

Increasing Empathy, Decreasing Prejudice: The Role of Empathy in Challenging Prejudice among Students

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Abstract

Is empathy a remedy for prejudice? This short paper argues it has a large role to play. It explores the author's observations as a Humanities teacher engaging Grade 8 Australian students between the ages of 12 and 14 in a study of the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. As students empathised with Aboriginal (Indigenous Australian) children forcibly removed from their families under Australian government policy in the twentieth century, they questioned the negative things they themselves had come to believe about Indigenous Australians.

Keywords: anti-prejudice education, anti-racism education, empathy, middle school, positive perspectives, social-emotional learning

Prejudice toward the Indigenous population, and numerous other groups of people in Australia, remains prevalent (Gallaher et al., 2009; Heaton, 2019). Recognizing children are shaped by what they see and hear around them (Christensen, 2017; York, 2016), the author of this paper hypothesized the students in two of his Grade 8 classes may well hold racial prejudices toward Indigenous Australians. Sure enough, they did. Before the first lesson commenced, not some, not most, but all 47 students in two classes he taught over two years openly indicated when they responses to a pre-survey, before the first lesson commenced, they held a range of negative beliefs about Indigenous Australians, including them being bad parents, unapproachable and even aggressive. They also reflected they had developed these perspectives about Indigenous Australians from what they had seen and heard from family members, friends, school and on television and radio — such as vilification of Indigenous Australians in television sitcoms and negative reporting on the news.

Schools have the potential, and arguably the role, of interrupting prejudices young people may potentially hold (Heaton, 2019; 2020). However, there is next to no mention of addressing racial or other forms of prejudice or teaching against it the Australian Curriculum, Accountability and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2013). Nevertheless, there is mention of teaching Indigenous histories and cultures and developing the general capability of intercultural understandings, which includes empathy. Based on this, in his role as a middle school teacher in South Australia, the author of this paper co-developed with local Indigenous educators and elders a program of learning aimed at countering stereotypes prevalent about Indigenous Australians, many of that are identified by Reconciliation Australia (2018). To do this, the approach he used was to showcase positive representations of Indigenous Australians, their cultures and their resilience and achievements amidst experiences of racial prejudice. The program of learning, or intervention, included them viewing the 2002 film *Rabbit-Proof*

Fence, based on true events of Indigenous Australian children being forcibly removed from their families, legalized under Australia's state government white Australia policies to assimilate or 'remove the Aboriginal' out of these children, and out of the nation. Often, these children never saw their families again.

In response to viewing *Rabbit-Proof Fence* over the duration of three 45-minute lessons, students were asked to journal their thoughts and feelings as well as write narratives in which they tried to imagine what it might be like to go through what the three girls in the film, Molly, Daisy and Gracie experienced. As the teacher, the author of this paper had never before observed such attentiveness from the otherwise highly distracted students. Over the coming week of viewing and responding to the film, students demonstrated expressions of concern for and empathy with the three Indigenous girls and their families and the broader community in the film (see Heaton, 2019). Their expressions of empathy reflected the conceptualization of empathy as being an innate response to another person felt to varying degrees of intensity (Rogers et al., 2007) which can result in actively caring for another person (Minio-Paluello et al., 2009).

Empathy was clearly evident in student's narratives that they creatively wrote from the imagined perspective of an Indigenous child. This imaginative narrative writing involved taking creative liberty of giving their Indigenous character a personality and the community they are from aspects of Indigenous cultures in relation to cooking, hunting, dancing and playing learned about in class. Most students selected Indigenous names for the character and communities in their narratives based on local Indigenous words they learned about. Olivia, for instance, named her character Tathra, which she had learned is Pitjantjatjara for a beautiful country. Peter introduced his character as being from the fictional town of Port Willabaroo, which sounds like the actual town that goes by the Aboriginal name of Wallaroo.

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Student's experienced what could be described as a foreign consciousness — an external awareness of knowing a world outside their own, as they developed a peripheral cognition of Aboriginal cultures and experiences (Minio-Paluello et al., 2009). Student's willingness and enthusiasm to consider what they thought might be the perspective of an Indigenous child was akin to Rogers and colleague's (2007) conceptualization of empathy as trying to imagine oneself in another person's situation. From learning about the forcible removal of children from their families and communities, in her narrative writing, Faith, like others of her classmates, demonstrated a willingness to try to take the perspective of an Indigenous child forcibly removed from her parents:

My mum quickly hid me and all the other mothers ran to get their children to hide them too. It made tears run down my face hearing all this and I was shaking so much that even my legs couldn't stay still. I was terrified and scared they were going to find me. When they were gone, my mother was happy that I wasn't taken but terribly upset for the other children and their parents.

Faith and her classmates acknowledged they had not personally experienced the same ordeals they were learning many Indigenous children and families faced, but they were able to draw upon some of their own upsetting experiences, such as being temporarily lost in a shopping mall, to identify how Indigenous children, to a very limited extent, may have felt upon being removed from their families. Trying to take an Indigenous perspective helped students better understand and appreciate the experiences of Indigenous people. Cognitive empathy was also demonstrated by students in the form of what de Waal (2008) refers to as assessing the causes of another person's distress. Students perceived the impact of racism, with Alan, for one identifying the 'heartache' and 'pain' he perceived Aboriginal peoples to have felt upon experiencing the forcible removal of children from their families and other forms of racism.

Creative expressions by Faith, Alan and the majority of their classmates not only showed their attempts to take another's perspective and understand the cause of their distress but also what Hodges and Klein (2001) conceptualize as trying to know the other's feelings. Catherine reflected on how she thinks she might have felt and responded in a similar way to the Aboriginal peoples she learned about if she encountered the same racial discrimination as them. She drew upon how in the past, she had cried herself to sleep when upset and creatively directed her lead Aboriginal character in her narrative to do the same upon experiencing forcible separation from her family. The ability to identify and, to some level, feel appropriate emotions that at least they perceive Indigenous children might have felt experience upon experiencing the ordeals portrayed in Rabbit-Proof Fence. For instance, students felt and articulated joy in their writing when learning about the bliss of Indigenous cultures and community activity and sadness and upset in response to the oppression experienced by the Indigenous characters in the film.

Student's narrative writing proved imperative in moving students toward feeling empathy with Indigenous Australians and dropping prejudices toward them. Like numerous classmates, Britney reflected on how she wrote her story with deep emotion as she tried to imagine how she might feel if she experienced the adversity the Indigenous characters in the film encountered. Claire reflected on how she felt 'pain, hurt and love' as she empathetically wrote her narrative and exposition:

I was able to express my creativity while feeling the pain, hurt and love at the same time. I feel the same way about my exposition, being able to express my feelings and thoughts through words.

From engaging in the program of learning and writing narratives from the imagined perspectives of Indigenous Australians, students started to respond with a range of positive emotions towards and perspectives of Indigenous people. Verma reflected on how she started to see Indigenous Australians are 'very much the same as we are' and experience 'warm' feelings toward them.

It was apparent students did not merely write their narratives as a task they were required by as part of their assessment to do, but as exercises, they wanted to do, to articulate the new feelings and perspectives toward Indigenous Australians and the injustices

they have faced. As a result, students developed more positive attitudes toward and perspectives of Indigenous Australians. At the end of their learning, when surveyed again, the large majority indicated they now see Indigenous Australians as being approachable, responsible, good parents, resilient and with other positive characteristics (see Heaton, 2020). The majority of students reflected that Indigenous Australians are great people and not that much different from other Australians.

It is concluded that when presented with a realistic portrayal of racial prejudice encountered and navigated by Indigenous people, students take the initiative to consider whether or not what they have assumed about 'them' is true. Although children and youth can be shaped by racist and other prejudicial discourse about another group of people, they can also reason when presented with alternative, positive portrayals of the 'other' and respond with empathy with them in response to the discrimination they have faced. Such empathy, as well as admiration for the resilience shown in the face of injustice, goes a long way to challenging prejudice and having students see that 'they are pretty awesome, and not all that different to themselves. Further educational initiatives and research will unearth other similar pro-social, anti-prejudice learning outcomes toward building better societies.

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