

Teaching Blackface: A Lesson on Stereotypes

In 2014, Alan Barron, a white middle school history teacher who taught for 36 years in Monroe, Michigan, was placed on administrative leave a few weeks before his retirement. Barron's administration viewed his history lesson as racist. While teaching about racial segregation laws during the Jim Crow era, Barron played a video showing a white entertainer in blackface. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, white actors commonly painted their faces with makeup to depict black individuals. Barron explained that the purpose of the video was to show how stereotypes of African-Americans were portrayed at one point in American history. During the lesson, an assistant principal who was observing the classroom demanded that Barron stop the video because she "concluded that Barron's lesson about how entertainers used to be racist was itself racist." Barron was subsequently suspended.

Many parents spoke out against Barron's suspension. Adrienne Aaron, whose African-American daughter was in Barron's eighth grade history class at the time, said that her daughter was not offended by the lesson and thought that the subject needed to be discussed. Aaron stated, "[My daughter] was more offended that they stopped the video...History is history. We need to educate our kids to see how far we've come in America. How is that racism?"

After two weeks on leave, the district allowed Barron to return to his classroom. The superintendent stated, "The teacher in question was placed on paid leave to give the district time to fully consider what occurred in this classroom. As a result of incorrect information, a highly respected and loved teacher, and one who has done much for his students and the community, has had to endure a public airing of what should have ended through a district discussion." Barron was set to retire soon after being reinstated.



Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think Mr. Barron was demonstrating moral awareness or a lack of moral awareness by showing the video of the minstrel show? Explain your position.
2. Do you agree with the assistant principal's decision to shut down the video during the observation? Was she demonstrating moral awareness or lack of moral awareness? Explain your position.
3. Should Mr. Barron have warned his students that some of them could have been offended by the racism portrayed in the video? Why or why not? Is it ever necessary for teachers to provide disclaimers about content that they use in their classrooms? Explain.
4. Should teachers be prevented from showing examples (books, films, photos, etc.) of historical events and/or practices that are considered racially insensitive by today's standards? Why or why not?

5. What do you think is the best way to teach about stereotypes? Is it possible to do this without offending someone? Explain.
6. Many people viewed political correctness as the main issue of this case. Can you think of an example in which political correctness promoted ethical behavior? How about an example in which political correctness led to unethical behavior?

Resources:

Teacher's lesson about racism offends his bosses

http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-06-05/news/ct-kass-met-0605-20140605_1_history-school-administrator-segregation

The Daily Caller – Middle School Teacher Suspended for Showing Video About White Actors Wearing Blackface

<http://news.yahoo.com/middle-school-teacher-suspended-showing-video-white-actors-122027921.html>

Monroe News – Monroe Teacher Suspended Over Black History Lesson

<http://www.monroenews.com/news/2014/may/30/monroe-teacher-alan-barron-suspended/>

Community comments on Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/monroenews/posts/10152456292741692>

Teaching Tolerance – Do's and Don'ts of Teaching Black History

<http://www.tolerance.org/article/dos-and-donts-teaching-black-history>

Monroe News – Monroe Teacher Reinstated After Segregation Lesson

<http://www.monroenews.com/news/2014/jun/01/al-barron-reinstated-mps-teacher/>

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