

RACIAL PREJUDICE IN THE CLASSROOM: A DEVELOPMENTAL COUNSELLING APPROACH

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Abstract

The writers were approached by an elementary school principal for help with incidences of overt racial prejudice in a regular Grade 5 class. In order to effect change it was decided to work with the whole class rather than just the identified children. To this end, the developmental counselling approach of classroom discussions was used. Four topics were selected: *Being a New Canadian, Being New, Being Different and Being Racially Different*. The purpose of the discussions was to strengthen self-esteem by valuing each child's unique ethnic identity before helping the children shift to understanding and accepting differences. The format for each discussion session was similar. A series of detailed stimulus questions were provided to help children explore the issues, understand them, and to stimulate positive action. The results indicated that these questions and the discussions activated positive racial attitudes and greatly improved the emotional climate of the classroom. Follow-ups one week, three months, and one year later indicated that incidences of racial prejudice did not reoccur.

Résumé

Le directeur d'une école élémentaire a fait appel aux auteurs de cet article afin d'analyser certains incidents raciaux survenus dans une classe régulière de cinquième année. Plutôt que d'intervenir uniquement auprès des enfants concernés, les auteurs ont préféré faire participer tous les enfants de la classe au processus de changement. Ils sont intervenus à titre de conseiller, suivant le modèle de développement progressif lors des discussions en classe. Quatre thèmes ont été choisis: Être néo-canadien; être nouveau; être différent; être de race différente. Dans un premier temps, les discussions visaient à renforcer l'appréciation de soi de même que l'identité ethnique propre à chaque élève. Dans un second temps, il s'agissait de faire comprendre et accepter les différences existantes. Chaque discussion suivait un modèle semblable. On donnait une série de problèmes de manière à inciter l'élève à explorer et comprendre les solutions possibles pour l'amener ensuite à poser des gestes positifs. Les résultats ont montré ensuite à poser des gestes positifs. Les résultats ont montré que les points abordés ainsi que la formule de discussions de groupe ont généré des attitudes raciales positives et ont contribué à l'amélioration du climat de la classe. Des évaluations après une semaine, trois mois et un an ont révélé qu'aucune autre manifestation de préjugés raciaux n'était survenue depuis.

In such a multicultural country as Canada there are bound to be clashes and conflicts between races and various ethnic groups. Some of this conflict will manifest itself in the schools. Several questions arise: How do teachers handle these situations when they occur in the classroom? What can teachers do in a developmental way that might prevent or minimize such outbursts? What can counsellors do to help teachers cope with this issue?

The purpose of this paper is to describe a developmental counselling approach that the writers devised in order to help a regular Grade 5 teacher deal with acts of overt racial prejudice in his class. In developmental counselling, a counsellor or teacher works with the emotional or affective concerns of the pupils within the context of the whole

classroom (Dinkmeyer, 1966, Van Hesteren, 1978). The specific form of developmental counselling used in this study is that of classroom discussions (Keat, 1974). Using this method, issues can be aired, thoughts and feelings understood, and appropriate actions stimulated.

Background

In November 1978, the principal of an elementary school in an almost exclusively white, middle-class suburb of Vancouver, B.C., was visited by the mother of one of his Grade 5 students. The mother complained that her daughter, Riga (a pseudonym), was being called names (e.g., "rug flyer", "Punjab") by some boys in her class. In addition, she stated that when the girl brought some food from home for a Halloween party the boys

not only refused to eat it but also made derogatory comments. The mother wanted the principal to intercede and stop the name calling and remarks as they were causing her daughter to be very unhappy at school.

In order to gain more information about the problem, the principal spoke to the girl's teacher. The teacher was aware of the problem and verified the mother's complaints. He identified three boys who he knew were name calling and felt that no one else was involved. He also mentioned that the girl was a good student and behaved well in class. She did not, in his opinion, provoke any of the negative racial remarks and it seemed that she was singled out because her skin colour was significantly darker than the rest of her classmates. The teacher was unsure of how to proceed to ameliorate this problem in his classroom and was open to outside help.

Though the problem seemed quite specific — three boys picking on one East Indian girl — the actions were occurring within the social context of the classroom. We felt that if change was going to occur and to be maintained, we would have to work with the whole class, including the teacher. With this in mind we set about reviewing the literature on racial prejudice (Nairne, 1980) so that we could address some of the key components in our methodology.

Review of the Literature

In order to design formats that would help change some of the central dynamics involved in racial prejudice, two main areas of the literature were reviewed: the determinants of racial prejudice and methods of attitude change.

Determinants of Racial Prejudice

Although researchers differ in the determinants they emphasize to explain racial prejudice, most agree that racial attitudes are multi-causally determined and are functional and need satisfying for the individual. In other words, racial attitudes are rooted both in a child's social environment and in the psychological processes that initiate and direct his behaviour in that environment (Allport, 1954). For example, sociocultural determinants emphasize the crucial role played by parents (Horowitz & Horowitz, 1938), community groups (Radke & Trager, 1950), and neighbours, teachers and peers (Davidson, 1976). Psychological determinants focus on displacement of hostility theory (Berkowitz, 1959), rigid personality organization (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), or learning through identification with prejudiced parents (Mischel, 1968).

Other related research (Grambs, 1973) shows that children who are subjected to arbitrary and

inconsistent authority and are insecure about their parents' affections typically do not like themselves. A lack of self-acceptance in a child has been found to be closely associated with an inability to adjust adequately to other children. Children who do not like themselves find it difficult to learn to like others. They tend to transfer their self-contempt to others, particularly those who are part of socially sanctioned out-groups.

Methods of Attitude Change

Although there has been considerable research conducted on attitude change, the literature on action programs for elementary school counsellors and teachers is very limited.

Theories. Rosenberg (1960) proposes that an attitude can be held if there exists a consistency between the affective and cognitive components implicit to the attitude. If either the cognitive or affective components shift markedly, the resulting inconsistency produces a drive or tendency to change until a new balance is achieved.

This theory is similar in its assumptions about motivation to the cognitive dissonance theory of Festinger (1957) and to the assimilation-disequilibrium-accommodation model of Piaget (1960). In Piaget's terms, when perceptual experiences are discrepant or discordant with previous ones, children become motivated to reorganize their cognitive structures. This process is called accommodation and with complex material a complete restructuring of attitudes may take several weeks to occur.

Research. Most of the research studies reviewed next incorporate various aspects of the above theories. The studies which seem most successful, however, are those which incorporate both affective and cognitive components.

Interracial contact on its own will not bring about positive racial attitudes (Baptiste, 1977; Patterson, 1977) and, in fact, might increase racial negativism (Gaughran, 1975). Also, most strictly informational approaches have proved unsuccessful (Graves, 1976; Koeller, 1977). Where positive changes have occurred they seem largely due to such key instructor variables as positive instructor-student relationship and the favourable attitudes of the instructor (North, 1977).

Recently the Association for Values Education and Research (1978) has published a kit designed to teach moral reasoning to students in order to help them stop acting on the basis of their prejudice. However, no research is yet available on its effectiveness.

When information reaches the affective levels, change seems possible. In a television film series entitled *Vegetable Soup* (Mays, 1975), focus was placed on developing genuine appreciation of

members of all racial groups by fostering positive identification with one's own ethnic group, accepting outsiders, showing friendliness, and changing occupational stereotypes. In a controlled study, positive attitudinal shifts were found for each of the four objectives for the experimental group.

Experiencing discrimination through role-play and talking about it increases children's empathy for minority group children (Clement, 1977; Weiner & Wright, 1973; Wilson, 1969). In a series of classroom discussions where students identified feeling and behaviours of whites and blacks and discussed these in relation to improving communication between the races, positive results were found (Gumaer, 1977).

These findings have a number of important methodological implications for a teacher or counsellor who wants to change negative racial attitudes in the elementary classroom. They suggest that: (1) a positive relationship be established between the instructor and the pupil, (2) material be provided that enhances self-esteem through positive identity with one's own ethnic group, (3) from this base, new and harder to assimilate information can be provided, and (4) role playing and discussion are useful techniques for activating empathy and attitude change.

Method

Four classroom discussion formats were designed. Topics were selected and arranged to have a cumulative effect, with each session building on the one before. The material was presented during Social Studies and purposefully the words "racial prejudice" were never mentioned. The topics were: *Being a New Canadian*, *Being New*, *Being Different*, and *Being Racially Different*. The overall goals of the sessions were to help the children feel good about their backgrounds, themselves and others, to cope with new situations, and to feel comfortable with differences.

The structure of each session was similar and contained three separate stages: (1) exploring thoughts and feelings (Exploration stage), (2) understanding issues (Understanding stage), and (3) developing action steps to improve relationships in the school and class (Action stage). Copies of each session with objectives and stimulus questions have been published by Allan and Nairne (1980) and are available on request. Within this format the counsellor provides the specific questions and structure while the pupils do the responding, *thinking through*, and *action*. The teacher was present during all discussions and participated as a member of the class.

Results

For each session a brief description will be provided of the method and the pupils' responses.

Session One: Being a New Canadian

In order to prepare the class for the discussions, the teacher alerted the pupils three days in advance that a counsellor was coming into the classroom to conduct four Social Studies classes. At the start of the first session the counsellor announced:

My name is Mrs. Nairne. Your teacher has asked me to come into your class, as part of your Social Studies program, to lead some classroom discussions about Canada. In the next four weeks we will talk about the variety of people who have come to Canada from all parts of the world, the reasons why they came to Canada and the problems a person coming to a "new" country might have.

How many of you have been in a classroom discussion before? There are two things that everyone must remember when participating in a classroom discussion: raise your hand if you want to say something and listen carefully when others are speaking.

Then students were asked where they, their parents and grandparents were born. Each country was identified on the wall map of the world and listed on the chalkboard (Exploration stage). Next they were asked why their parents or grandparents came to this country and how they imagined they felt during the first six months to a year (Understanding stage). For their homework they were asked to fill in a mini-family tree chart (Action stage) and to share it with others at the next class meeting.

All the children were very excited by the material and became aware of the multi-cultural nature of the classroom. Most were second generation Canadian. All three identified boys were involved and contributed information to the discussion while Riga listened attentively throughout.

Session Two: Being New

This session started with a review and discussion of the family trees: "Did you learn anything new when you spoke with your parents?" This was followed by discussion of a number of questions designed to help the pupils: (a) explore their thoughts and feelings about being new (i.e., their first day at school, moving to a new class), (b) understand new situations, and (c) think of ways they could help newcomers to the class or school feel accepted and at ease.

Once again the children were enthusiastic about sharing their unique experiences in new situations. Riga spoke up and her information was well accepted by all. A whole range of thoughts and feelings and experiences were shared (e.g., excited, scared, frightened) and many useful suggestions were given to make a "new" person feel at home. For example, "take him on a tour of the school and class, introduce yourself, ask him to play, show him the washroom and where to hang his coat, ask

him if he wants help with his work, take him home to meet your mum or dad."

Session Three: Being Different

In order to help the children see and discuss conflict on the basis of physical differences, the award winning Canadian short film "Balablok" (Pojar, 1972) was shown at the beginning of the third session. This film depicts the start and escalation of a war that develops when a "ball" bounces into "block" territory. The following introduction was provided in order to connect the film with the previous sessions and to focus the children's thinking processes:

In our previous sessions we were trying to imagine how an immigrant to a new country, and a child entering a new class, might feel. Today I am going to show you a film which is related to those topics and I want you to notice how the characters were feeling at the beginning of the movie and what happened that caused the feelings to change.

The film captured the attention of all of the children and in the exploration phase they seemed to identify with the "picked on" ball. They imagined that the ball felt isolated, sad and angry and that the blocks picked on the ball because (a) the ball was different, (b) they had not seen the ball before, (c) the ball intruded into their territory, and (d) the blocks wanted the area to themselves.

They developed conflict resolution action strategies for both sides. The blocks could have ignored the ball, greeted the ball just like they greeted other blocks, and/or let the ball pass unmolested. The ball could have walked out, stayed out of the area, or not retaliated.

When asked, at the end, what they learned from the film, responses fell into four categories: "Don't pick on people who are different like Negroes, don't start fights, accept every human being, and every person should have equal rights."

Session Four: Being Racially Different

The understanding phase of this session was composed of two parts. In the first part, anthropological information regarding the origins of man and his dispersion over the world was given (Grevious, 1968). This was followed by an empathic exercise. Pupils were asked to imagine how it would feel to live in a country where most of their classmates were dark-skinned and to imagine being teased about their light skin. Later they were asked to describe how a dark-skinned child might feel if he was teased in their school and what might cause a child to tease another child about his skin colour.

This was the most powerful session. The children were fascinated by the anthropological data and were able to imagine being teased and to iden-

tify with the dark-skinned child. They felt he would be sad, angry, and embarrassed, that "kids should not do it", and that regardless of colour or race children all felt the same way when teased. Riga listened but did not contribute verbally while the three boys spoke up against teasing.

When asked what they could do to help someone who looked different feel comfortable in their class or school they came up with the following suggestions: be friendly to them, smile at them, include them in games at recess, share your snack with them, help them with school work, sit beside them, walk with them in the hall, be interested in them, and ask them about their family and where they came from.

Evaluation

A week later, the counsellor returned to the class and conducted an informal evaluation session. On a blank piece of paper, without writing their names, the pupils were asked:

1. "Did you learn anything from our classroom discussions? Answer Yes or No."
2. As a result of the discussions "How has your attitude changed towards the boys and girls in this class?"

The responses were collected and those of Riga and the three boys noted. The results of question #1 indicated that 25 children responded affirmatively (including Riga and the three boys), one said "No" and there was one "I don't know". Their written responses included the following:

Riga: I have learned lots of things about families and respecting other people.

Boys: 1. I have learned about different families.
2. I have learned about where I came from and where my parents and grandparents came from. I've learned to treat a new person like you would your best friend.
3. (No response).

Others: 1. I have learned not to laugh at people that are a different colour and not to tease them.
2. I've learned that some kids are from different places and we should treat them just like we treat people from our own country.
3. I've learned not to be mean to someone if they are different from you.
4. Just because you came from another classroom or school you wouldn't like to be teased or called names.
5. I have learned where my family came from and how other people's skin is darker than mine.

The responses to question #2 were also very favourable.

Riga: I don't call the boys names.

Boys: 1. I sort of learned something because I use

- to say: "Ew you have her germs" but I'll try not to say it any more.
2. I don't call kids names in my class any more.
 3. (No response).
- Others:
1. I've learned how we're different and how to welcome people and that their differences in colour doesn't matter.
 2. I've learned to treat other people how I want to be treated.
 3. My attitude really changed because I know how they really feel now.
 4. My attitude is that they are people just like me.
 5. I've learned to respect other people because I know what it feels like because I'm new.

Teacher's responses. A week after the sessions the teacher was asked for his evaluation. He was very pleased with the outcome. He was surprised by the high quality of discussion that had occurred, by the many good ideas that had emerged, and by the number of children that had contributed. The film and family tree seemed particularly successful. As far as he could determine, racial name calling and any other signs of prejudice had ceased entirely. He felt he had learned a lot from being present at the discussions and that he would implement the same program if this type of problem reoccurred in his class.

Follow-up. A follow-up with both the teacher and the principal three months after the program was completed revealed that Riga was happy and that neither had received any complaints or were aware of any signs of racial prejudice. A further follow-up a year later with the girl's Grade 6 teacher indicated a similar picture.

Discussion

From everyone's point of view the program met its stated goal as racial name calling and teasing stopped and did not reoccur. Riga and two of the boys showed considerable change of attitude as did many other members of the class as assessed by the evaluation. One of the identified boys, though stating that he did learn something from the discussions, never wrote any descriptive comments saying what had changed for him. However, the teacher did not see any more prejudiced behaviour and noticed a very positive shift in the emotional climate of the classroom.

In our own evaluation of the program, we felt it worked because (a) one focus was on strengthening each child's sense of self-esteem, (b) the materials and topics captured the children's interest, (c) the topics were presented sequentially (moving from acceptable tasks to more threatening material), (d) the methodology allowed most of the children to explore the issues, understand their own various thoughts and feel-

ings, and to try out certain action steps, and (e) the materials and information given reached both the affective and cognitive levels of the pupils.

This program was developed in response to a crisis request. The counsellors attempted to respond to the need for help as quickly and as efficiently as possible. In order to determine more accurately the degree of effectiveness of such a program the writers plan a more thorough evaluation using pre- and post-tests (measuring the self-esteem of students and racial attitudes) and experimental and control classrooms. If empirical evidence to validate this study is found, developmental counselling methods may play an important role in the future in both preventing and remediating racial prejudice.

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