Muddy Waters Can Yield Clear Evidence

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In the summer of 2006, a real estate developer in a small Mississippi town accidentally unearths a city pool that had been filled with dirt over thirty years prior in an effort to thwart the movement of racial integration. In his recent article, Adam Nossiter (New York Times article on 9/19/2006) visits the town and discovers that the wounds created from this part of the city’s racist past remain deep and open. Over thirty years later, many White townspeople still find it difficult to talk forthrightly about the reasons behind the pool’s closing, instead resorting to the use of what Nossiter (2006) called “veiled language” in an effort to communicate what they saw as the necessity of filling the pool with dirt to prevent Whites and Blacks from “mingling that close.”

Discussing the reality of prejudice, racism and other social problems can be challenging for adults of all ages, races, and genders. However, there is a trend among educators to talk about prejudice and injustice with the youngest among us – our children. Decades after the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, educators and social scientists alike are trying to find ways to reduce prejudice in children through school interventions that directly engage the issue, with the hope that frank and honest engagement at the youngest ages can help to develop the cognitive, social, and emotional capacity for understanding necessary to combat prejudice in this world, as discussed by Pfeifer and colleagues in this SPR.

This trend comes at a time when the national educational policy climate is characterized by an emphasis in building language and math skills and their standardized assessment. As a result, interventions that are not deeply woven into these major policy initiatives will face great difficulty finding space in the classroom. In response to these concerns, some educators are using children’s literature that addresses themes of prejudice and its understanding as a way of enhancing both literacy skills and social skills (Selman, 2003; Solomon, D., Watson, M., & Battistich, V., 2001).

*Freedom Summer*, by Deborah Wiles, published by Atheneum Book for Young Readers, is one such picture book that dramatizes a situation remarkably similar to the events reflected in the New York Times Article above. Written at a level that is accessible to the average third grade reader, it tells the story of the desegregation of public places in 1964 through the eyes of an interracial friendship pair, Joe, who is White, and John Henry who is Black. Previously forbidden to swim in the public pool, and relegated to a creek, upon the passage of the Civil Rights act of 1964, John Henry would now be able to swim in the pool with his best friend, Joe. However, on the day it was to be opened to everyone in the community, the two boys rush to the town municipal pool, only to find it being filled with tar. At the end, the boys, each sad in his own way, but each brave and resilient, go together to buy ice pops at the formerly segregated general store that remained open in spite of local assaults on desegregation.

We read *Freedom Summer* aloud to 107 predominantly low-income African-American students in grades one through five, most of whom attended neighborhood elementary schools in a Northeastern urban area. Our main goals were to assess students’ comprehension of the story and their understanding of the nature of prejudice and discrimination. One of the questions we asked was, “Why was the pool filled with tar so that Joe and John Henry could not swim in it?” As expected, cognitive development, such as classification skills, as well as social-cognitive development, such as perspective taking skills, significantly affected students’ understanding of the story. Younger students were largely unable to understand that racism was the underlying factor that led to the closing of the pool, attributing its closing instead to factors unrelated to racism, such as the need to build a road or a bridge. It was not until third grade that students were able (or willing) to demonstrate consistent awareness of racism’s role. Older students were able to discuss various prejudicial attitudes, the intransigence of those who did not want to follow new desegregation laws, the ways in which intergroup and intragroup conflict served to perpetuate discrimination, as well as the stress those conflicts placed on Joe and John Henry’s friendship (as described in a paper we are presenting at AERA this year).
However, we found that context also affected students' comprehension of the text. The illustrations and the text show Black workers filling the pool, which led even some older students with perfectly adequate social-cognitive development to interpret the story as if Blacks were trying to keep the races segregated. When informally investigating why students would make such a crucial error in interpreting the story, we hypothesized that their experience in predominantly Black schools had exposed them to a context in which Black students are the majority and use their power and influence to discriminate against White students. They extrapolated information from their own limited context and applied it to the greater mainstream society, and to history, to suggest that Blacks were the ones in power attempting to thwart integration with Whites. Thus, these preliminary findings suggest that even with the requisite cognitive tools, social context plays a very powerful role in how students make meaning of the story, the history, and their world.

Findings such as these have significant implications for fields of practice and research, and the relation among them. Teaching young children is a highly sophisticated and challenging profession, which requires deep disciplinary knowledge, especially where teaching controversial issues such as race relations are concerned. Freedom Summer's value as a vehicle for discussing contemporary issues of prejudice has the potential to be reduced to a literacy lesson alone, and one that might be lost on many of the children in the class if the teacher does not understand the developmental and contextual bases of children's competencies, and is unable to help students make connections between their knowledge of the world and their experience with the text. To aid teachers and students in the very difficult task of discussing race relations, developmental theory derived from controlled research conditions must actively make its way into the classroom so that teachers might be empowered to make sound developmental choices that appropriately challenge and scaffold student learning.

However, the run down stream from lab-space to school place is often long and gets turgid toward the practice delta and the evidence is likely to be swamped along the way. Therefore, we must also embed more of our basic research in the practices to which they are relevant, even if for a while rigor is slightly attenuated (Selman & Dray, 2006). Controlled laboratory experiments reduce the messiness of real-world complications and contextual factors, but they also reduce the insight that rich, complex, and yes, even muddy, contexts can bring to our basic understanding of how children grasp crucial social phenomena. Our collective knowledge of the way children comprehend and relate to prejudice, whether they encounter it in their literature or their world, can only be enhanced by direct study of it in the field, at the site of primary engagement.

References


Recommendations for Future Research

This review also suggests future directions for those doing basic empirical research. If carried out, these recommendations will complement those for educational practice by exploring developmental and contextual factors more broadly than in the past.

1. Prejudice in later childhood and adolescence. While there is little variance in children’s prejudice prior to age eight (Aboud, 1988), probably attributable to cognitive constraints, there is much greater variance in children’s prejudice after age eight. Researchers should begin to address what factors contribute to prejudice in later childhood and adolescence. One area of potential research concerns whether ethnic identity development is related to the expression of prejudice (Pfeifer, Ruble, Bachman, Alvarez, Cameron, & Fuligni, in press). Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1986), in their social identity theory, propose that individuals who strongly identify with their group are more motivated to evaluate their group positively compared to other groups. As children and adolescents are in the process of developing an ethnic identity, it is important to examine how this process affects prejudice. New lessons in this domain are simply waiting to be learned. A related area of potential research assumes that most individuals hold some degree of prejudice. What is critical is whether that prejudice is expressed or not, and the internal and external motivations we possess to control prejudiced responding (Devine, Plant, Amadio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002). This topic is relevant to later childhood and adolescence as inhibitory control and other self-regulatory capabilities exhibit a protracted course of development through the first two decades of life (e.g., Wright, Waterman, Prescott, & Murdock-Eaton, 2003).

2. Address both the holder and target of prejudice. As more and more children belong to racial, ethnic, linguistic, or national minority groups, we need to consider ways to reduce intergroup prejudices, as well as explore how children cope with being the target of prejudice. Ideally, interventions should begin to address prejudices directed at multiple groups from the perspective of both the holder and target (in addition to further recognizing that individuals can also be holders and targets of prejudice). Although prejudice reduction interventions are not typically designed from the target’s perspective, research has consistently shown that elementary and middle school children are aware of, and report having experienced, many types of prejudice and discrimination. For example, a majority of African-American and Mexican-American 10- to 12-year-olds report having experienced some form of racial/ethnic discrimination, with verbal insults and racial slurs being most commonly reported (Quintana, 1998; Simons, Murry, McLoyd, Lin, Cutrona, & Conger, 2002). Many children also reported being suspected of wrongdoing or being excluded from activities because of their race (Simons et al., 2002). Thus, it is evident that children know they are experiencing prejudice and discrimination, and this may lead to poor peer relationships (Schofield, 1980), reductions in academic achievement (Gougis, 1986; Steele & Aronson, 1995), and more negative mental health (Krieger, 1999). New interventions should be designed to not only reduce these instances of prejudice and discrimination, but also help children cope with them when they do occur.

3. Beyond “Black versus White” to multietnic schools. It has become evident that the school context has dramatically changed in the past fifty years. In heterogeneous schools, ethnic differences are no longer primarily “Black versus White” but often involve more than two groups. Moreover, the particular ethnic or racial groups (e.g., Latino, Asian, Black, and White) and their relative sizes vary from school to school. To date, there is significantly less information available on prejudice (or prejudice reduction) in multietnic schools. However, some preliminary findings regarding student perceptions of their school environment and their social relationships are encouraging. For example, Juvonen, Nishina, and Graham (2006) found that African-American and Latino students felt safer in school, less harassed by peers, and less lonely in contexts that were ethnically more diverse, compared to less diverse classrooms and schools. In general, while it seems as if context is particularly important for determining the prejudice-related outcomes, we are not in a position to evaluate its specific effects until further research is conducted. A related area of potential research is supplied by the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). With the multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups in some heterogeneous schools, the creation of superordinate identities (which could range from the school to the national level) may serve to diminish subgroup prejudices. This has
rarely been studied in children, although there is some evidence that increasingly central national (American) identities can diminish intergroup bias in ethnic minority and immigrant children (Pfeifer et al., in press).

4. Resegregation. At the same time as some schools have become more multiethnic, many schools are once again homogeneous: not only have schools desegregated, but they have since been resegregated. The problem of resegregation has advanced to the point that schools are now as segregated as in the early 1970’s (Harvard University Graduate School of Education, Civil Rights Project, 1999). For example, African-American children are more likely to attend majority African-American schools now compared to any time since the 1960’s, and Latino students are even more likely to attend predominately ethnic minority schools today than are their African-American peers (Orfield & Lee, 2006; Orfield, 2001; Pettigrew, 2004). The reality of these homogeneous contexts trumps the possibility of using cooperative learning or other strategies to create conditions for interracial contact that are maximally effective at prejudice reduction. In these cases, multicultural curricula would likely play a critical role by supplying the necessary content, but because it only provides vicarious intergroup exposure, it may be insufficient to reduce prejudice on its own—especially in younger children. The addition of social-cognitive programs to a multicultural base could create beneficial synergies (i.e., multicultural curricula might provide concrete examples to which children can apply social-cognitive gains). Future research should examine the additive effects of multicultural curricula and social-cognitive skills training to test this hypothesis.

Social Implications

Assuming prejudice reduction is a valued goal in our society, there is hardly a better place than schools to potentially make a difference in children’s attitudes and behaviors toward “different” others. The current review suggests that the contexts under which any prejudice reduction is attempted are important inasmuch as diversity allows more than vicarious exposure. Racially homogenous schools can never provide the conditions under which children learn to constructively work with other-race peers. Hence, it would be paradoxical and unfortunate if the lessons learned since 1954 are ignored when making decisions about the federal mandates for desegregation in public schools. To create the best possible contexts under which to implement school-based programs to achieve prejudice reduction in children—and ultimately in society—it may be necessary to “rededicate” ourselves to desegregation (Pettigrew, 2004).

References

Tolerance Promotion, Talent Development, and the Burden of Dreams Deferred

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In this article, Pfeifer, Brown, and Juvonen discuss three school-based strategies for promoting interracial tolerance and esteem. Those strategies, rooted in theories of prejudice, include multicultural curricula, cooperative learning, and social-cognitive bias reduction. Pfeifer and colleagues join a growing chorus of researchers who conclude that context affects racial attitudes (McGlothlin & Killen, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and that schools could play a key role in producing a pluralistic society characterized by a mutual respect conspicuously and often devastatingly absent in many parts of the world (Banks, 2006; McKown, 2005; Paluck & Green, in press).

Pfeifer and colleagues rightly point out limitations of existing work and suggest promising future directions. Even without further evidence, however, their article leads to four firm conclusions. First, setting characteristics, such as the structure of intergroup contact, affect children’s racial attitudes. Second, some settings, particularly schools, can be designed to promote tolerance. Third, varied strategies promote tolerance, from teaching children to see human diversity to teaching children how to work cooperatively in diverse groups. Fourth, school-based tolerance promotion strategies work. Pfeifer and colleagues lead us to conclude that although we should continue to study and expand the range of tolerance promotion strategies, we know enough about what works that we may justifiably act now.

Why then are there no prominent state or national campaigns to integrate into schools with all deliberate speed effective tolerance promotion strategies? One likely reason is that tolerance promotion is usually described as a non-academic “add-on.” Educators are already overburdened with the monumental task of imparting academic knowledge and skills. Under pressure to increase achievement test scores, even educators who value racial tolerance may forego tolerance promotion in favor of more purely academic initiatives.

The choice between tolerance and talent development is a false one, however. In fact, time spent promoting tolerance may very well be time spent nurturing talent. We know, for example, that stereotypes can impair achievement among members of academically stereotyped ethnic groups (Aronson & Steele, 2005; Steele & Aronson, 1995) as early as elementary school (McKown & Weinstein, 2002, 2003). If tolerance is increased in schools, then, it stands to reason that fewer children will be subjected to damaging stereotypes about their academic ability. Increased tolerance is thus not only a desired outcome, but also a means to academic success.

A second reason tolerance promotion is not widely practiced is that, as Pfeifer and colleagues point out, many believe racism is largely a thing of the past (Waller, 2001; Wilson, 1987), obviating the need for intervention. This belief runs counter to evidence that a substantial minority of adults endorse overt racial prejudices (Bobo, 2001) and that many more adults harbor subtler, implicit prejudices (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). Moreover, research from around the globe suggests that children continue to display inter-ethnic biases (Enesco, Navarro, Paradela, & Guerrero, 2005; Nesdale, in press). To motivate key constituents to act, increased public awareness that racial prejudice persists is critical.

Finally, even those who acknowledge that prejudice still merits attention may believe that other problems represent more pressing threats. A broader perspective calls this belief into question. In a diverse and increasingly interdependent global economy, growing smaller through technology and transportation, our economic competitiveness depends on our capacity to work with people across ethnic, cultural, and national borders. Furthermore, in an era characterized by intense and bloody ethnic conflict around the world, the ability to negotiate intergroup conflict has never been more important. In the very near future, the nation with the highest average intergroup intelligence will be at a huge economic and strategic advantage.

Tolerance promotion has a clear moral dimension in any society that aspires to equal opportunity for its citizens. Unfortunately, pure appeals to conscience may not enjoin even those of good will to use what we have learned, so clearly described in this paper, to promote tolerance if that is the only end served. Intense pressure to foster academic growth,
economic vitality, and strategic advantage can spur action so long as educators, policymakers, and the public understand that tolerance promotion may very well be an untapped resource for nurturing the talents essential for our individual and collective prosperity.

References


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