images from these mediums constantly bombard American children with negative and unrealistic portrayals of African American life or deny the existence of African Americans in a “true” American society at all.

The use of racial stereotyping is destructive to American society on two fronts. First it connotes to the majority population of America that the negative actions of a few minorities sum up the collective values of the whole minority community. The second effect of stereotyping is that the group being stereotyped begins to internalize the negative images and actually mimic some of the behavior and attitudes portrayed in the negative imagery.

An educator would be foolish to suggest that viewing images is the major cause of negative behaviors present in some of today’s school aged children. Unemployment, poor housing, and lack of education are some of the ills which heavily shape negative behavior patterns. However, it would be absurd to assert that these portrayals have no effect at all. Educators have to develop programs that teach children how and why television and movie images are manipulated and how these manipulations affect them.

This curriculum unit will provide elementary school teachers with a framework to begin to help their students understand and define a stereotype, recognize common stereotypes and stereotypical themes in film and television, and illustrate some damaging effects perpetuating stereotypes.

The unit will be taught within the context of film and television. All of the unit’s activities will revolve around watching selected movies and documentaries and discussing these materials in small and large groups. Preceding each discussion students will perform various writing assignments on topics being discussed. Assignments would include but not be limited to journal writing and essays from various writing prompts. In addition, problem solving activities such as role playing will be included. Math and social science will be integrated into some of these activities.

(Recommended for Writing, Math, and Social Studies, grade 5)

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