

The Australian Journal of
INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING :

TEACHING ABOUT RACE RELATIONS IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

* Michael McDougall and
Peter Hastie

Racism certainly exists amongst primary school children in Australia. Through both experience in school and teaching, the authors have noted marked prejudice amongst students. This prejudice takes the forms of slurs, name calling, recitation of myths and stereotypes, and occasionally violence, and is directed at all minority groups, but notably Aborigines and Asians.

Students in minority groups have most likely been on the receiving end of this prejudice during their school lives and, because of this, may have felt alienated and humiliated. In this paper it is proposed that the teaching of race relations and cultural understanding is one method teachers may use to decrease the racial attitudes of the white non-minority students.

The first step is to define racism. Pettman (1986) discusses two aspects of racism. These are *prejudice* and *discrimination*. Prejudice refers to negative attitudes towards people in different racial groups. Students are identified as belonging to a particular group and are then judged according to the presumed characteristics of that group, often on the basis of inaccurate and derogatory stereotypes. Discrimination is defined as behaviour that disadvantages those identified as belonging to different racial or ethnic groups.

Both prejudice and discrimination can, however, be seen as "symptoms of deeper sociological processes which are explained better in political and sociological terms" (Pettman, 1987, 31). The concepts of "ideology" and "institutional racism" therefore need to be discussed.

Ideology is described as social myths about minority groups. This ideology is to assert and "explain" the inferiority or differences in the minority group. Hence, the Aborigines are said to be inferior since they are "at a more primitive stage of evolution".

---

* *Michael McDougall is a 4th year student and Peter Hastie a lecturer in pedagogy in the Department of Human Movement Studies, University of Queensland, St Lucia.*

Another racist ideology is that immigrants are "taking our jobs". Institutional racism has been described by Pettman (1987,32) as "the patterns of distribution of social goods which regularly and systematically disadvantage some people and advantage others." This type of racism is manifested in today's society through school outcomes, as in who gets into university, etc. Aborigines, however, are normally at the bottom with the worst health profile, the most disastrous school outcomes and the highest rates of unemployment.

While this paper attempts to deal with prejudice and discrimination among school children, it must be realised that racism is deeply entrenched in our society due to racist ideology and institutional racism.

WHY ARE STUDENTS RACIST?

We should expect our students to be racist due to the social ideologies and institutional racism present in society. Racism was also an intrinsic part of our history, both in the disposition of the Aboriginal people and in the systematic exclusion of non-whites from Australia until recently.

As individuals, students may be racist for many different reasons. Some may be prejudiced literally by default, growing up in our culture. Others may have acquired their views from family and peers. Still others may hold prejudiced views to compensate for their own insecurities or be seeking scapegoats in time of stress.

Branch and Newcombe (1986) in a study of racial attitude development found parental and child attitudes to be related. Yet, as the children mature and develop a more global expansive world view, their racial attitudes also change, normally becoming more negative. Branch and Newcombe suggest entrance into primary school at age five or six is one place where extra familial socialisation occurs and the students come under the influence of peers. It is also in this age group that racial attitudes begin to change. On this evidence it is proposed that the primary school, not the secondary school, should be where race relations and cultural understanding must begin to be taught.

THE PREVALENCE OF RACISM

Little or no Australian data exists on the racist attitudes of primary school children. Data of older age groups suggests that racism is prevalent. A recent survey of Australians in the age

group 15 to 24 showed that only 50 percent of young Australians see Aborigines as victims of discrimination and 60 percent believe that too many immigrants are being allowed into Australia.

TEACHING ABOUT RACE RELATIONS AND FOR CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Stenhouse, Verma, Wild and Nixon (1982) conducted extensive research in British schools on the teaching about race relations and for cultural understanding. They found that while racist attitudes already existed within the 14 to 16 year age groups, direct teaching about race relations tended to have positive effects upon inter-racial tolerance. Relating these findings to primary school students who have had less exposure to racial ideologies and institutionalised racialism, the teaching of these topics may derive even more positive results than the Stenhouse *et al.* study.

Lingard (1980) writing on why Aborigines fail at school suggests that, to decrease alienation the first step should be to increase the involvement of the affective rather than the cognitive domain in social studies. Teaching students how to *appreciate and value* other cultures may be more fulfilling than just teaching them *about* other cultures. Skelton (1986) agrees and states that the role of developing student understanding about minority cultures and race relations is to increase the likelihood of the students' assimilating different viewpoints and values. Other roles include encouraging students to acknowledge and express their own opinions and attitudes and to develop insight into the formation of these views and those widely held by the community. Skelton lists ways of developing this student understanding:

> The study of the role of immigration in Australia's development, traditional and contemporary Aboriginal studies, investigation of Australian society and social concepts in general, of global issues such as inequality, human rights and racism, the development of media literacy and the appropriate use of materials across subjects which reflect culturally diverse experiences, all contribute to challenging prejudice and racism.
>
> (Skelton, 1986, 38)

Most, if not all, of the areas outlined by Skelton could be incorporated to some extent into the primary school curriculum. Just as primary school curricula can be developed around themes of "pirates", "the seasons", "EXPO", and "the jungle", so too could themes on Aborigines, migrants, the divergent nature of

Australian society, or even race relations in general be developed and implemented to fit into the subject areas of mathematics, social studies, music, physical education, language arts and art. Of these, the subjects with the most potential for developing the affective objectives of cultural understanding appear to be language arts and social studies.

The teacher implementing such themes should at all times be aware of the danger of presenting stereotypes, and should take note of the stereotypes and myths presented in children's literature. Once stereotypes are created, minority students are locked into categories. Other students then assume they can predict from these categories what minority students are like or what they are capable of as individuals.

The dangers of stereotypes underlie the importance of shifting the focus to affective objectives over cognitive objectives. Content about minority culture is insufficient; the importance lies in creating values, appreciation and empathy towards the minority groups. Also important is that the processes of teaching also affect the change in prejudice amongst chidren. Stenhouse *et al.* (1982) found that direct teaching of race relations was effective in decreasing prejudice in situations where (a) the teacher was a neutral chairman and (b) the teacher was free to express his/her own opinion. Skelton suggests that setting ground rules for discussion with the students works towards a classroom atmosphere in which winning and losing is not seen as the outcome of discussion and helps in the development of student understanding. She also suggests the use of guest speakers from minority groups, as well as providing opportunities for students to work in groups. This allows for an exchange of opinions without the need for the teacher to be present.

The most successful teaching methods appear to be those which encourage interaction and cooperation between students, which allow opportunites for negotiation between students, promote enquiry as opposed to instruction, and foster critical analysis of visual and printed material. These methods assist students in gaining some insight into their own attitudes and help combat the prejudice among them.

Hopefully, teaching about race relations and for cultural understanding will widen the consciousness of students in the majority groups and will increase their racial tolerance. As Stenhouse *et al.* suggest -

> The school can make a worthwhile contribution to the improvement of racial attitudes, but it can only ameliorate, not adequately counter influence the racism in society...In the end, the school which cannot remedy or avoid the forces of society that bear on it cannot be held responsible for the reform of society and the adult world.
>
> (Stenhouse *et al.* 1982, 102)

REFERENCES

Branch, C.W. and Newcombe, N., 1976: Racial attitude development among young black children as a function of parental attitudes: a longitudinal and cross-sectional study. *Child Development*, 57, 712-721.

Lingard, R. 1980: Schools do make a difference, but...! *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 8, 51-59.

Pettman, J., 1986: Racism; attacking the problem. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 11:3, 27-32.

Pettman, J., 1987: Racism in the classroom. *The History Teacher*, 24:4, 30-41.

Skelton, K, 1986: Educating for cultural understanding: The work of the Combating Prejudice in Schools project. *Youth Studies*, 5:3, 36-39.

Stenhouse, L., Verma, G.K., Wild, R.D., and Nixon, J., 1982: *Teaching about Race Relations: Problems and Effects*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

.....