LESSON PLAN

Level:	Grades 6 to 8
About the Author:	*Media Literacy for Development & Children's Rights*, UNICEF Canada. Used with permission. For more teaching and lesson ideas for global education from around the world, visit UNICEF Canada's Global Schoolhouse at www.unicef.ca.

Media Literacy for Development & Children's Rights

"Children are immersed daily in a dense bath of mass media images and messages. Some teach children about the world around them. Others promote deceptive, partial, stereotypical and sometimes harmful perceptions."

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"Media Literacy for Development & Children's Rights" was created by UNICEF Canada to help young people in grades 6 - 8 understand the role played by the media in influencing their attitudes and perceptions about developing nations and development issues. This module contains a series of lessons, exercises and background information to help familiarize students with the issues and challenges surrounding representation of other countries and cultures by the media. The module includes:

- Why Teach About Media Literacy?
- Definitions for Use in Activities
- Activity One: Looking Through the Lenses
- Activity Two: Whose Lenses? How Mass Media Portray Global Development
- Activity Three: Adjusting the Focus

For additional resources on global development issues, visit UNICEF's Global Schoolhouse, at www.unicef.ca.

Why Teach About Media Literacy?

Before they are two years old, many children are aware of racial differences. By the age of three, they may attach value judgments to those differences, and begin to stereotype people based on perceived individual or group characteristics such as gender or disability. How do such stereotypes come about? The first influences are the attitudes of people around them, often acquired unconsciously. Later, children absorb stereotypical messages from books, television, movies, magazines, newspapers and other media. Even the absence of certain people (ethnic groups, the elderly, the disabled, youth) from the media conveys a sense of the diminished worth of those groups in society.

By the age of ten, students hold stereotypes about people in other countries. An important source of these ideas is television and movies. News media largely project sensational images about unfamiliar people and places; in turn we use those images to form opinions about them. Representations of the world, especially the developing world, are very often reduced to stereotypical images. Through most Western media, we catch only glimpses of life in developing countries. The "news" usually consists of fleeting images of starving children, victims of unexplained wars, or desperate child labourers. Such stories leave many of us with the impression that developing countries in particular are mired in intractable problems, and never make progress.

If the perception that all Canadians live in igloos is a stereotype, surely those media images we see of people in developing countries don't fully reflect the daily lives and rich diversity of life there! We know from our own everyday experience that what appears on the news; the crimes and sensational events; do not represent the norms of our society. That is what makes them news. But when it comes to developing countries, most people have no counterweight of personal experience, no equivalent sense of the norms to set against the constant reporting of the exceptional.

It is critical to understand whose eyes we are looking through and what they have chosen to show and not to present, so our perceptions can be more objective and just. Our perceptions of people from other countries, particularly those in developing countries, may be distorted by a number of factors, including:

- our insufficient first hand experience of other countries
- the media -- particularly news media -- may be the dominant source of our images and perceptions of people from other countries
- the tendency of news media to focus on the dramatic and tragic or the exotic and traditional rather than everyday reality
- the legacy of colonization which has left behind assumptions of superiority on the part of many people of colonizing cultures

These factors can result in the formation of misperceptions, negative stereotypes and prejudice. Children -- and adults -- think, "they are not like us", and believe that their views are universally shared. Positive stereotypes are also harmful, by failing to acknowledge the diversity and essential dignity of all people. Such stereotyping harms everyone involved. The group which is being stereotyped may experience reduced self-esteem, lack of social and economic opportunities and other forms of overt or systemic discrimination. Those who are doing the stereotyping are also harmed. They develop an unrealistic, partial view of the world and of themselves and their place in it, and an inability to function effectively in our increasingly diverse and interconnected societies.

News media are not the only source of images of other people and of ourselves: the range and reach of media to which children are exposed has grown rapidly in this generation. It is estimated that a person in the Western world receives on average 1500 advertising messages per day. The result is a dense electronic bath in which children are immersed daily. What are the impacts on children? Entertainment media, advertisers and the Internet are key sources of images that children use to generate perceptions and make decisions. Even relief and development agencies, with the positive intention of fundraising, may reinforce stereotypes if they use images of pathetic children and imply that all children in developing countries are victims of starvation and disease -- and that only the aid of affluent donors can help them.

Children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in the media, both as objects and as subjects. They have rights to be protected from exploitation and harm, and rights to access and create information that is important for their well-being. Just as bias and stereotyping are learned, they can also be changed through education. By learning skills for media literacy and responsibly exercising their rights, young people can adopt a critical stance to information and images they receive through the media and use media to access and disseminate information that will help ensure their healthy development and participation in society.

Definitions For Use In Activities

Some of the terminology in this activity file will need careful explanation to students. The following definitions may be helpful as a starting point, but do not claim to be representative of all ways of thinking about these concepts. These definitions can be reviewed with students by presenting the definitions and terms in two separate lists, and guiding students to match the terms with their definitions.

Images and Perceptions

Images are what we see; how we interpret them depends on our perceptions. The images we see also contribute to how we formulate our perceptions.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping is based on the assumption that because a number of individuals share one attribute -- such as religion or gender -- they are similar in many others. Stereotypes arise from a need to conceptually organize the world around us, but they may also result in oversimplified beliefs, attitudes or uncritical judgments. This kind of arbitrary grouping of people can lead to prejudice against a particular perceived group.

Prejudice

Prejudices are feelings or attitudes which a person holds on to despite contrary available evidence or experience. Some definitions also include the actions being directed against particular groups as a result of these feelings and attitudes.

Discrimination

This term has the sense of prejudice in action. It is based on the creation of unfavourable distinctions between one group of people and another, often because of characteristics such as race, colour, gender, religion, socioeconomic status or class. It can take the form of more overt, individual action, or more systematic (and often hidden) institutional and government action.

Racism

Racism refers to the assumption of superiority of one group, whether conscious or unconscious, and its exertion of power to enforce this to the detriment of other racial groups.