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## NOT SO FAIR AND BALANCED: ANALYZING BIAS IN THE MEDIA

**Grades:** 9 and up

**Time:** One week of 45 minute class periods

**Materials:** One or more dictionaries; photo of babies of various ethnicities; black/white board and chalk/markers; propaganda images

**Relevant Subjects:** Social Studies, History, Journalism, Media Studies, and Language Arts

### DAY 1:

1. Begin a discussion with students about prejudice by showing them a dictionary definition of the term or by having students look up the definition. Ask them to redefine the definition in plain, everyday language, guiding them to understand that negative prejudices that give an unfair disadvantage to a group nearly always go hand in hand with a positive prejudice that gives an unfair advantage to another group.
2. Share a personal experience with prejudice and then encourage students to write and reflect upon any experiences with prejudice that they have encountered or witnessed.
3. Lead students in a “tea party” discussion: have them walk around the classroom and have brief discussions (about 2 minutes each) with classmates about their thoughts and/or experiences with prejudices. Give students enough time to connect with several other students.
4. Have students gather in a circle. Ask them to think critically about how people learn prejudices. (You may want to show students a picture of babies of different ethnicities and ask them if people are born with prejudices.) Post the reflection question: **“Where do our prejudices come from?”** on the board, and ask students to think about this question and be prepared to discuss it during the next lesson.

**DAY 2:**

5. Have students gather in a circle; lead them in a discussion about where and how prejudices are learned, again showing them the picture of the babies, reminding them of their “tea party” during the previous lesson, and pointing to the reflection question. Write on the board students’ ideas about where prejudices come from. They may suggest influences and sources such as:
- Our personal experiences, friends, and family;
  - Our religion;
  - Our government;
  - Movies, the news, other media;
  - Ignorance, misinformation, etc.

During the discussion, help guide students to understand that prejudices are not ideas that we are born with, but are ideas that we learn through passively or actively receiving information from the world around us. Give them an example of an active and passive source, such as:

- **Active:** Our own personal experiences or those of a friend that we’ve witnessed
  - **Passive:** Media sources such as movies, TV, magazines, news, etc.
6. Have students categorize their list of sources of prejudices into passive and/or active sources, using a tool such as a Venn Diagram. Lead them in a discussion about active and passive sources; point out that prejudice may be invisible and difficult to detect in the media simply by their covering certain news stories while avoiding others, sharing certain viewpoints while shunning others, and by the ethnicities of people we see or do not see in the media. Since prejudice is an unreasonable dislike or preference, then media bias is a sort of invisible prejudice broadcasting many messages to us through many outlets.
7. Mention to students how effective the media is at distributing information because of the wide range and large number of people it reaches. Show students propaganda images from the past used to create negative prejudices about certain people and discuss the events that followed these propaganda campaigns. For example: cartoons of Jewish people and other anti-Semitic visual material from Nazi Germany and the Holocaust that followed.
- <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/posters/derjude.jpg>
  - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nazi\\_Anti-Semitic\\_Propaganda\\_by\\_David\\_Shankbone.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nazi_Anti-Semitic_Propaganda_by_David_Shankbone.jpg)
  - <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/ww2era.htm#Antisem>
- Have students analyze and discuss together the power of the mass distribution of prejudices and the dangerous consequences that they can have if not analyzed critically by the general public.

**DAY 3:**

8. Refer students back to the Venn Diagram and remind them of the media that they are exposed to. Ask students to think about how they can analyze the media to check for the proliferation of prejudices or bias – What kind of criteria should they use? What should they look for?
9. Have students sign up to investigate a media area of interest. Some students may investigate the lyrics or the cover art of the top 5 songs currently in the Billboard or iTunes Top Songs list. Some students may investigate the plot lines and characters or the advertising posters of the most popular movies. Others may want to watch the evening news and tally up the different ethnicities of people in the news and any positive or negative stereotypes or prejudices that they may see. Others may read the newspaper and tally up the different ethnicities of people noted on the front page and any positive or negative stereotypes or prejudices in the articles, etc. Have students break into groups of interest and divide up the work of the investigation. Have students come prepared with the relevant material to work in cooperative groups for the next day.

**DAY 4:**

10. As students work in their cooperative groups, circulate and listen in among groups; facilitate a way for recording their findings if necessary. When students may need guidance, provide help such as making positive examples of work that other groups are doing, i.e. “Oh, the lyric group thought of noting the different ethnicities of the artists and are writing down phrases on a chart that have a prejudice in them. Maybe that would work for your group too?”
11. Have students discuss how to summarize their findings and who and how they’ll present it to the class the following day in a 3 minute presentation. Students may need to do additional work to prepare.

**DAY 5:**

12. Give students a few minutes to practice their presentations.
13. Have student groups present their findings.
14. Lead a discussion with students, encouraging them to talk about what they learned from their experience of analyzing the media for prejudice/bias and how it impacts their consumption of media images and ideas. Encourage students to discuss the importance of being critical of the information they receive and more sensitive to the ways that prejudices can be magnified through media sources and discuss the consequences of passively accepting information.

**Activity by Daniella Schmidt, M.Ed. Student**