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What Do Halloween Costumes Say?

Oct. 4, 2006 -- This activity, adaptable across grades, is designed to help students look critically at the Halloween costumes marketed to them. In schools where Halloween is observed, the activity can be used to develop guidelines for acceptable holiday garb.

Objectives

- Students will examine and understand the use of stereotypes and biases in visual media.
- Students will use viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.
- Students will use listening and speaking strategies in small group and class discussions.
- Students will use the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
- Students will contribute to the overall effort of a group.

Time and Materials

- 2-3 class periods
- Copies of Halloween costume catalogues, printouts of Internet catalogues or access to catalogue websites, such as www.lillyskids.com.
Note: If class time is a concern, teachers can select a set number of costumes for student analysis.

Suggested Procedures

Ask students to describe Halloween costumes they have worn in the past, or to describe costumes they've seen others wear. Ask for their opinions about how people might select their Halloween costumes.

Divide students into groups of six. Have them analyze a Halloween costume catalogue for each of the following elements:

- **Costume type:** animals, job roles, consumer brands (i.e., "Star Wars" or "Pirates of the Caribbean"), superheroes, fairy tale roles (i.e. "princess" or "prince"), violent or military costumes (i.e. "Ninja" or "G.I."), death and evil (i.e. "the Grim Reaper" or "Devilish Barbie."), Other. *Note: Costumes can fall into more than one category.*
- **Gender representation:** Based on the pictures of models and the names of the costumes, which appear to be intended for boys/men, for

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Standard

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girls/women or for all?

- **Racial or ethnic representation:** Based on the pictures of models, which costumes appear to be intended for white children and for children of color? Do any of the costumes represent a specific racial or ethnic group?
- **Age representation:** Based on the costumes' sizes, which appear to be intended for infants, toddlers, young children, young adults and/or adults?

Assist students in their small group work, as needed.

Construct a large graph from butcher paper with the names of each costume listed at the top. On the left-hand side of the graph, each of the four elements should be listed. With the whole class, and starting with the first costume, each group should report on their findings about each specific costume. Have student volunteers (or yourself) write key points on the chart.

Encourage students to discover and explain the patterns emerging between the costumes, i.e. "animal costumes are intended almost exclusively for infants and toddlers;" "almost none of the photographs depict models of color;" "costumes depicting Asian culture tend to promote subservience or violence, depending on gender;" "there are a lot of 'princess' costumes for girls/women."

Introduce the concept of a "stereotype" to the class. As a class, discuss the following questions: What kinds of stereotypes do these costumes promote about boys and girls? About people of color? About people of different ages?

As a class, brainstorm a list of ways to identify stereotypes represented in Halloween costumes (for examples, see: "[Five Questions to Ask Before Donning a Halloween Costume](#)").

As a class, pledge to think about this list in selecting costumes to wear at school or at home.

As a class, write a letter to parents and guardians sharing what the class learned and asking for their support (for a sample of writing to audience, see how Dana Williams adapted the "Five Questions"). Send copies of the letter home with students.

In schools where Halloween is observed, write and deliver a 'similar' letter to other classrooms, for a student audience, or write an article for the school newspaper. Students also can present their findings to other classrooms or in a school-wide assembly.

Math Extension

Students can apply basic concepts of statistics and data analysis by selecting methods to represent and describe patterns revealed in the class-generated chart. For example, students might select pie charts as a way to

display a disproportionate representation of male models in violent costumes.

Social Justice Extension

The class also can write letters to the editor of local newspapers, expanding their sphere of influence beyond their own school, and/or to the catalogue publisher.

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