Ageism: Word Association Lesson Plan

Introduction

People of all ages commonly hold negative attitudes about aging. This activity is designed to help young people rise above these attitudes against younger and older people. This activity can be used in instructional units on individual rights or on national political movements against racism and sexism. It is an effective intergenerational exercise.

Objectives

Students will:

- understand common connotations associated with the word old;
- recognize pervasive negative attitudes about growing old;
- consider how attitudes about aging influence public policy; and
- compare ageism, racism and sexism.

Key Terms

ageism, stereotypes, chronological age, legal age, racism, sexism

Procedures

1. Draw a large circle on the board with the word KIDS or TEENAGERS in the center. Draw lines coming from the outside of the circle. (The use of circles to "defuzz" words or concepts generally solicits more varied responses than when straight lists are used.)

2. Ask the class: "When you hear, see or think the word kids, what other words come to mind?" Write word associations on the lines and around the circle as students respond out loud. Common word associations are: wild, silly, fun seeking, active, crazy and inexperienced.

3. After two or three minutes of word associations, discuss the following: "What do you notice about attitudes toward young people?' "In what situations have you felt people prejudge you based on stereotypes of young people?" "How have negative attitudes affected how you feel or what you do?" "How have positive attitudes about young people helped you?"

4. Introduce the concept of ageism - a form of discrimination that relegates people to an inferior or limited position simply because of age.

5. Repeat the circle association (in procedure 1), only this time use the word OLD instead. Common word associations are lonely, nice, retired, weak, depressing, wise, gray and wrinkled.

6. After two or three minutes of word associations, discuss attitudes toward older people. "What kinds of negative and positive connotations do the word old have?"

Extension Activities

The following are additional questions for writing assignments, group problem-solving activities or class discussions.

- Old is a relative measure of time, yet it conveys strong, mostly negative impressions. How might these attitudes about old affect one's attitudes about growing old? About being with older people?

- How might negative attitudes about aging influence public policy, health care and social programs for older people?

- Just as young people are limited in what they may do because of negative stereotypes, how might older people be unnecessarily limited in what they do?

- What are examples of laws that set legal age restrictions on activities? (Examples: voting, drinking, driving, employment)

- The United States experienced several national movements to stop racism and sexism in the workplace. Discuss the merits of a similar movement to stop ageism toward young and old.

- Invite a local attorney, corporate personnel officer and/or an older employed person to discuss the effects of ageism and ways to counter it.

- Discuss how ageism differs from racism and sexism. Point out that we will never know what it will be like to be a different gender or a different race, but it is hoped that we will all know what it is like to be old.