

# Closing the gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’: The role of perspective taking and empathy in Reconciliation Education

Dr Adam Heaton

**Abstract:** Challenging prejudices held by school students is imperative, as children and youth are all too often shaped by the intergroup tensions they observe. In a classroom action research study it was first seen that not some but all the Grade 8 (12-14 year old) Australian school students—of who the majority were white and influenced by wider social discourse, initially held prejudices toward Aboriginal Australians. This paper looks at how students developed more positive attitudes toward Aboriginal people as they attempted to take their perspectives and empathise with them. It explores the potential role of Reconciliation Education in having students drop prejudices and start to see another group of people more positively.

## I. Children, prejudice and anti-prejudice education

Even at a young age, children can commence identifying points of difference they have with other people, including those of other ethnicities and cultures, and can show aversive responses toward them (Connolly & Hoskens, 2006). York (2016) explains that the language and behaviour of children all too often reflects prejudices prevalent in wider society. Children pick up their understandings of other groups of people from a range of influences, including storybooks, films, nursery rhymes and other media, which can depict ‘the domination of one sex, one race, one class, or one country over a weaker counterpart’ (Christensen, 2017, pp. 4-5).

As racism and other forms of prejudice can have a devastating impact on a young person’s intellectual, social and emotional development, it is imperative to interrupt such attitudes early on (Heaton, 2019a; 2019b). By holding prejudices, students are prevented from becoming knowledgeable, healthy, socially skilled, responsible and contributing citizens (Priest, Paradies, Trennerry, Truong, Karlsen, & Kelly, 2012; Heaton, 2019c). Additionally, prejudice adversely impacts people who it is directed toward (Larson, Gillies, Howard, & Coffin, 2007).

But challenging prejudice is not easy, as the person holding the prejudice can hide or justify their beliefs and attitudes (Heaton, 2019d). From nearly as early as children may start to develop prejudices they might hide it behind a veneer of tolerance, while behind this veneer these thoughts and feelings continue to grow (Kivel, 2017). What further complicates the task of teaching against prejudice, even when taught sensitively and effectively, is opposition that can come from students, their parents, other teachers and also school leaders (Heaton, 2019d). Regardless, the potential benefits of anti-prejudice educational initiatives to students outweigh challenges to the teacher.

## II. Research methods

The author of this paper, employed as a teacher at an independent school in the lower socio-economic northern suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia, was granted permission by the school principal (headmaster) to facilitate an anti-racism program of learning. A white homogenous culture was predominant in the school community,

and there was no focus on Aboriginal studies and minimal emphasis on multicultural studies in the school curriculum.

Against this backdrop, the teacher co-designed with a local Aboriginal elder and cultural educator the program of learning to counter racist stereotypes about Aboriginal people in Australian social discourse. The program presented a positive discourse about Aboriginal people that counters the stereotypes, showcasing aspects of their past and present cultures, experiences and achievements.

Before the program of learning commenced, ethics clearance was obtained from the Charles Darwin University Ethics Committee, and each and every student, with a guardian, signed a Consent Form to participate in the study. The program was implemented over a two-year qualitative action research cycle, with both cycles comprising a Grade 8 classroom.

Throughout both cycles the 47 participating students reflected on what they were learning and the teacher reviewed these reflections to sharpen lesson content and optimise student engagement. Students' written reflections as well as the narratives and expositions they produced were photocopied for later thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involved coding and categorising students' writing to identify repeated ideas and sentiments (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012), including if students' perspectives toward Aboriginal people were changing or not.

### **III. Results**

Prior to engaging in the program of learning, students identified they had developed their understandings about Aboriginal people from what they had heard from family members, friends and media personalities. They indicated they had engaged minimally in Aboriginal Studies at school and had personally met only a few Aboriginal people. Upon undertaking a Likert-scale survey, all but one of the 47 students in both classes disagreed or strongly disagreed that Aboriginal people have a number of positive characteristics, including approachable, intelligent and good parents. The one student who was the exception selected 'unsure' in response to all the characteristics, but the week before the program commenced he had been heard making derogatory comments about Aboriginal people.

The program of learning, outlined by Heaton (2018; 2019a), introduced students to past and present cultures, experiences and achievements of Aboriginal people while portraying them in a positive light. Over the duration of the program students reflected on what they were learning, which, for numerous students, included a change in their thoughts and feelings about Aboriginal people. At the end of the program the initial survey was repeated to identify any changes in students' perspectives as a result of what they had learnt. This time, most students agreed and strongly agreed Aboriginal people are approachable, intelligent and good parents, as well as holding a wide range of other positive characteristics, and students' levels of agreement remained relatively high when they were surveyed again six months later (see Heaton, 2018).

### **IV. Reconciliation Education**

At the end of the program of learning many students reflected that the program had helped to interrupt the prejudice they had held toward Aboriginal people. Numerous students identified on their own accord that their initial thoughts and feelings toward Aboriginal people in general had been 'prejudiced', and even 'racist'. These students reflected on how they now viewed Aboriginal people as being "just like us", as well as "amazing" and "brilliant". Perhaps more importantly, they acknowledged that no group of people should be considered and treated as inferior.

From students' reflections on their learning experience, resonance was seen with concepts of reconciliation between Aboriginal people and other Australians, which comprises understanding and valuing others' cultures and experiences, supporting their rights and standing together in unity (Reconciliation Australia, 2017).

Based on the results of this study, Reconciliation Education has been coined by Heaton (2020) as a teaching-learning approach for interrupting prejudices and developing more positive intergroup perspectives. Figure 1 presents a conceptual diagram for Reconciliation Education, commencing with the teacher identifying prejudices prevalent in society toward another group of people that may have shaped students' perspectives, such as seeing 'them' as unintelligent, unkind, unskilled and unaccomplished. Reconciliation Education centres positive messaging about the 'other' group of people that is antonymous to the prejudices in wider society commonly held toward the group, and raising learners' awareness by telling the truth about their past and present experiences, cultures and accomplishments. Students in turn may attempt to take the other group's perspectives by imagining their experiences and empathising with them. Resultantly, divisions between 'us' and 'them' may be closed as students see that many of them are intelligent, kind, skilled and accomplished, and assumptions about them and other groups of people shouldn't be made.

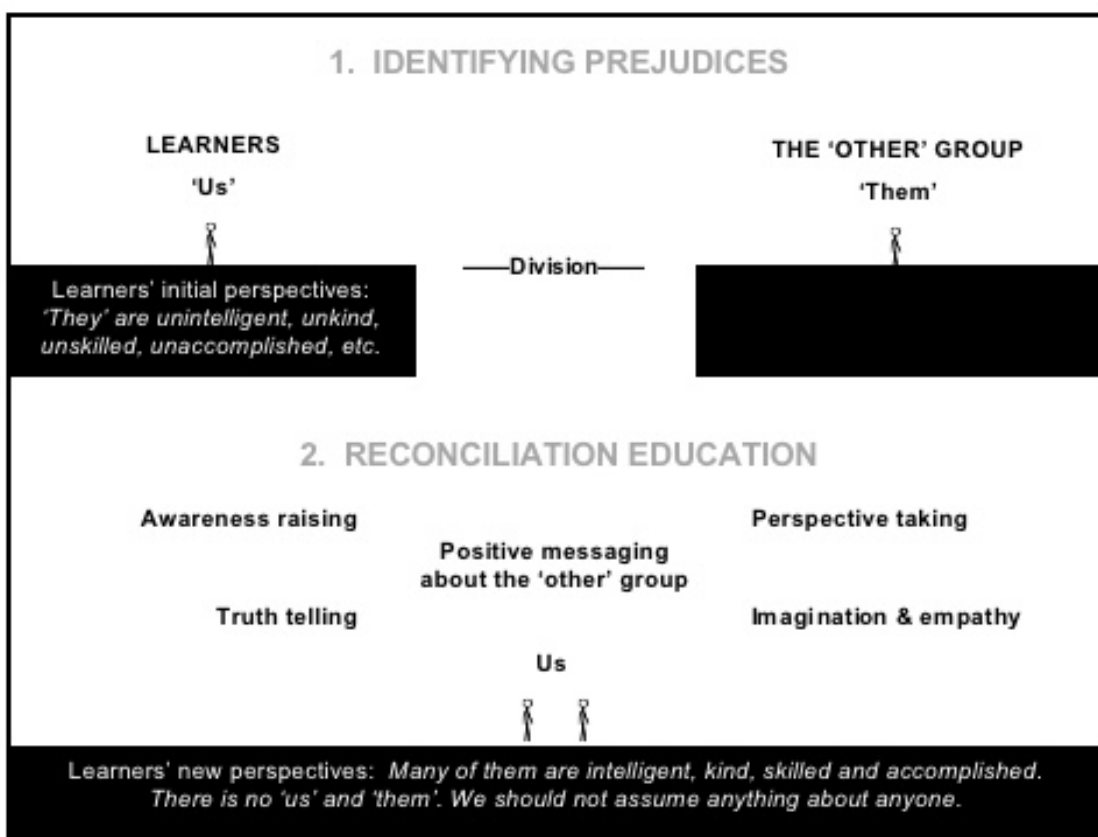


Figure 1 Reconciliation Education (Heaton, 2020)

### The role of perspective-taking and empathy

The large majority of students attempted to take the perspectives of Aboriginal people in response to learning about their past and present cultures, experiences and accomplishments over the program of learning. This was clearly seen in students' narratives, creatively written from the imagined perspective of an Aboriginal person engaging in aspects of Aboriginal cultures and experiences of racism learned about.

Students' narrative writing showed their ability to consider the diverse viewpoints of Aboriginal people. Their willingness and enthusiasm to consider what they thought might be the perspective of an Aboriginal person was akin to Rogers and colleagues' (2007) conceptualisation of empathy as trying to imagine oneself in another

person's situation. One of the students, Dan, tried to imagine being an Aboriginal child as he assumed the love the child has for his family, community and natural environment in his narrative:

My people loved the land, the sea and all its creatures. We lived in this land for thousands of years. I would do many tasks for my family. They were very fun but also required me to be very responsible for my age. I would have had to do many things, like catching mud crabs for the tribe. This task is a very tiring because of the aggression that the crabs show when they protect themselves, as we similarly our little ones. But when it is done the whole tribe can enjoy a beautiful meal of mud crab.

Students' imaginative narrative writing involved them taking the creative liberty of giving the Aboriginal character/s in their stories a personality, and embedding aspects of Aboriginal culture and community living that they were learning about, including in regards to cooking, hunting, dancing and playing games. Students gave names to the character and communities in their narratives based on Aboriginal words introduced to them. Olivia, for instance, named her character Tathra, which she had learned is Pitjantjatjara for 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.

Early on students demonstrated basic expressions of empathy as they learned about and imagined the life of Aboriginal people. They 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. Students identified aspects of culture and experiences that they perceived they share in common with Aboriginal people and, to some extent, felt they can relate to. One such thing was their love for the game hide and seek, which they learned Aboriginal children and youth played before and after British arrival in Australia (Craven 2011) and which students played together at a local nature reserve as part of the program of learning. This excursion to the reserve was a particularly rich learning moment that moved many students to appreciate more aspects of Aboriginal cultures, including throwing spears, basket weaving, dancing and cooking for the community. Students drew upon this newfound appreciation for Aboriginal cultures in their narrative writing, with Reg imagining himself as an Aboriginal adult reflecting on when, as a child, he had enjoyed playing games and engaging with family and community:

Back when we were kids we would play lots of games together. We would have so much fun running down the big sand dunes. Our mothers would teach us the art of track-making... Every now and again we would sit with our fathers and other men and learn spear throwing skills. We would throw the spear at a paddy melon that we found somewhere. At the end of the day nearing dark we would sometimes perform a dance for everyone.

As lessons stated exploring past injustices experiences by Aboriginal people, students showed willingness to try to see how Aboriginal people might perceive the various associated social issues. In so doing they became increasingly cognisant of their own personal perspectives and position on these matters. As they started to learn about the impact of past racial discrimination numerous students demonstrated empathy in the form of trying to take the other person's perspective (Rogers et al., 2007). Like others of her classmates, Faith, from learning about the forcible removal of children from their families and communities, tried to take the perspective of an Aboriginal 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. But it was too late, the men were already out the car and ran and took the other kids that weren't hidden. While I was hiding I could hear all the mothers screaming and the men shouting 'HAND THEM OVER!'

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 we could see that I was the only kid left. All the mothers were bawling their eyes out and screaming. My mother was happy that I wasn't taken, but terribly upset for the other children and their parents. From then on we never heard from those children.

Faith and her classmates had not personally experienced the same ordeals they were learning many Aboriginal people have faced. However, they tried to draw upon some of their own upsetting experiences, such as being temporarily lost in a shopping mall, to identify at least partially how Aboriginal children, youth and adults may have felt upon being the victim of racist government policies of Australian states and territories that forcibly removed Aboriginal children from their families. In her narrative Catherine drew upon how in the past she had cried herself to sleep to creatively direct her Aboriginal character to do the same upon being forcibly separated from her family:

When the time came to close our eyes I would usually cry myself to sleep, but then remember the good times when my family and I would go and look for bush tucker and just play on the steep sand hills. To this day I desperately want to go back there.

Trying to take an Aboriginal perspective helped students to better understand and appreciate the experiences of Aboriginal people, including as they considered the frustration many might feel upon experiencing racism in the twenty-first century. In response to learning about the greater disadvantage Aboriginal peoples face as compared to non-Aboriginal Australians in education, employment, health, housing and life expectancy, as she wrote her exposition Toni attempted to take the perspective of an Aboriginal person:

My people die 17 years younger than other Australians. I have lost many brothers and sisters. I am tired of burying loved ones. In rural areas our unemployment levels are twice as high as those of anyone else. At work the other day I saw somebody treating my friend like they were a piece of dirt. When will all this end?

Such creative expressions by Faith, Toni, 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 to know the other's feelings (Hodges & Klein, 2001; Minio-Paluello et al., 2009). David imagined himself as an Aboriginal man experiencing a range of strong emotions as he witnessed his wife dying:

I awake to the scream of a female as the horror set in. I realised my wife was gone. I rush out of the bed and looked around, to see my wife on the ground bleeding. I rushed to her only to see that she was dead. I couldn't believe it, the love of my life is dead and I thought to myself if anyone else was hurt. I went around the camp only to Gordon, the only one there, sleeping. I awoke Gordon to tell him the news. He apologised for my loss and he aided to give her a proper burial. We dug her a grave and buried her. I couldn't hold back the tears. It felt like someone had driven a spear through my heart.

Feeling empathy with Aboriginal people involved experiencing a range of feelings. Claire reflected at the close of the program of learning how she had felt a range of emotions while writing her narrative and also an exposition about the past and present injustices faced by Aboriginal people:

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.

Jon indicated he had felt deep emotions as he tried to imagine what Aboriginal people would have felt while writing his narrative:

This story made me feel very emotional as I wrote [emotion] in the story very deeply ... I felt what I wrote was what I would have done if I was her.

This imaginative and empathetic experience made possible through narrative writing moved students to see Aboriginal people as holding a wide range of positive characteristics. Verma, amongst others, reflected on how she started to see that Aboriginal peoples are 'very much the same as we are' and experience 'warm' feelings toward them:

But, as I found out in the lessons following, they are very much the same as we are. During the lessons I slowly started to warm up to them, feeling a change of sympathy and a special acceptance and affection.

## V. Conclusion

Reconciliation Education provides opportunity for students to drop prejudices and to adopt more positive perspectives and attitudes toward other groups of people. As was seen in the study detailed in this paper, it offers room to students, in their own way and timing, to empathise with the people group who they are learning about as they imagine and empathise with their past and present experiences. Where students belong to a group in society that is privileged and are learning about a group of people in their society that is disadvantaged, and who prejudices are held toward, imagination and empathy helps move students to better understand the others' experiences and perspectives. Such attempts to understand are critical to having students start to see the 'other' group more positively and, more broadly, to understand that no assumptions about any group of people should be made.

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