

School Strategies to Combat Racism

by the Making Multicultural Australia Project Team

Schools are a crucial arena for combating racism and prejudice especially as there is some evidence that children can show prejudice and discrimination at an early age. This has been proven to be least likely in the loose associations of the playground or classroom but more likely in activity involving closer “social distance”, such as having a friend home to play. Young children have been shown to find it difficult to comprehend the notion of different but equal; most children show greater empathy for children like themselves, in age, sex, colour or custom. Australian studies have shown that children of the majority culture in any situation tend to categorise those like them, the “in-group”, as better or more worthy than the “others”, the “out-group”. In the case of children from minority cultures, they frequently identified with the majority culture, absorbing society’s view that their own culture was somehow less worthy. While it is not until the ages of 11 or 12 that children have been shown to express racist attitudes similar to their elders, there is no doubt that very young children can differentiate between groups and pick up on social indicators of difference and relative worth.

So educators have realised that schools are a vital component in fighting racism. If schools help to foster an environment of tolerance and are free of racism, then this is a major step in creating a whole community in which racism and prejudice are fought. A number of strategies have addressed this issue including making resources and kits available to schools. The Prejudice Book, an Australian reworking of an American anti-racist workbook for schools, was one of the efforts to provide teachers with lesson plans and activities. But the most creative school project so far has been a collaboration between

the NSW Department of School Education and the NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission, part funded by the federal Office of Multicultural Affairs. Called the Whole School Anti-Racism Project it was based on the assumption that there are a number of stakeholders in devising anti-racist school policies - students, teachers, parents and the local community.

Two high schools and their feeder primary schools were chosen for this project in 1991, one a suburban Sydney high school with a high proportion of students from ethnic backgrounds and the other a school in a rural town with a high Aboriginal student population. As anti-racism strategies were developed by the stakeholders working together, they were documented. The participants and the project co-ordinators conducted in-service education and community education workshops to look at school data and evaluate any incidences of discrimination in current school practices, they reviewed existing school curricula and practices to identify where anti-racist initiatives could take place, participated in community and general media publicity for the project, developed action plans for community consultation and involvement and collected data from all the feeder schools involved.

The collated preliminary resources and strategies were given a trial in 1993 and the final product published in 1995. This is a kit which consists of a description of the project, an evaluation and planning tool for schools that want to utilise the kit, a set of materials developed by the Whole School Anti-Racism Project which provide models for change and a set of curriculum materials which can be further adapted for practical use in the classroom. The kit also includes a collection of articles on the issue of racism and anti-racism education.

At the time the Whole School Project was being

conducted, the NSW Department of School Education was introducing its Anti-racism Policy and Grievance Procedures and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission launched its Different Colours, One People campaign; a climate of attention to racist issues and an understanding that government was committed to structural change were therefore its underpinning. Teachers were trained and continue to be trained in the project and its strategies and its impact is likely to be felt far beyond NSW.

Further reference:

Office of Multicultural Affairs, Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW, and NSW Department of School Education NSW Whole School Anti-Racism Project (4.vols.), Sydney, NSW Department of School Education, 1995.