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MORE THAN A LABEL

Grades: 9 & up

Time: 90 minutes

Materials: Two sets of photos (see below), using PowerPoint, if possible – if you use PowerPoint, then you’ll need the appropriate computer/data projector equipment; the song or lyrics to “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught,” from the musical *South Pacific*; facts/statistics regarding societal examples of bigotry; black/white board and chalk/markers; bigotry scenario cards (see below); copies of “25 Things You Can Do” sheets for students (see below)

Relevant Subjects: Social Studies and Language Arts

This activity inspires students to think about their own areas of bigotry and to identify how we develop our attitudes about others, and it empowers them to take action to reduce bigotry in their own lives and in society.

1. “We’re going to test your observational skills today.” Show students two sets of photos, (preferably using PowerPoint). With the first set, ask them to look at each photo & write down the first word or words that come to mind about the person in the photo -- not a description, as in “He’s wearing a blue coat.”, but what students can tell about the person or his/her character. Show the photos quickly, so that students don’t have much time to rethink their initial impression/judgment. Photo examples might include:

- an African-American or Latino dressed in “gang”– looking or “hip hop” gear
- an “obviously” gay male
- a “butch”–looking female
- a “granola/hippie”–looking male
- a person with missing teeth
- a teen dressed in “goth” gear
- an Arab/Muslim male
- a person with an animal rights protest sign
- a white person who’s obviously very well dressed, with expensive jewelry
- a beautiful, fit person in skimpy attire

Briefly show students a second set of photos. These photos will show paired photos side by side; ask students to quickly write down their answer to the questions you ask them for each pair of photos. Examples might include:

- a female & male (“Which would you ask for directions?”)
- a person of color and a good-looking white guy (“Which would you vote for for Governor?”)
- a person with a disability and a young, fit person (“Which one would you hire for a job?”)
- an Asian male and an African-American female who looks of lower socio-economic status (“Which one is smarter?”)
- a well-dressed guy in a suit and a “tree hugger”-looking guy (“Which one is more responsible?”)
- a “normal” looking guy with glasses and a “gorgeous,” muscular guy (“Which one would you cast as leading man in a movie?”)

Alternative: For this second set of photos – depending upon your class’s political savvy -- you could use somewhat “known” figures (e.g., for the “Governor” question, you could have Senator Barack Obama & a criminal; Desmond Tutu vs. war criminal Ratko Mladic; Wangari Maathai vs. Jet Li, etc.), and then reveal who they are at the end.

2. After students have looked at the two sets and written down their answers, have them collate a list of descriptors/answers that were used for several of the photos and then discuss why they made the choices they did.

3. Lead a brief discussion about bigotry. Questions might include:

- What is bigotry? (write down/share several definitions)
- What are some examples of your own bigotries?
- What are some examples of some of the bigotries society encourages?
- What bigotries did you notice from the first activity we did?

4. Share the song/lyrics to “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught” to spark a discussion on “How do we develop our attitudes about other groups/people?” Have the class refer back to their responses to the two sets of photos, as well as to what types of behaviors are encouraged by classmates. You may also want to share personal examples of your own bigotries & from where they developed and/or bring up examples from society for discussion, such as the issue of “Why Do They [the “terrorists”] Hate Us [Americans]?”, or the red state/blue state split in the U.S., etc.

5. Lead a brief discussion on “Why do we do it?” You may want to write students’ responses down, so that everyone can see them. Sample questions might include:

- “When we treat a person or group with prejudice, what do we get out of it?”
- “How does it make us feel?”
- “How does it make others feel?”

- “What kind of world am I creating when I judge another group?”

6. Have the class brainstorm actions everyone can take reduce bigotry (on both a personal & societal level).

7. Either as a class or in small groups, have students role play some “What would you do?” scenarios, focusing on reducing bigotry. Examples might include:

- A homeless guy comes up and asks you for money.
- A goth girl wants to sit at the “preppie” table (where you’re sitting) for lunch.
- A fur-wearer and an animal rights person meet on the street.
- Students are hassling a guy you know is gay.
- A person in a wheelchair comes up and starts talking to you. You can’t understand what she’s saying.
- A person from an opposing political party comes up and starts arguing with you about an important issue.
- You overhear someone who looks to be Muslim criticizing lazy, violent, greedy Americans.
- One of your friends tells a racist joke.

8. Pass out copies of “25 Things You Can Do, Starting Today” from the book *More Than a Label* by Aisha Muharrar (or a similar list).

9. Have students write down one personal action they can take to reduce bigotry in their own lives, and one school/community-level action they can take to reduce bigotry in school/society. (Actions don’t need to be taken from the handout.)

Activity by Marsha Rakestraw (HECP Graduate)