RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES AND RACISM THE NEW «3RS»

by Ray Harris

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This paper considers the manifestations and impact of racism and the ways in which educators, particularly, have the responsibility to challenge and reduce the consequences and incidence of racism. Only a multi-dimensional approach, linking family, school and society (at all levels, including global) will really make any impact on the problem.

Dans cet article, nous nous penchons sur les manifestations et les effets du racisme de même que sur les avenues que peuvent emprunter les éducateurs pour le contrer ; seule une approche multidimensionnelle associant l'école, la famille et la société civile peut vraiment y parvenir.

En este artículo, nosotros nos interesamos a las manifestaciones y a los efectos del racismo, de la misma manera, a los contornos por los cuáles pueden acudir los educadores para hacer frente a este problema, solo un acercamiento multidimensional, asociando la escuela, la familia y la sociedad civil permitirá verdaderamente afrontar este problema.

Introduction

Racism, like other forms of discrimination and oppression, instils hatred which often leads to conflict, and is destructive for the perpetrators as well as the victims.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* defines the importance of non-discrimination by stating that human rights are **universal**, applying equally to all people everywhere. Non-discrimination is at the heart of human rights principles and every human rights treaty makes this clear with a specific statement that forbids discrimination on the basis of such things as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political opinions or national origin.

This paper considers, briefly, the manifestations and impact of racism and the ways in which educators, particularly, have the responsibility to challenge and reduce the consequences and incidence of racism.

The issue

This section outlines some of the manifestations of racism at different levels in society, their origins and their impact, specifically at school level.

- Racism indicators
If the goal is to challenge racism, it is essential to know how it manifests itself in daily life. «Indicators» are needed to know what goals to aim for and to know, for example, when a non-racist school or community has been achieved.

On an individual basis, we might see some children refusing to play, talk to or co-operate with people from different ethnic groups. We might also hear racist comments, ridicule or abuse from children, parents or even teachers.

In the community we might receive racist propaganda from «fascist» organisations and there may be reports of physical assault and harassment of certain marginalised groups, such as travellers, nomads or refugees. There may be racist graffiti on the walls of a shop owned by a representative of one particular ethnic group.

On a structural front we might discover discriminatory policies and procedures at school or at local authority level and through investigation realise that there is a non-inclusive curriculum within the school.

If racism in society is to be challenged, then it is necessary to be able to identify where racism is manifesting itself ; whether it is at an individual/family level, at an institutional level (school, health centre, youth centre) or at a structural level (e.g. justice system). If racism is discovered at a structural level then it is likely to be found also at an institutional and individual level, such is the pervasiveness of structural racism.

At all levels, we are likely to see judgements made on a stereotyped view of a certain group of people which is likely to lead to discriminatory practices, based on these judgements. A stereotyped view of someone's cultural background may lead to exclusion from an activity based

on the assumption about that person's abilities, in language, for example.

- Roots of racism

When racism is discovered and the forms of manifestation identified, then it is also necessary to gain a better understanding of the roots of racism. This is essential so that deeper seated psychological and socio-economic dimensions of racism are dealt with rather than just the superficial features of the problem.

Racial attitude development, at a personal level, begins in the family at an early age (often prejudiced racial values in society ensure that the early socialization of children has a racial dimension). The school and media can also reinforce these values .

Although it is often individual acts of racism that are witnessed and acknowledged, structural racism at a national and even international level has caused considerable harm. The last century provided evidence of international acts of racism fought out in several conflicts – from the treatment of the Jews and Romany people at the time of the Second World War –, to civil war in Nigeria and Rwanda and to ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia. Even prior to that, the Atlantic slave trade was in part justified by a European belief that black people were not only different but inferior. It is this link between prejudice and power (in this last case, the power of the colonisers) that gives rise to racism.

- Impact of racism at school

To understand the full picture of racism, it is necessary to consider some of the effects of racism. As far as schools are concerned, one impact of racism will be on children's self esteem which will also have an effect on their success at school. There is likely to be more conflict and bullying, in turn affecting school attendance and the participation of students from certain ethnic groups. School/community relations are likely to be more antagonistic with a lower participation rate by parents.

Taking action

This section briefly describes the need for action, first at the international level and, secondly, at school level through Human Rights Education.

- The international challenge to racism

Racism is a Human Rights issue and there are two international documents which provide the basis of action against racism. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC).

A foundation principle of the CRC is that of non-discrimination, in that all rights apply to all children without exception. It is the state's obligation to protect children from any form of discrimination and to take positive action to promote their rights. (Article 2 of the CRC).

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The documents themselves are important starting points, because, as Lynch (1992) states : «*Underlying the documents are basic moral concepts such as human dignity and justice, liberty and equality, human-human and human-environmental interdependence.*»

There is a pressing need to reduce the impact of racism as there are national and global changes that are leading to more diverse, pluralistic populations. These changes include the increasing number of conflicts based on ethnic difference and religious intolerance (and producing an increasing number of refugees), and issues of poverty and migration due in part to competition for the world's resources within a rapidly degrading environment.

Human Rights Education can play a part in the preparation of young people to face such a future. The committee of ministers of the Council of Europe stated in 1985 that : «*The understanding and experience of human rights is an important element of the preparation of all young people for life in a democratic and pluralistic society. It is part of social and political education and it involves intercultural and international understanding.*»

On this basis, schools have an obligation «to prepare children for the future» by providing a relevant curriculum learned in a democratic and supportive environment.

- Challenging racism at school level

As a Chinese proverb says : «*To know and not to act is not to know.*»

Awareness of the problems in society is not enough. Young people will have to gain knowledge, skills and attitudes to allow them to act to protect their own rights and to take the responsibility for protecting others' rights.

In schools, this is seen through the ethos and management of the school, its policies towards pupils, staff and visitors. It is also explicit in the taught curriculum. Each curriculum area has the potential to make clear those elements of its discrete body of knowledge and skills, which aid an understanding of rights and responsibilities.

Human Rights Education develops skills for participation in wider society. In schools where rights and responsibilities form the framework for learning, students can experience democracy in action.

Policies in schools should address issues of race, but within a framework of challenging every type of oppressive behaviour, whether focused on race, gender, disability or class. A school should have a clear policy to deal with incidents that discriminate against particular students.

- The Human Rights learning environment

To challenge racism and other oppressive actions, the main aim for a teacher is to create an educational environment, which not only embodies racial and cultural diversity, but also actively fosters positive inter-group attitudes and behaviour.

There needs to be a democratic classroom and school ethos, where children learn the skills of participation through actively taking part in decision making.

For skills to be developed in the classroom there should be an emphasis on the use of co-operative and collaborative methods of learning.

Role-playing and activities involving social simulations, which appeal to the judgement of children and young people, should also be part of the normal learning programme.

UNICEF's research has shown that schools, already taking a human rights approach, find that sound knowledge and practice of human rights, which provide a secular, international values code, can improve relationships within the school and considerably improve behaviour amongst students.

Rights have to be lived, not just theorised and those responsible for managing a school have an obligation to act as human rights protectors as well as implementers. Students have to learn (and live) their own rights and discover ways in which they can protect the rights of others. Democratically established and effective school councils can be a good starting point, and the use of peer mediators and student conflict managers may also be effective.

- When should this type of education begin ?

For this type of education to be effective there needs to be a developmental approach which responds to children's development.

Goodman has shown that the seeds of prejudice are sown at a very early age, stating that prejudice, ethnic bigotry and gender bias may be learned as part of a stereotyping process beginning at birth and based on false or inappropriate generalisation.

Based on Dynneson and Gross developmental stages of citizenship, Lynch (1992) suggests that the values and attitudes acquired during the early years of socialization, will be difficult to change later. He says that educators working in the pre-school stage need to work on eradicating early prejudices and to promote values and skills of social association and judgement. Concepts such as justice and fair play may be fostered by a conducive social environment and appropriate activities facilitated by well trained and aware educators.

If a school aims to facilitate children's sense of self esteem, critical thinking skills and an ability to stand up for themselves and others, then the methodology must allow them to experience their intelligence and power as having a constructive effect on their world. For this to happen, children must be given power through active participation and decision making.

Final remarks

New models of citizenship have been proposed, which focus on global rather than national citizenship and which deal with cultural diversity and changes that are happening on a global basis.

Although these educational approaches can help to challenge racism in society, only a multi-dimensional approach, linking family, school and society (at all levels, including global) will really make any impact on the problem. Schools, themselves are too often divorced from their communities, thus hindering such an approach. Hopefully, lessons are being learned and new paradigms of learning and managing community-based learning centres can be applied.

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