

Reducing Prejudice: Constructivist Considerations for Special Education

How might teachers think about moving to challenge prejudice against persons with handicap? Drawing on Piaget's and Bateson's constructivist theories, prejudices are examined in terms of the processes by which they are formed within the individual, the role they play in identity and the reasons they may be resistant to change.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine Piaget's type of theory and extend it to consider how it can be used to diminish prejudice. Recently these constructivist ideas have been used to lower children's levels of gender stereotyping (Gash, 1991). Here the concern is to think about what would be involved in trying to promote more positive attitudes towards persons with disability, particularly in regard to children's attitudes. A key idea in this theoretical approach is that if one has an appreciation of how a prejudice is formed and what role it plays in the personality then it is easier to foster mutual understanding and tolerance of differences. Another key idea is that the overcoming of particular forms of prejudice offers a more human way of relating with others. This is the motivation for overcoming particular forms of prejudice: being less prejudiced can be seen as developmentally advantageous.

PROCESS AND LEVELS OF THOUGHT

Piaget's (1970) theory describes the process of thinking as an intentional equilibrium between past learnings and present experience. Assimilation is the filtering of experience by existing learnings, and accommodation is the noticing of changes between what was known and what is happening now. Being out of equilibrium is uncomfortable and so efforts are made to avoid it.

What is often unnoticed in this description is that the individual cannot be assumed to have the same experience as the observer of the individual. This is to have profound implications for teaching, particularly in the case of more complicated learnings like those which make up social expectations. Bateson (1972, 1979) described different levels of learning. What he wanted to distinguish were learnings which do not depend on context, with learnings which do. Many of the things which are taught in school, like word skills or numeracy, are independent of context. Bateson used the language of trial and error learning to describe this: in context free learning, errors are corrected by changing the response. A higher level of learning was involved however, when learnings were contextualised. For example, a child learns to play with a friend with Down's Syndrome. The activities involved can initially be examples of the first type of learning; but a context may be added to the entire process by friends who mock the child for choosing to play with a Down's Syndrome child.

Learning the context of activities is an important part of one's identity. This is because in learning context, one learns what to expect and to anticipate how others will react to one's choices. One behaves partly in accordance with how one expects others to react. Others in interacting with us develop their pictures of how we can be expected to act. So one's identity is located somewhere in between one's own expectancies and those of others - this is acknowledging that one's identity is not fixed but varies from one person's perception to another's to some degree (von Glaserfeld, 1987).

Bateson (1972) saw an individual's identity as being made up of such contextual learnings. His approach implies a change in the way in which traits like independence, friendliness, opportunism, or fatalism can be explained. In this way of looking at these traits they exist in relation with others rather than as items "in" an individual.

If stereotypes are seen as being like prejudices which are part of an individual's identity this is so whether one is referring to gender or to attitudes to disability. "I am or I am not the sort of person who is at ease talking to and playing with a child with Down's Syndrome." The majority of children in school may be quite inexperienced with persons with disability. Out of such experience often comes fear and rejection of the unknown. From such feelings comes prejudice.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

These contextual learnings which form part of our identity are resistant to change

for a number of reasons. To begin with, as part of personal identity, they are “ways of looking” at things, and as such are based on a wealth of prior experience. Ways of looking at people with disability in Irish primary schools include jokes about disability, as well as more caring accepting ways. A child who desires to challenge a group which accepts such jokes will require special skills to get the group to change its sense of humour. Indeed without such skills a child who takes on the group about its sense of humour may be immediately vulnerable to group hostility.

A second reason such attitudes towards people with special needs are difficult to alter is that contextual learnings are what is called “self-validating”. That is, counter-examples are likely to be treated as exceptions to the rule. As another example, a person who enjoys telling jokes about persons with handicaps will be rewarded by those who think like he/she does, but may well be driven to harden his or her attitude by a hostile listener, or to dismiss the critic as a crank.

A third reason why it may be difficult for a teacher to change these attitudes is that the child may learn that in class it is unacceptable to be prejudiced in this way. Out of the range of this teacher, however, the child knows that the group likes these jokes and the attitudes which are associated with them.

CHANGING STEREOTYPES

A beginning can be made to change children’s attitudes towards people with disability with two tactics, by questioning and by appropriate counter-examples. If one considers the stereotype “men are cruel”, or “women are dependent”, questions might be, “Is this always true in your experience?”, or “Can anyone think of a case where this is not true?” Counter-examples can be introduced with people, on video, or via anecdote. The CARA programme (1981) which originated in St Michael’s House is one way in which to provide people with material to help them to reconsider their views on people with handicap.

It is important, however, to pay special attention to the role of the learner’s identity in trying to change these attitudes. It is important that the questions and examples be seen as ways of extending the learner’s experience so that the learner can begin to appreciate the negative implications of the stereotype.

Lastly, I will make some comments taken from psychotherapy which may be useful to teachers desiring to help children change their prejudices in this area. First, there is the attitude which therapists adopt in dealing with families which

may be useful to reflect on. This is an attitude of neutrality in which the therapist holds his or her identity apart from the remarks of the family members undergoing therapy. The therapist adopts this neutrality to avoid confirming or disconfirming any individual family member. For the teacher it is a useful strategy to reflect on since the remarks of children in class are sometimes designed to see how the teacher will react! This is not to say that at other times the teacher will be neutral; at other times the teacher will have ample opportunity to make his or her views clear. In dialogue, neutrality will avoid placing the child in a position where he or she must either be humiliated or even more prejudiced.

A second way in which children may be encouraged to reconsider their views will be via a type of discussion in which the teacher recognises the validity of what the speaker says but imposes limits to this validity. So the teacher follows the prejudiced statement with "I realise you hold your view seriously, but you must realise that it is your view and there may be others with different views. Your way of looking is just one way of looking, and you might even be willing to change it when we have discussed the issue further." What is at issue here is that there are many ways to describe things and it is hard to be sure that any one way is better than another. (For a full technical explanation of what is involved here see Maturana, 1988). It will require careful examination of the way in which people put their views together to assess their viability.

Finally, there is a form of questioning which is based on the dynamics of role-taking. Role-taking is involved in considering another person's point of view. It is hard for children of less than seven years to do this. With older children, however, it can be used to develop an appreciation of the different ways in which they view issues. In therapy (Deissler, 1987) it is used so that parents, for example, can see how they each think about one of their children, and further how the father sees the mother's perception, and how the mother sees the father's perception. Differences which emerge during this form of questioning can be powerful stimulants to change the views the participants hold. In class it can be used easily with boys and girls when trying to foster more mature thinking on gender stereotyping. In dealing with the different perceptions of children on the issue of persons with handicap perhaps considerably more sensitivity would be required in "managing" discussions.

SUMMARY

In this paper a constructivist approach to attitude change was considered. There are a number of key elements in this way of looking at stereotypes and in

particular stereotypes towards persons with disability. First, there is the view that all stereotypes are built up through the process of organising one's experience - equilibration in Piaget's terms. Second, this implies that the environment is always filtered and interpreted via past learnings. So, the environment of any individual cannot be assumed by an observer to be the same as the observer's environment. Third, the expectations which are built up through experience come to form a pivotal role in the identity of any individual. So changes in one's expectations, in one's way of organising one's experience have inevitable consequences for one's place in the perception of one's peers and friends.

The educational implications require that teachers need to take very seriously the identity and values of their pupils and to use tactics which place the responsibility to change on the pupils. It is no longer the case that the teacher is trying to modify the children's thinking; rather the teacher is providing opportunities for the children to reconsider their views. It is no longer the case that the teacher is teaching the "received" political view on disability. Rather the teacher is posing questions and providing examples so that the pupils can be challenged about their understanding of what it means to engage towards others with "mutual respect" and why this is important.

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