
RECONCILIATION EDUCATION: A NEW CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTERRUPTING PREJUDICES AND DEVELOPING POSITIVE INTERGROUP PERSPECTIVES

Dr Adam Heaton
Charles Darwin University

ABSTRACT

Just as there are a myriad people groups across the world, there are countless prejudices and divisions between them. These prejudices and divisions can shape the worldview of children and young people. It was evident that 12-14 year old Grade 8 school students in Australia, of who the majority were white, initially held racial prejudices toward Aboriginal Australians. As students engaged in a program of learning about Aboriginal people they commenced dropping these prejudices and developing more positive perspectives toward them. This paper presents a conceptual framework for how Reconciliation Education, a new approach to anti-prejudice education, can provide students with opportunity to drop prejudices and see other groups of people more positively.

Key Words: Prejudice; Racism; Anti-prejudice Education; Aboriginal Studies; Reconciliation; Positive Intergroup Perspectives

1. INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that the language and behaviour of children is all too often shaped by prejudices they observe (York, 2016). Christensen (2017, pp. 4-5) explains that children pick up understandings of other groups of people from storybooks, films, nursery rhymes and a range of other media that can ‘depict the domination of one sex, one race, one class, or one country over a weaker counterpart.’ Even at a young age children commence identifying points of difference they have with other people, including people of other ethnicities and cultures, and can show aversion toward them (Connolly & Hoskens, 2006; York, 2016).

It is important to respond appropriately to prejudice as it has a devastating impact on a person’s intellectual, social and emotional development (Heaton, 2019a). Prejudice prevents its bearer from becoming a knowledgeable, healthy, socially skilled, responsible and contributing citizen, and impacts on the mental and physical health of the recipient (Priest, Paradies, Trennery, Truong, Karlsen, & Kelly, 2012; Heaton, 2019c).

But confronting prejudice is not easy. From as early as children can start to adopt prejudices, some can develop the tendency to hide aversive thoughts and feelings toward another group of people behind a ‘vener of tolerance’, while behind this veneer the thoughts and feelings continue to fester and grow (Kivel, 2017). Further complicating the task of teaching against

prejudice, even when taught sensitively and effectively, is opposition that can come from students, their parents, teachers and school leaders(Heaton, 2019b). Regardless, anti-prejudice education is imperative in light of the positive impact it can have, including in developing empathy and positive intergroup perspectives among learners (Heaton, 2019d).

2. RESEARCH METHODS

The author of this paper, in his capacity as a humanities teacher, obtained permission from the principal at the school at which he taught to implement a program of learning with the aim of improving students' perspectives of Aboriginal Australians. The school was an independent school in the lower socio-economic northern suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia. A white homogenous culture was predominant in the school community, and there was little to no focus on multicultural or Aboriginal studies (Heaton, 2018).

Against this backdrop, the teacher co-designed with a local Aboriginal elder a program of learning aimed at countering prejudices and stereotypes about Aboriginal people prevalent in Australian social discourse. The program presented a positive discourse about Aboriginal people and aspects of their culture, experiences and achievements. Ethics clearance was obtained from the Charles Darwin University Ethics Committee, and each student, together with a guardian, signed a Consent Form to participate in the study.

The program was implemented over a two-year qualitative action research cycle, both cycles comprising a Grade 8 classroom—47 students in total. Throughout both cycles students reflected on what they were learning, and the teacher reviewed these reflections to sharpen the lesson content and 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' writing to identify repeated ideas and sentiments (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012).

3. RESULTS

Students in this study indicated that prior to engaging in the program of learning they had learnt little about Aboriginal people at school, had interacted minimally with only a few Aboriginal people, and had developed their perspectives toward them from what they had heard from family members, friends and media personalities. Via a Likert-scale survey all but one of the 47 students disagreed or strongly disagreed Aboriginal people have a number of positive characteristics, such as approachable, intelligent and good parents. The one student who was the exception selected 'unsure' in response to all of the characteristics, but a week earlier he had been heard making derogatory comments about Aboriginal people. Numerous students identified on their own accord they had initially felt "prejudice" and "racism" toward them.

The full program (see Heaton 2019a; 2019d) portrayed Aboriginal people in a positive light as it introduced to students some of their past and present cultures, experiences and achievements. Over the duration of the program students reflected on what they were learning and if there were

any changes in their thoughts and feelings about Aboriginal people. At the end of the program the initial survey was repeated, and it was evident that most students now agreed and strongly agreed Aboriginal people have the positive characteristics. These new levels of agreement remained relatively high when students were surveyed again six (6) months later (see Heaton, 2018).

4. DISCUSSION

It is important to first identify prejudices that exist in society that may have shaped students' worldviews. The teacher in this study initially acknowledged Aboriginal people are often perceived by other Australians as bad parents, happily unemployed, alcoholics and in a range of other derogatory ways, and so designed the program of learning to try to counter these stereotypes. Through truth telling and raising students' awareness of the past and present lives of many Aboriginal people, students engaged in perspective taking (considering the perspectives of Aboriginal people) to start to see another, more positive side to them.

A particularly moving and meaningful learning moment was students considering and responding to the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families, sanctioned by Australian state and territory governments throughout the twentieth century. Students tried to imagine what this might have been like for Aboriginal children and their families, and its continuing impact on Aboriginal people today. While students appreciated they themselves have not experienced such injustices and so cannot relate to them, their attempts to imagine and empathise with them were key to better understanding the experiences of not all but many Aboriginal people (Heaton, 2019d). In response students wrote narratives from the imagined perspective of an Aboriginal character, and later reflected on how this narrative writing helped them empathise with Aboriginal people and start to see them more positively.

Another significant learning moment was meeting Stef, a local Aboriginal elder and cultural educator. Stef shared with a few poems and songs that depict the environmental responsibility and strong family and kinship systems of Aboriginal people. Students later reflected that Stef showed them how kind, insightful and community-oriented Aboriginal people are, which was crucial in helping them see Aboriginal people as approachable, responsible and intelligent.

At the end of the program of learning students reflected that the lessons had helped them reconsider the prejudice they had initially held. They now not only viewed Aboriginal people as being "amazing" and "brilliant", but "just like us". Perhaps more importantly, most students acknowledged that no group of people should be considered and treated as inferior. Resonance was seen between students' reflections on their learning experience and concepts of reconciliation between Aboriginal people and other Australians, which comprises understanding and valuing others' cultures and experiences, supporting their rights, and standing together in unity (Reconciliation Australia, 2017).

From this study, Reconciliation Education has been coined as a teaching-learning approach for interrupting prejudices and developing positive intergroup perspectives. Figure 1 presents a

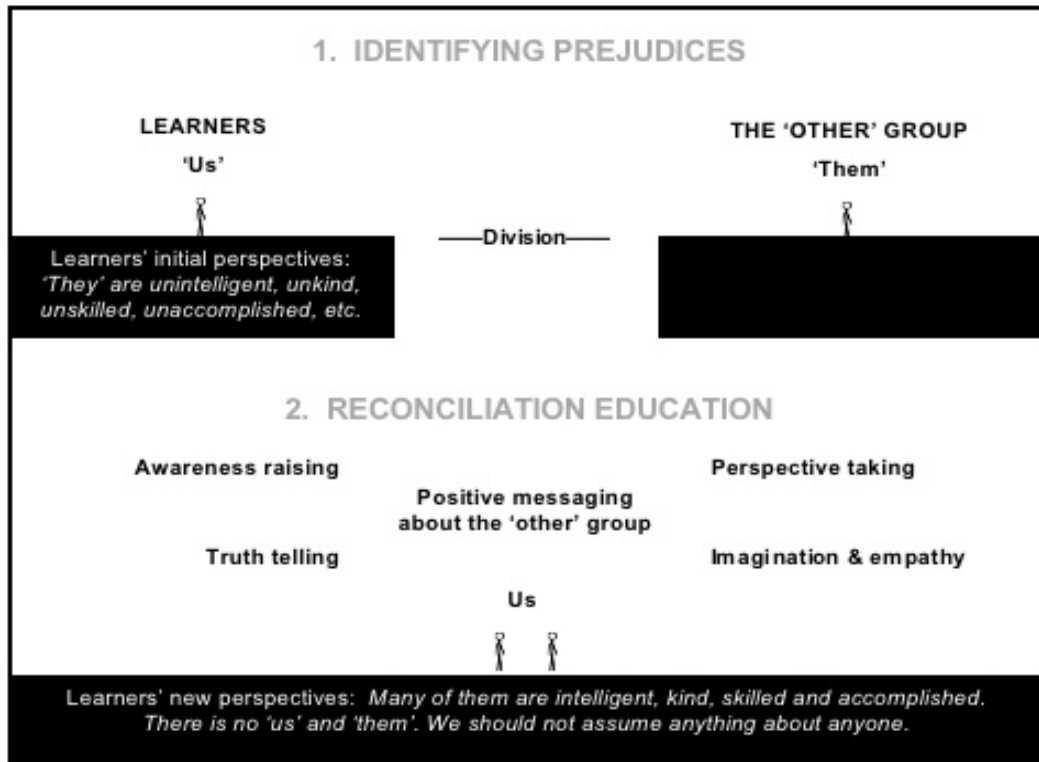


Figure.1 Reconciliation Education (Heaton, 2020)

conceptual framework for Reconciliation Education, which commences with the teacher identifying prejudices prevalent in society toward another group of people that may have shaped students’ perspectives toward them (such as ‘them’ being unintelligent, unkind, unskilled and unaccomplished). Reconciliation Education centers positive messaging about the ‘other’ group of people—messaging that is antonymous to prejudices and stereotypes about them. Raising learners’ awareness through telling the truth about some of the others’ past and present experiences, cultures and accomplishments provides students opportunity to try to take their perspectives, imagine their experiences and empathise with them. As was the case in this study, divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are closed when students start to see that many of them are intelligent, kind, skilled and accomplished, and assumptions about other groups of people shouldn’t be made.

5. CONCLUSION

Reconciliation Education provides a framework from which teachers can craft a program of learning to respond to prejudices or intergroup divisions prevalent in society that may have shaped students’ worldviews. Just as there are countless groups of people across the globe, there are a myriad of prejudices and divisions between them, and hence endless possible applications of Reconciliation Education. Through presenting a positive discourse about the ‘other’ group,

teachers facilitate opportunities for students to see that there is no 'us' and 'them', but we are all one, and while no one is perfect, we are all pretty amazing.

REFERENCES

Christensen, L. (2017). Unlearning the Myths That Bind Us: Critiquing Cartoons and Society. *Rethinking schools*, 31(3).

Connolly, P., & Hosken, K. (2006). The general and specific effects of educational programmes aimed at promoting awareness of and respect for diversity among young children. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 14(2), 107-126.

Guest, G., MacQueen, K., & Namey, E. (2012). *Introduction to applied thematic analysis*. Applied thematic analysis, UK: Sage Publications.

Heaton, A.P. (2018). Kids can show prejudice and teachers can show them another path. *Issues in Educational Research*, 28(4), 940-954. Retrieved 10/4/2020.

Heaton, A.P. (2019a). Combatting racism to create a better Australia: the potential of the national cross-curriculum priority of teaching Aboriginal histories and cultures. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, Issue 1, 2019. Retrieved 10/4/2020.

Heaton, A.P. (2019b). I no longer feel comfortable teaching here: The need for schools to support educators teaching against racism. *International Journal of Education Humanities and Social Science*, 2(3), 33-46. Retrieved 10/4/2020.

Heaton, A.P. (2019c). The Importance of Students Engaging in Anti-Racism Education: A Case Study. *World Journal of Educational Research*, 6(2). Retrieved 10/4/2020.

Heaton, A.P. (2019d). The Path of Empathy: Students imagining the impact of racism and re-thinking their race-related perspectives. *International Journal of Education Humanities and Social Science*, 2(3), 33-46. Retrieved 10/4/2020.

Kivel, P. (2017). *Uprooting racism: How white people can work for racial justice*, (4th ed.), US: New Society Publishers.

Priest, N., Paradies, Y., Trennerry, B., Truong, M., Karlsen, S., & Kelly, Y. (2012). A systematic review of studies examining the relationship between reported racism and health and wellbeing for children and young people. *Social Science & Medicine*, 10(95), 115-127.

Reconciliation Australia. (2017). *What is Reconciliation?* Retrieved 10/4/2020.

York, S. (2016). *Roots and wings: Affirming culture in early childhood programs*. US: Redleaf Press.