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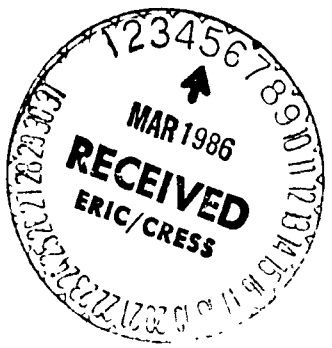
ABSTRACT

Rural elementary school teachers were interviewed to determine their knowledge of student prejudices and how they encouraged acceptance of differences; students were interviewed to determine what prejudices were held. Eight rural teachers and 53 first, third, and fifth grade students in a small northern Rocky Mountain community with no racial, ethnic, or religious minority inhabitants were interviewed. Rural first graders were found to know many ethnic and racial stereotypes, perceived people different from themselves as foreigners, would prefer to play with Anglo American children, and teased about physical appearance and religion. Rural third and fifth graders could not define "prejudice," learned their views from parents/relatives/friends and television, seemed uncomfortable responding to questions about Blacks, and teased about skin color, families, and religious affiliation. Rural teachers took strong stands against classroom expressions of prejudice, but rarely confronted deeply held attitudes, stressed acceptance of differences, and would like to spend more time on citizenship but did not illustrate diversity in American society through teaching materials. Recommendations for addressing prejudice in the classroom included inservice/preservice exploration of personally held prejudices, teaching about discrimination, helping children examine treatment of people who are different, and introducing students to the spectrum of individual differences outside their local community. (LFL)

Prejudice: Views of Children and Teachers in a Homogeneous, Rural School



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Prejudice and discrimination continue to be among our most pressing social problems (Kreidler, 1984). Although many adults in American society like to believe that children are immune to prejudice and discrimination, it is obvious that this is not the case. An impressive body of research demonstrates that children are aware of differences among people and that they learn the prevailing social attitudes toward these differences at a young age (Adams & Crossman, 1978; Clark, 1955; Goodman, 1952; Miel, 1967; Milner, 1975; Williams and Morland, 1976). However, there is little in the literature to indicate to what degree teachers are aware of children's prejudices and to what extent they address such issues in their classrooms.

The present study, conducted in a Northern Rocky Mountain state, was designed to look at teachers' views and knowledge of their students' attitudes toward people different from themselves and what teachers personally do to encourage children to be accepting of differences. In addition, students were interviewed to determine what prejudices they hold and express. Twenty-one teachers were interviewed. Eight of these teachers teach in a rural community school and nine teach in a suburban school. (Another four teachers were interviewed from a suburban school noted for its diverse population. No children from this school were interviewed.) Fifty-three rural school age children and 48 suburban school age children were interviewed about their views of people who are different, be it due to race, ethnicity, religion, or family life style. The data presented in this paper will focus on the children and teachers in the rural school. Findings and observation from this project have been used in the formation of a handbook for teachers entitled, "Teacher They Called Me a _____": Prejudice and Discrimination in the Classroom (Byrnes, 1985).

The Study

The study was conducted in a rural elementary school situated in a town with approximately 2900 residents. The community has virtually no ethnic or racial minority residents. The vast majority of families are also of one faith. There is only one religion represented by the several churches in the town. Approximately 60 to 70 percent of the students are bused to the school from outlying areas. Interviews were conducted with 18 first graders (9 male, 9 female), 18 third graders (9 males, 9 females) and 17 fifth graders (9 males, 8 females). These 53 children's responses were compared with the responses of 48 children living in a suburban community in the same region. The suburban school is in a "bedroom community" of an urban area with an S.M.S.A. population of approximately 1,023,000 residents. The children were asked to respond to questions about various racial, ethnic, and religious groups as well as more general questions about what children tease each other, and why some children are excluded from play. Two different interview forms were used, one for the first graders and a longer more detailed form for the third and fifth graders. None of the rural children in the study were members of racial or ethnic minority groups. Of the thirteen teachers from the rural school who were asked to participate in the interview, eight teachers (4 first grade; 3 third, and 1 fifth) accepted. Nine of the eleven teachers asked at the suburban school participated.

Major Points

Views of Rural First Graders

1) Despite the fact that many of these children had very few or no personal experiences with ethnic or racial minority groups, they knew many of the stereotypes attached to such groups.

2) Several of the young children erroneously perceived those who are from different ethnic or racial groups as being "foreigners."

3) When first graders were asked to choose the pictures of children with whom they would most like to play, Anglo children were most often chosen first. They were followed by Mexican American or American Indian children. The least chosen children were either Black American or Asian American. Gender was a significant variable in their responses. Students with few exceptions chose all children of their own gender, regardless of race or ethnicity, before choosing children of the opposite sex.

4) Teasing in general revolved around name calling. Often children were teased about being "dumb" or "stupid," for example. First graders also frequently reported that children were teased about physical appearance. The most frequent responses were about weight, hair, clothes and skin color. Seventy-eight percent of the children reported that children are teased about the way they look.

5) Sixty-seven percent of the first grade children reported that children are teased about their religion. However, seventy-five percent of the first grade children could not accurately state the name of even one religion.

Third and Fifth Graders

1) When children were asked if they knew what the word "prejudice" meant, none of the children could give an accurate definition. Five of the 35 children did express a partial definition (e.g., "it means someone doesn't like you").

2) The most frequently named sources from which rural students reported learning their views about Black Americans, Asian Americans, and Mexican Americans were parents, relatives, and friends. Media (e.g., television, movies, books) were the second most frequent response. School

was the last major category mentioned. In the case of American Indians, children more frequently mentioned learning about them from school. Responses of media and other people followed with an equal number of mentions.

3) Students were shown four different collages each depicting a different minority group. They were then asked, "What are these people like?" The following observations were made:

American Indians (as with the other minority groups) were most frequently described by their physical appearance (e.g., black hair and brown skin). Unlike the descriptions of the other minority groups, American Indians were likely to be characterized by their traditional customs (e.g. "eat corn," "sew beads," "live in tents," or "ride horses").

Students seemed particularly uncomfortable in responding to questions about Black Americans. Children frequently became fidgety and restless when responding. Blacks were often described as having black skin, short, curly hair; and very white teeth. Frequent comments about poverty, language, and discrimination were made. Generally students saw them as being different from themselves (e.g., "I think they go to school."). A few referred to them as though they were foreigners.

Mexican Americans were most frequently described as people who have darker skin and speak a different language. Differences in food, and fondness for singing and dancing were often mentioned.

Mexican Americans qua foreigners seemed to be the underlying theme in their comments (e.g., "They don't look like Americans.").

Asian Americans were most often described has having different eyes, black hair, and different skin. Students often inferred that Asian Americans live in a different country. Generally students seemed to know the least about this group.

4) Seventy-four percent of the third and fifth graders stated that children are teased about skin color. Forty-nine percent of these students indicated that children are teased about their families. Forty percent stated that children are teased about their religious affiliation.

5) Children knew the names of surprisingly few religions. Seventeen percent of these children could not name a single religion and an additional 34 percent could give only one accurate name of a religion. Thirty-seven percent could name two to three religions. The remaining 12 percent named betwen four and eight religions. Grade was an important variable. The third graders knew the names of significantly fewer religions than the fifth graders.

6) When asked how you could tell what religion someone is, 45 percent of the children said you could not tell or they did not know how. The 55 percent who said you could tell mentioned: how they act (e.g., drinking, or smoking), how they talk (e.g. swearing), clothing (e.g. dresses neatly or immodestly).

Teachers

1) Teachers were aware that their students do have prejudices and do discriminate. However, teachers feel that they take strong stands against

the expression of these attitudes in the classroom. For example, a teacher would say "We don't call people names in this classroom" or "I don't allow it, and they know it."

2) Teachers appear to deal with the outward expression of prejudice but rarely confront deeply held attitudes. Only one of the teachers (first grade) could remember ever directly discussing prejudice or discrimination in their classrooms. In contrast, half of the teachers in the suburban school have directly addressed these issues.

3) When directly confronted by an overly dicriminatory action in the classroom (e.g., a child with a disability or a child of a minority group is teased), teachers are much more likely to address the importance of accepting differences. Approaches used include: setting rules for acceptance, focusing on citizenship issues, or self-concept activities.

4) Many of the rural teachers would like to spend more time on citizenship. In contrast, almost all of the classroom teachers in the suburban school felt they were doing enough.

5) Teachers, for the most part, were very interested in receiving more information on how to help children accept differences in race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, achievement, religion, gender, and family lifestyle.

6) In observing the classrooms of these teachers there was no evidence of any attempt to illustrate the diversity of our society in the visual materials displayed. Other than materials used in the teaching of social studies (e.g. pictures depicting people of other countries), pictures of people were entirely of white, attractive children and adults.

Recommendations

1) Teacher inservice and preservice education programs must make the

exploration of personally held stereotypes and prejudices a part of the teacher education curriculum. Teachers cannot be expected to raise the awareness levels of their students if they have not examined their own prejudicial attitudes first and made efforts to change them. Teachers must model acceptance and tolerance of differences.

2) Lessons in all areas of the curriculum may be utilized to combat prejudice. In particular, teachers should use lessons in democracy, law and citizenship as valuable tools in breaking down prejudice. The constitution protects the rights of all citizens and in recent years laws have been passed that continue to strike out against cases of prejudice and discrimination.

3) Teachers who make rules to control discriminatory behavior in the classroom need to be aware that rules alone are unlikely to change the underlying attitudes that promote such behavior. Teachers must be aware that rules may control behavior in the classroom but are not likely to control it in other settings where the teacher is not present.

4) Educators need to teach about the meaning and identification of discrimination and prejudice in a purposeful fashion and not just address individual problems which arise in the classroom. The importance of tolerance toward individual differences (e.g. disabilities, lifestyles, physical appearance and coordination, learning styles, and religion) must also be taught and modeled.

5) Teachers need to help children examine their own and other people's treatment of people who are different. Children need to be able to analyze and reflect upon their own feelings, thereby differentiating reasonable dislikes or caution from prejudice. The use of activities which ask children to share personal impressions and viewpoints will create elements of risk for them. Before attempting such activities it is

important for a teacher to develop an atmosphere of warmth, trust, and nonjudgment.

6) Teachers need to evaluate media for stereotypes and overgeneralizations and examples that do appear should be used to raise the awareness level of students. Media that positively depict diversity in American society should be sought and utilized. Children need to see concrete examples and evidence of the value of diversity in the films, books, bulletin boards and other visual aids to which they are exposed.

7) Efforts should be made to introduce students to a broader spectrum of individual differences than may be present in their school and immediate community. Teachers should seek opportunities to have students interact with a diverse population of children and adults. Prejudices are most likely to break down when diverse individuals work together toward a common goal (Allport, 1958; Milner, 1975). Exposure alone, or information talks, are unlikely to change attitudes.

Conclusion

No child grows up without some prejudices. However, this tendency may be exaggerated in homogeneous rural communities where there are few opportunites for children to have their stereotypes confronted and addressed. Teachers in rural communities must understand that the children they teach are less and less likely to spend their lives in the "protected" environments in which they have been raised. They must be prepared to work and live beside people that are different from themselves, both in appearance and beliefs. They must be ready to accept the supreme worth of other individuals, despite their differences. Fortunately children's attitudes are amenable to change, much more so than with adolescents and adults (Shiman, 1979). For this reason it may be with them that the hope

for a more peaceful and cooperative world rests. There are no simple answers, but the first crucial step is for adults to become convinced that it is important to guide children toward greater acceptance of diversity in society. Once this step has been taken, teachers can make conscious efforts to help children learn to understand their rights, the rights of others and concern for the well being and dignity of all.

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