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USING EMPATHY AS A TOOL TO REDUCE PREJUDICE

by

Traci Lloyd

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Introduction and Purpose

Children are not born with prejudices. However, they are born with a natural inclination to categorize people and situations (Byrnes, 1988). As early as two years of age, children may begin asking questions concerning the differences and similarities they observe in the people around them (Derman-Sparks, 1993). Children may develop negative beliefs about these differences from a variety of sources. Parents and extended family may, through their words and actions, play a major role in the attitudes children develop about differences. Teachers, peers, television, books and movies also make large contributions (Byrnes, 1988; Derman-Sparks, 1993).

Students may learn prejudice from those around them, but they can also be taught tolerance and understanding ("How Teachers," 1992). The early childhood and elementary school years provide crucial opportunities for prejudice prevention. It is during this period that children expand and construct their attitudes about the differences they experience (Byrnes, 1988; Derman-Sparks, 1993).

This paper offers suggestions teachers can implement to help reduce prejudice. Since prejudice reduction is such an extensive topic, it is difficult to study any single area in great depth. Therefore, the included curriculum development project focuses specifically on using empathy building activities in an upper elementary classroom in order to reduce prejudice.

Teachers and Prejudice Reduction

By using anti-bias education, teachers can help change existing prejudicial attitudes and discourage the development of prejudices (Byrnes, 1988). Helping teachers confront and change their own prejudices is a critical first step in the fight to reduce prejudice. Eliminating the bias of teachers will bring about many positive results in student prejudice reduction (Pate, 1988).

Unfortunately, changing the philosophies of teachers is not an easy task and requires a great deal of commitment (Sonnenschein, 1988). Educators must take a look at their own lives

and reexamine their prejudices and beliefs (Thomson, 1993). This is a life long process which involves understanding one's culture and seeing how it relates with others. In addition to exploring these beliefs, teachers need to see themselves as active change agents in the reduction of prejudice (Derman-Sparks, 1993).

Within the classroom, teachers must examine the example which they daily portray to the students (Thomson, 1993). What direct, and indirect, messages are being sent to students about the teachers' opinions and feelings? A teachers' response to questions and/or issues concerning prejudice is an important standard by which students formulate opinions (Derman-Sparks, 1993). According to Elrich (1994), unwillingness to discuss sensitive issues regarding prejudice with students only increases the tension. A recent survey indicated that twenty-five percent of U.S. classrooms did not discuss the Los Angeles riots at all ("How Teachers," 1992). Students need to feel comfortable asking questions about skin color, disabilities and other sensitive issues in order to resolve their concerns (Thomson, 1993).

Teachers must also take a look at how they handle prejudice and discrimination at school. Ignoring or excusing prejudicial behavior only validates the biased actions ("How Teachers," 1992). Even the language used in the classroom should be respectful and free of stereotypes (Thomson, 1993). Prejudice remarks must never go unchallenged. Students should never doubt a teachers' commitment to creating a classroom which is conducive to learning and free of bigotry for all students, regardless of their background (Sonnenschein, 1988).

If teachers are to challenge students' deepest beliefs about themselves and others, a classroom in which they feel safe must be created. Reexamining one's beliefs is not a comfortable process, but to be effective it must be done in an atmosphere that is not damaging (Derman-Sparks, 1993). The climate in which this is done must be one of trust and respect, in which the students feel a sense of security and acceptance (Thomson, 1993; Walsh, 1988). Byrnes (1988) also adds that independence, responsibility, warmth, praise, consistency and

appropriate limits are necessary in an effective anti-bias classroom. Once we provide an appropriate classroom climate we can begin discussing sensitive issues, such as prejudice and discrimination.

Multicultural and Anti-Bias Curriculum

Several sources quote James A. Banks' four main approaches which attempt to bring a multicultural curriculum into the classroom. The first three are the contributions, additive, and transformation methods (Brandt, 1994; Menkart, 1993; Rasinski & Padak, 1990).

The contributions approach focuses on teaching about holidays, heroes, food, and commemorative days of the culture (Menkart, 1993). Unfortunately, this method has some serious drawbacks. The cultures presented may seem disconnected from the lives of the students. This method may also trivialize the culture by making important rituals seem quaint and exotic and by giving the impression that holiday customs represent daily life. For this reason it is sometimes referred to as the zoo approach (Pate, 1988), or tourist curriculum (Derman-Sparks, 1993).

The additive approach is very similar to the contributions method. It involves adding a unit or lesson on a minority group without changing the structure of the curriculum (Menkart, 1993). For instance, students may complete a study of Native Americans in November and a unit on African-Americans in January. This method has many of the same shortcomings as does the contributions approach because it separates the study of other cultures from the regular curriculum. Both of these methods may also lead to misrepresentation of the culture. For example, some educators focus on the ancient customs of the culture and imply a continuation in practice today. It is also common to associate the culture in the country of origin with those groups living in the United States. This can be very misleading as the two cultures may be extremely different (Derman-Sparks, 1993).

Rather than inserting information about minority groups, teaching should integrate the full history and perceptions of a variety of groups into the on-going curriculum of the classroom. The entire structure of the curriculum must be modified (Brandt, 1994; Menkart, 1993). Infusing various perspectives and frames of reference into the curriculum is called the transformation approach (Brandt, 1994; Menkart, 1993; Rasinski & Padak, 1990). For instance, study of the westward expansion of the United States would include the perspectives of the Native Americans, as well as the perspectives of the early European settlers. In a classroom oriented towards the transformation approach, recognition of multiple viewpoints would be integrated into the curriculum on a daily basis (Derman-Sparks, 1993).

Children must also be prepared to take an active stand against prejudice. They will be called upon to stand up for themselves and others in the face of peers or adults who engage in prejudiced actions (Derman-Sparks, 1993). Decision making and social action are considered the fourth and culminating approach to teaching a multicultural curriculum (Menkart, 1993; Rasinski & Padak; 1990).

A classroom which actively uses the transformation and social action approaches would naturally include anti-bias discussions which actively engage students in thinking about prejudice and discrimination (Byrnes, 1988). Prejudice and discrimination cannot be taught in a vacuum. Therefore, the curriculum must become the framework for discussions of prejudice. A curriculum which regularly addresses a variety of perspectives provides an excellent context for prejudice reduction activities (Sapon-Shevin, 1988).

Prejudice Reduction Approaches

Unfortunately, exposing children to simple facts about other cultures and discrimination does not decrease prejudice by itself (Pate, 1995). In fact, direct teaching about prejudice may be ineffective in reducing prejudice unless the skills and dispositions necessary for attitude changes are also taught (Walsh, 1988). Four such intervention approaches that have proven helpful in

reducing prejudice are the development of critical thinking skills, self-esteem enhancement, cooperative learning groups and empathy building activities.

Critical Thinking Skills

Many studies suggest that students with high cognitive sophistication and high levels of critical and analytical thinking show fewer prejudicial behavior (Byrnes, 1988; Derman-Sparks, 1993; Sonnenschein, 1988; Walsh, 1988). Students with a high level of critical thinking strive to find the most accurate view of their surroundings as possible and actively search to make reasonable decisions concerning their actions and beliefs. Children need to be taught to withhold judgment until they are fully informed and have made knowledgeable examinations (Walsh, 1988). There are two other basic critical thinking strategies that are related to prejudice reduction. They are metacognition and recognition of multiple perspectives.

Students must have good metacognition skills in order to monitor their own thinking about various individuals and groups. In order to avoid stereotypes and prejudices, it is necessary to identify faulty thought process (Byrnes, 1988; "How Teachers," 1992; Walsh, 1988). Students need instruction on how to identify unfair and untrue assumptions made by themselves and others (Derman-Sparks, 1993). Children who have been taught to think about their thinking seek to discover how they came to a conclusion or on what evidence they based their judgment. These students can recognize incorrect thinking and reevaluate decisions (Walsh, 1988).

Children will be less likely to engage in prejudicial thinking and discriminating behavior if they are sensitive and open to a variety of viewpoints (Brandt, 1994; Byrnes, 1988; Walsh, 1988). To effectively resist bias, students must be willing to consider a wide variety of beliefs before making a decision. If students can become aware of multiple perspectives on important issues they are more likely to make bias-free decisions (Walsh, 1988).

Self-esteem Enhancement

Research suggests that students with high levels of self-esteem show less biased behavior than students with low self-esteem (Byrnes, 1988; Derman-Sparks, 1993; Pate, 1988). It seems that if students are self confident, there is less need to establish themselves as superior over other students (Derman-Sparks, 1993; Thomson, 1993). Prejudice and self-esteem have such a high correlation that Pate (1988) suggests if only one approach can be used to reduce prejudice, improving the self-esteem of the students would be the best choice. A classroom climate which is supportive to all individuals greatly impacts the self-esteem of the students. Incorporating such strategies as critical thinking and cooperative learning, can also increase the student self-esteem (Conrad, 1988; Walsh, 1988).

Cooperative Learning Groups

To function in the world today, children need to develop human relations skills which will allow them to interact with a diverse population. Teachers can help children develop these skills by using cooperative learning strategies on a day to day basis. Ideally, children will learn and practice these skills in a multicultural setting. In classrooms with little diversity, teachers may need to create opportunities for students to work cooperatively with individuals who are different than themselves (Byrnes, 1995).

Cooperative learning is more than just a group of students working together on a project. To be effective, a cooperative learning activity must include a cooperative incentive, a common goal, interactions between equal status individuals and a task structure for each student. By using academic learning teams children can help each other learn and discover the value of cooperation (Byrnes, 1988).

Cooperative learning has been hailed as a promising approach to eliminating prejudice (Pate, 1988). When children must work together towards a goal they are able to move beyond their initial prejudices, be it race, gender, class or ability, and discover similarities between themselves and others (Walsh, 1988).

Empathy Building Activities

Students who have a high sense of empathy for other people show fewer biased behaviors (Byrnes, 1988; Pate, 1988; Pate, 1995; Sonnenschein, 1988). Pate suggests (1988, 1995) that prejudice has three dimensions: cognitive, affective and behavior. All three must be addressed or anti-bias efforts may have limited success. In fact, studies indicate that programs which focus only on the cognitive domain are less effective than programs which involve both the affective and cognitive dimensions (Pate, 1995). Research suggests that it may be necessary to invoke the feelings of the students before they will be fully receptive to the cognitive aspects of prejudice reduction (Clark, DeWolf, & Clark, 1992).

Successful methods for increasing student empathy include performing and/or writing skits and plays which portray individuals who are confronted with discrimination. Children's literature, simulations and film can also help students take another look at their perceptions. When chosen wisely, such resources and activities can increase students' sensitivity and acceptance of other people (Byrnes, 1988).

The most successful attempts to increase empathy allow students to vicariously identify with positive and likable individuals from other groups (Pate, 1995). Providing students with opportunities to see things from many points of view increases their understanding and respect for others' feelings (Byrnes, 1988; Derman- Sparks, 1993).

Curriculum Sampler

There is a great deal teachers can do to reduce prejudice in students. Effective strategies include teaching a multicultural curriculum, incorporating critical thinking skills, self-esteem enhancement, implementing cooperative learning groups and using empathy building activities. Obviously each of these areas could be easily expanded. The following is the development of a curriculum sampler focusing specifically on building empathy in the classroom using role play,

simulations, film, and literature. Each focus area includes several activities which have been selected, adapted and/or developed for upper elementary classrooms.

Role Play

Providing students with opportunities to see another viewpoint as they vicariously take on diverse roles can be a successful means to build student empathy with other groups and ultimately reduce prejudice (Athanases, Christiano & Lay, 1995; Byrnes, 1988; Martorella, 1994; Pate, 1985; Pate, 1995).

Activity 1.

Puppets can be an effective way to help children step out of their natural character. Have children dramatize a simple story where discrimination might be present at school, such as not letting everyone play at recess (Byrnes, 1995). Also use this to reenact prejudicial conversations or acts which have been evident in the classroom or on the playground. Discuss these events and the feelings of those involved. Use the puppet shows as catalysts in developing alternate approaches which could be used to handle such situations.

Activity 2.

It is also successful to dramatize historical events which involve prejudice. For example, after reading Sterling's Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman as a class, students could choose the role of Harriet, the plantation owners, Harriet's family, slaves she helped to escape, or other characters from the book (see appendix for references on children's literature). Have students brainstorm a list of the most important scenes and then work in cooperative groups to write the scripts. Rehearse the scenes then perform them for the entire class or a younger grade. Follow up with discussion about prejudice, discrimination and slavery (Schniedewind & Davidson, 1983).

Activity 3.

Familiarize the students with the Rosa Parks story by retelling it or reading her book Rosa Parks: My Story with the class. Reenact the meeting which brought about the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Assign the children all a different role, including one child to be Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Debate whether or not to have a peaceful demonstration or come out in violence (Thomson, 1993).

Activity 4.

Culture greatly influences communication and the interpretations of interactions. Simple actions, such as time between responses, personal space, and eye contact, may carry a great deal of the conversation. For example, comfortable wait time between comments may vary across cultures anywhere between two to twenty seconds. Direct eye contact may be considered disrespectful or confrontational in some cultures and may be a sign of respect and honesty in another. Many cultures also have different views on how much physical space is required between people to be comfortable. These differences may cause many misconceptions for students if they are not sensitive to the practices of others (Lebow, 1992).

Divide students into groups of four. Two students will be from the local area (i.e. Logan, Utah), while the other two students will be from a hypothetical city (i.e. Elmville) in another state. Inform the students from Logan that they have traveled to Elmville and somehow become stranded far from their motel and lost all of their money. They need to ask someone in this city for money to ride the bus (which is the only way to get back). Tell the students from Logan they know very little about the customs of the people in Elmville and need to figure out how to politely ask for this favor without offending them. Before going to the people in Elmville, the two students must discuss what they are going to say and how they are going to say it.

Somewhere the first pair of students can't hear, inform the Elmville students about the situation of the two students from Logan. The customs in Elmville require that they wait at least

twenty seconds after each question or comment before responding. Instruct them to carry on the conversation exactly as they think people from Elmville would.

Have the groups come together and try to carry on a conversation. Continue this for about two to five minutes depending on the responses of the children. Discuss the feelings of both parties. Were they able to communicate? How did it feel to not be understood? This role play could also be adapted to focus on comfortable personal space, eye contact or other body language (Smith and Otero, 1985).

Activity 5.

Brainstorm a list of possible day to day occurrences which may expose people to prejudice. For example, consider trying to get a loan, buying a car, waiting in line at a grocery store, signing up for school or applying for a job. Discuss ways people respond to discriminating actions and how students can help overcome these problems. Write small scripts, then reenact the incidents for the class (Anthanas, Christiano, & Lay, 1995).

Activity 6.

After reading Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, by Mildred Taylor, discuss the plight of the young African-American boy, T.J., who was accused of murder and theft. Assign the students roles and reenact a hypothetical court trial. Will T.J. receive a fair trial? What, if anything, will happen to his white accomplices? Is it fair? Discuss the feelings of the students after they have participated (Smith, 1995).

Simulations

Simulations are a valuable resource in prejudice reduction (Byrnes, 1988; Clark, DeWolf & Clark, 1992; Martorella, 1994; Sapon-Shevin, 1988). While similar to role play, simulations require students to experience the feelings of discrimination first hand rather than by taking on another role. The following activities address the situations people are living in as well as direct simulations of prejudice and discrimination.

Activity 1.

Assign each student to experience a disability. For example, create masks with eye pieces made of wax paper (Thomson, 1993) or blindfold some children (Byrnes, 1995). Use sound proof headphones, earmuffs or wads of cotton in student's ears (Byrnes, 1995; Thomson, 1993, 127; Shiman, 1979). Have students use crutches or a wheelchair (Byrnes, 1995; Shiman, 1979,; Thomson, 1993). Wrap students hands with an ace bandage (Shiman, 1979) or tape their fingers together (Thomson, 1993). Continue with the classroom routine as normal. After several hours discuss what the children are feeling. For instance, what was difficult about the disability and what could have been changed to accommodate it? How did it feel to experience the disability in the classroom? After the discussion, have students complete an accessibility checklist for their school (Sapon-Shevin, 1988).

Activity 2.

Have students talk with something in their mouths. For example dental cotton or a clean small rubber ball. Instruct students to make a phone call to a local business to request information (Byrnes, 1995). Also try having students talk with their tongue over their lower teeth or their mouth full of peanut butter (Shiman, 1979). Discuss the reactions and responses they received during their phone call. How did it feel to have difficulty communicating? What did the people they spoke to do, or not do, to make it easier to communicate?

Activity 3.

Without an explanation, instruct students to perform an assignment that is beyond their capabilities (Byrnes, 1995). Also, create mirror image copies of the reading assignment for some children (Shiman, 1979). Discuss intellectual differences. How did the student's feel when they couldn't do the assignment? What can be done to help all students succeed? Is it unfair to modify assignments for some students and not others?

Activity 4.

Invite a guest who speaks a language other than the common language spoken in the classroom to conduct a simple lesson. Include an assignment written in that language which the students must complete. How did it feel to be responsible for material they could not understand? Discuss how the language difference affected their opportunity for success on the assignment. What could have been done for students who experience a language difference (Byrnes, 1995)?

Activity 5.

Give the students an examination. While most of the class must complete it without any help, allow some students to use their study notes and other students to have the answers. Score the examination and then discuss what happened. What resources are available to someone who is wealthy that are not available to everyone? How can race, gender, class or culture make a difference in our ability to succeed? Ask the students to consider if it is reasonable to discriminate against someone due to limited resources (Byrnes, 1995, Schniedewind & Davidson, 1983).

Film

Film can also be used in to reduce student prejudice (Athanases, Christiano, Lay, 1995; Byrnes, 1988; Pate, 1995). Pate (1995) suggests that the best films are those which allow students to strongly identify with characters who model a change in attitude. Dramas with an integrated cast seem to be very successful.

Films for the Humanities' Umbrella Jack (1986) and Disney's In Harmony (1992) are examples of children's films which directly address prejudice (for full reference see appendix). It is also helpful to consider current or popular films as catalysts for discussions of prejudice and discrimination. After viewing such films, discuss the feelings of the characters involved, as well as the feelings of the students.

Children's Literature

Children's literature is a powerful way to bring about acceptance and sensitivity in students (Byrnes, 1995; Hillard, 1995). The most successful books involve a highly affective component in which characters either experience prejudice and discrimination or help someone who is being victimized (Byrnes, 1995). Be cautious in choosing books for classroom use. Remember, they must first meet the criteria for good literature (Hillard, 1995). Not all books which deal with differences are helpful in reducing prejudice. Check the book carefully for stereotypes, implied or direct. Be sure to consider the author's perspective in writing the book, as well as the accuracy of the information (Lebow, 1992).

Children's literature seems to be even more successful when it is used with response and discussion activities (Athanases, Christiano, & Lay, 1995; Rasinski & Padak, 1990). These can take the form of response journals, creative writing activities, or role play and simulations. Several of the activities described in previous sections are based on the use children's literature.

The appendix contains an annotated bibliography of children's literature which has been reviewed and selected for classroom use to reduce prejudice. Some of the books which appear on the list are picture books. While these picture books have not been used extensively with upper elementary students in the past, they are becoming more common. They can provide short and powerful lessons for upper elementary students as well as younger children.

Summary and Conclusion

Once teachers have examined their own feelings about differences, there is a great deal they can do to combat prejudice. A multicultural and anti-bias curriculum that integrates multiple perspectives and discussions of prejudice and discrimination into the curriculum can significantly reduce bias behavior. Prejudice reduction approaches are also necessary. Examples of methods which reduce prejudice are development of critical thinking skills, self-esteem enhancement, cooperative learning groups and empathy building activities. The curriculum

sampler focuses on developing empathy building activities for an upper elementary classroom using role play, simulations, films and children's literature. The research strongly implies that by using methods, such as the ones listed above, teachers can have a great effect in the reduction of prejudice.

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Walsh, D. (1988). Critical thinking to reduce prejudice. Social Education, 52 (4), 280-282.

Appendix

Resources for Teachers

Film

- Goble, M. (Production assistant) & Burke, W.P. (Writer). (1986). Young peoples' specials: Umbrella jack [Film]. Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities. (A young boy associates with an outcast old man.)
- Mitchell, J. (Producer & director). (1992). Disney's the little mermaid: Ariel's undersea adventures: Vol. 4. In harmony [Film]. Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Video. (A manta ray tries to disrupt the harmony in the undersea kingdom by introducing prejudice.)

Children's Literature

- Ackerman, K. (1988). Song and Dance Man. New York: Scholastic. (A grandfather entertains his grandchildren with song and dance from his vaudeville days.)*
- Blume, J. (1974). Blubber. Scarsdale, NY: Bradbury. (A pre-teen girl is ridiculed for her weight.)
- Blume, J. (1971). Freckle Juice. New York: Four Winds Press. (A boy wants freckles in order to fit in.)
- Bunting, E. (1991). Fly Away Home. New York: Clarion Books. (A homeless father and his son live in an airport.)*
- Cannon, J. (1993). Stellaluna. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company. (A young bat must adjust to the customs of the family she lives with.)*
- Carter, F. (1976). The Education of Little Tree. Albuquerque, NM: The University of New Mexico Press. (The education of a Cherokee boy is not recognized at school.)
- Danziger, P. (1974). The Cat Ate My Gynsuit. New York: Delacorte. (An unpopular young girl stands up for her beliefs.)
- Ernst, L. C. (1983). Sam Johnson and the Blue-Ribbon Quilt. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books. (Sam experiences prejudice when he takes up quilting.)*
- Estes, E. (1944). The Hundred Dresses. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich. (An immigrant child experiences discrimination due to her dress and accent.)
- Fitzgerald, J. D. (1967). The Great Brain. New York: Dell. (Characters have a subtle background of religious differences.)
- Hoffman, M. (1991). Amazing Grace. Bergenfield, NJ: Penguin. (Classmates object to having an African-American girl play Peter Pan in the school play.)*

- Levinson, M. (1985). And Don't Bring Jeremy. New York: Henry Holt and Company. (The younger brother of a neurologically impaired boy faces the prejudices of his friends.)
- Lowry, L. (1989). Number the Stars. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. (The story of two girls during the Nazi occupation of Denmark.)
- Martin, B. & Archambault, B. (1987). Knots on a Counting Rope. New York: The Trumpet Club. (A grandfather reminds a young Native American boy about all he's accomplished despite his blindness.)*
- Mills, L. (1991). The Rag Coat. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. (An Appalachian girl is teased about her new coat.)
- Mitchell, M. K. (1993). Uncle Jed's Barber Shop. New York: Simon & Schuster. (An African-American family deals with segregation in an unsuspected way.)*
- Mohr, N. (1979). Felita. New York: Bantam Skylark. (A Puerto Rican family faces discrimination when they move to a nicer neighborhood.)
- Odell, S. (1970). Sing Down the Moon. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. (Story of a young Navajo girl on a relocation march.)
- Parks, R. (1992). Rosa Parks: My Story. New York: Dial (The autobiography of a heroic African-American woman and her stand on civil rights.)
- Speare, E. G. (1958). The Witch of Blackbird Pond. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. (Religious prejudice leads townspeople to make accusations of witchcraft).
- Sterling, D. (1954). Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman. New York: Scholastic. (The true story of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad.)
- Taylor, M. (1976). Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. New York: Bantam. (An African-American family faces prejudice during the Great Depression.)
- Yolen, J. (1988). The Devil's Arithmetic. New York: Viking Kestrel. (A modern-day Jewish girl experiences the holocaust first hand.)

* Denotes picture books.