
**I NO LONGER FEEL COMFORTABLE TEACHING HERE: THE NEED FOR
SCHOOLS TO SUPPORT EDUCATORS TEACHING AGAINST RACISM**

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ABSTRACT

Teaching against racism is not easy. Not only might school students oppose a classroom discourse that opposes race-related discourse they have heard in their social surrounds—and believed, but so too might their parents and other adults in the school community. Even if anti-racism learning outcomes are achieved, opposition from parents, colleagues and even school leaders can be challenging to navigate. This paper presents the author’s experience as an Australian school teacher when faced with such opposition for teaching against racism toward Aboriginal Australians. Ways schools can better support anti-racism initiatives and those who facilitate them are put forward.

Key Words: Racism, anti-racism education, school leadership, Aboriginal Australians, parental opposition, anti-antiracism

INTRODUCTION

Anti-racism education is imperative due to the persistence of racism the world over, and children not being immune to it. Children are not ‘colour-blind’, but develop basic understandings of race-related differences and power relationships from which they determine who to play with and who to exclude (York, 2016). From the early years (0-5 years) they start picking up race-related understandings, language and behaviour from a range of influences, including storybooks, films, nursery rhymes and other media (Christensen, 2017). From such influences, children can all too often commence believing that white people talk properly, think more cleverly, look better and, all round, are better (York, 2016).

Schools have the opportunity and the responsibility to shape children’s intellectual, social and emotional development — which racism seeks to erode (Kivel, 2017). Not only is classroom-based anti-racism education beneficial for students whose worldviews have been shaped by racist discourse, but victims of racism, due to the mental and physical impact of racism (Priest, Paradies, Trennery, Truong, Karlsen & Kelly, 2012).

But confronting racism is a challenging task, as victims of racism who speak out are often accused of ‘playing the race card’, and anti-racism initiatives often labelled a witch hunt (Heaton, 2018). Also, prejudices can be hidden. From nearly as early as children can develop

prejudices, they can learn to hide such perspectives behind a ‘vener of tolerance’, while behind this veneer the thoughts and feelings continue to grow. Adults often excuse the racist beliefs, language and behaviour children may begin to exhibit as an innocent preference for some characteristics and cultures over others. When racism comes to public light, the unfair treatment toward someone of another group is often rationalised as being due to their accent, or choice of music or food (Kivel, 2017).

Schools often fail to address racism held by students (New South Wales [NSW] Government, 2013). A survey conducted by Starke and Marszalek (2012) of more than 4,000 Australian schools found that over 20 per cent of students engaged in racist discourse online or at school. Unfortunately, however, there is often opposition from educators and parents toward anti-racism educational endeavours (NSW Government, 2013) and toward teaching about Aboriginal people and their perspectives (Craven, 2013). It is up to school leaders to determine the level to which they teach the Australian cross-curricula priority of Aboriginal histories and cultures (ACARA, 2013).

THE CASE STUDY

The author of this paper, in his capacity as a Grade Eight Humanities teacher, obtained permission from his school’s leaders to implement an anti-racism program of learning with the aim of improving students’ perspectives of Aboriginal Australians. The school was an Independent school in the low socio-economic and ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse suburbs of northern Adelaide, South Australia. A white-oriented homogenous culture was predominant in the school community, and there was little focus on multicultural or Aboriginal studies.

Against this backdrop, a program of learning was designed for two classes of 12-14-year-old Grade Eight students, to counter stereotypes about Aboriginal people in Australian social discourse by facilitating a contradicting, positive discourse about them and their histories, cultures and achievements. Students indicated they had learnt little about Aboriginal people at school, and had developed their understandings about Aboriginal people from what they had heard from family members, friends and media personalities.

The program of learning was facilitated only after ethics clearance had been obtained from the Charles Darwin University Ethics Committee, and all students, each with a guardian, signed and submitted a Consent Form to participate in the study. The program was implemented over a two-year qualitative action research cycle, with both cycles comprising a Grade Eight classroom — a total of 47 students. Throughout both cycles students reflected on what they were learning in their lesson and program reflections, and the teacher reviewed these reflections to progressively finesse his pedagogy and the lesson content to optimise student engagement. Students’ written reflections as well as the narratives and expositions they produced were photocopied for later thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involved coding and categorising students’ reflections and work to identify repeated ideas and sentiments expressed in their learning (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012),

Before the program of learning commenced, all but one of the 47 students indicated they believed Aboriginal people hold a range of negative traits (e.g. aggressive, unintelligent, bad parents etc.). The one student who did not had been observed making racist comments about Aboriginal people the week before the program commenced. The program of learning, showcasing positive qualities of Aboriginal people from before British Invasion of the continent through to today, moved students to rethink their perspectives. At the conclusion of the program, all students indicated they now see Aboriginal people as holding positive traits anonymous to the negative traits (e.g. aggressive, unintelligent, bad parents etc.) [for a full account see Heaton, 2018; 2019].

Several students specifically reflected on the fact they had initially felt prejudices toward Aboriginal people This included Emma:

At the beginning of the term I felt prejudice towards the Aboriginal people. I also felt distance and a distinct feel of fear towards them.

But throughout their engagement in the program of learning, divisions between “us” non-Aboriginal Australians and “them” Aboriginal Australians became increasingly blurred. Verma reflected on this:

But, as I found out in the lessons following, they are very much the same as we are. During the lessons I slowly started to warm up to them, feeling a change of sympathy and a special acceptance and affection.

DISCUSSION

While most students accepted what they learnt, and started to rethink their perspectives about Aboriginal people, some did not. Some parents also did not like what their children were learning, and complained to the teacher or directly to school leaders — whether the Principal or Middle or Senior School Coordinator. After having invited the teacher to implement the program of learning as a part of his PhD research, their support for his teaching and for him progressively waned.

One mother in a parent-teacher meeting told the teacher that what he was teaching in the program of learning is wrong. She argued that the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families from the 1920s to the 1970s was to save them from neglect and abuse, and therefore the right thing for the government to have done. The teacher explained the Australian Government has admitted having done the wrong thing and apologised to Aboriginal children and families who were forcibly separated. The teacher also pointed out that what he was teaching was a part of the school’s, the state’s and the national curriculum, and reflects the school’s core values of ‘opportunity’, ‘hope’ and ‘respect’. The teacher later learnt the mother had directly complained about him to the Middle School Coordinator (MSC), who, although his employment supervisor, did not talk the matter through with him.

What the MSC did do was arrange a parent-teacher meeting between the teacher and a second mother who had also complained about his teaching. The teacher was advised by the MSC that her complaints about his teaching had been raised with the School Principal, that he would join the two of them in the meeting, and after the meeting he will be submitting a formal report of the complaints to the Principal. During the meeting various questions were asked by the mother as to why students were being taught about the disadvantage and inequality Aboriginal Australians experience in education, employment, health, housing and life expectancy, as compared to the rest of the population. She was not satisfied with the same response he had used in the first meeting, that teaching the truth about Aboriginal people's contemporary experiences with racism is endorsed by the school's, state and national curriculum, and reflects the school's values. After the meeting the teacher was not given a copy of the formal report to the Principal, and nor did he hear anything from the MSC or Principal.

Over the course of the year the working relationship between the teacher and MSC became increasingly difficult. The latter made several derogatory comments and jokes about Aboriginal people, and had asked the teacher why he wants to teach about them. After the second parent-teacher meeting, and after having had appraised one of the teacher's lessons as satisfactory, the MSC needed to appraise a second and final lesson as part of the teacher's probationary review. The lesson was a part of the program of learning, focused on challenging misrepresentations about Aboriginal people in news reporting. After sitting in to appraise the lesson, the MSC pulled aside the student who had made racist comments about Aboriginal people — and who had resisted all the lessons in the program and whose mother was a school employee. The MSC appraised the lesson as dissatisfactory, with the comments "lessons were over students' heads" and "students would have felt they were hit by a truck". Because the appraisal left the teacher uncertain whether he would pass his probation period and become a permanent employee, he requested a meeting with the MSC. He presented to the MSC all students' lesson reflections that were part of his research methods, in which students agreed the lessons: 1. were understood; 2. made them feel comfortable; and 3. helped them rethink their perspectives about Aboriginal people. The MSC proceeded to adjust the appraisal, assessing the lesson as satisfactory.

The following year, when the program of learning was repeated for a second and final time, there was a somewhat physical confrontation with a father, who was also a member of staff and hence a colleague of the teacher. A large man, standing centimetres from the teacher with his finger in his face, asked in a loud voice why he is teaching about discrimination experienced by Aboriginal people. He told the teacher he was tarnishing his reputation at the school by selling a divisive political agenda. The Senior School Coordinator, who was the teacher's employment supervisor that year, observed the confrontation but did not say anything during or after the incident. The teacher was not sure what affected him more — the aggression from the colleague or his employment supervisor's silence.

During these ordeals, the teacher was uncertain as to his future employment at the school. When, a few months later, he was offered permanency at the school, he wasn't sure he wanted it. He no longer felt comfortable teaching there.

CONCLUSION

Anti-racism education must be taught sensitively due to its challenging nature, but it must also be taught effectively due to the fact racism is real and has often shaped the worldviews of students and adults in a school community. As seen in this study, by confronting racism in the classroom the teacher can be confronting the perspectives of students as well as, often, parents and colleagues, who can complain to school leaders. School leaders then have a decision to make — to support the teacher and the anti-racism learning outcomes being achieved, or support those complaints from those parents and staff.

Teaching against racism is a big enough challenge without the opposition that can come from not only students, parents and colleagues, but also school leaders. It is imperative for teachers facilitating anti-racism learning among students to be supported by their school leaders. School leaders must not only appreciate the reality of racism in society and how it can influence students' own perspectives, but also recognise the importance and challenge of teaching against it. If, however, support from school leaders is not forthcoming, teachers should proactively seek out the support and ensure it is maintained. Such support is crucial for optimising the socio-emotional development of children and the health and wellbeing of recipients of racism, and society as a whole.

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