# 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.
   1. I believe he was showing moral awareness by his spoken intentions being what his job was, teaching history. Mr. Barron did not take a “side” in the matter, let alone support or encourage it in any way that could be truly labeled as “racist”, but rather pointed out that as an early American practice it was wrong.
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.
   1. No. She was demonstrating lack of moral awareness by not giving attention to the reason for the video, the teacher’s intentions, and the real message being portrayed, as well as the fact that no one in the room, including applicable students, had any issue with it.
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.
   1. Yes and no. While it may have helped prevent the issues that happened, I don’t think it was necessary. Like the student’s parent said, “history is history” and with it being taught in that context, if someone has an issue with that, they need to either deal with it themselves or confront the teacher privately about it, and that includes the principal. At that point it is not the fault of the teacher.
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?
   1. Absolutely not. At least, not if it doesn’t infringe any other school policies. Kids need to be educated about how things used to be, that some of those things are wrong, and that’s how society changes for the better. Society changes by learning from the mistakes of the past, and racist events and practices are a great example of that.
5. What do you think is the best way to teach about stereotypes? Is it possible to do this without offending someone? Explain.
   1. Teach indifferently, not taking sides to either “opinion” about it. Say it as it is, how is used to be, how it is now, as a majority. Unfortunately, it’s impossible to teach anything, especially involving race, without offending someone. Someone is always going to find a reason to be offended. However, I believe the goal should be to teach educational topics such as this in a way where it’s not going to be widely controversial, such as in the case of Mr. Barron.
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?
   1. Political correctness has influenced larger involvement and inclusivity of race, gender, age, etc. in various events and forms of media such as movies and sports.
   2. However, political correctness has also blurred the lines and “corrupted” the original intent and purpose of some things, such as the Boy Scouts situation.