

Cultural Awareness Through the Arts:

The Success of an Aboriginal Antibias Program for Intermediate Students

Bias and racism are often a problem in schools. Many children are singled out for teasing or bullying based on their culture or personal attributes. In 1995, Butler and Swain developed a curriculum project for Grade 7 and 8 students, with funding from the Ontario Ministry of Education.¹ The project, *Cultural Awareness Through the Arts*, was designed to address issues of bias generally and bias toward First Nations People specifically. Over four months, students learned about the First Nations People through their arts. The unit appeared to help students develop positive attitudes towards First Nations People. It seemed to succeed largely because of the way the arts drew the students into their studies in a deeper, more personal way than any other approaches the teachers had taken previously to address the same issues.

Developing Voice

One Voice > Two Voices > Cultural Voices > A Different Voice

The curriculum was based on a model of antibias education in which students develop their voices or points of view by first finding their own voices, then hearing and appreciating other voices, then recognizing cultural voices, and finally adopting voices that are more critical and less biased than the voices with which they began.

To develop their own voice, students examined and critiqued the language they used in talking about peers, expressed their feelings about being different, and created a quilt in which each square represented a student's heritage. To appreciate other voices, students studied post-modern revisions of folk tales, told tales from points of view of two different characters, and read and wrote poetry in two voices. To learn to recognize cultural voices, students examined stories in text and film from voices or storytellers from a different culture than the culture of the characters in the stories. They then engaged in related discussion, journal writing, problem-solving, and role-playing. They deconstructed stories and reports from a wide range of media.

Once they had acquired the necessary vocabulary and experience of an antibias approach, they began learning about First Nations. They listened to a creation legend told by an elder, studied and responded artistically to First Nations art, made dream catchers, and danced with a group of First Nations youth. To demonstrate that their voices or points of view had changed, students ended the unit by writing and producing a musical drama dealing with the issues they had been studying. With very few exceptions, students' attitudes and behaviours improved.

The curriculum project established a foundation for reducing bias by helping students develop strong healthy feelings about themselves, their world, and others.

The Study

During and immediately following the implementation of the curriculum by teams of teachers at several schools, Butler conducted a study to explain the success of the project.² The project was assessed by examining 123 students' responses to a questionnaire administered at the conclusion of the project and by examining 7 teachers' perceptions through a focus group discussion held shortly after the end of the school year.

The data show that a major contributing factor to the success of the curriculum project was the centrality of the arts in the learning activities. The personal link created between the students and the First Nations artists through viewing and doing the arts was crucial to the development of positive attitudes. Students were placed on a developmental continuum of antibias, using key indicators identified in the study. This continuum progresses through four stages: "no awareness of bias", "awareness of bias", "political correctness", and "transfer to personal life".

A Developmental Continuum of Antibias

The curriculum project established a foundation for reducing bias by helping students develop strong healthy feelings about themselves, their world, and others, and by helping them to know how it feels to be hurt by comments or inconsiderate remarks. The curriculum authors wanted students to know and understand the issues of fairness, justice, and equity. The project immersed students in artistic study and expression to understand themselves and the culture of their community and neighbours, allowing them to enter into those cultures through the arts.

The teachers and students in the project began at various starting points, but most made some movement on the antibias continuum. Some progressed only to the stage of political correctness or even only to awareness, but for some whose attitudes were particularly hardened, this was major progress. Most ended up in the last two stages of the developmental continuum.

No awareness of bias

People at this stage saw nothing wrong with openly using racial slurs and telling jokes that were dirty, racist, or sexist. The project began by having students identify and discuss the impact of the names they called each other. That led to an increase in such behaviour for a while.

Awareness of bias

People at this stage knew that there were taboo words and topics. They avoided inappropriate behaviour in front of some people, but continued in their old ways, sometimes joking about it. Boys might brazenly call girls sexist names and then immediately turn around and say, "Oh no, I mustn't say that. It's sexist." Teachers were more cautious about telling inappropriate jokes in the staff room.

Political correctness

The students in this group had finally developed the vocabulary to discuss issues of bias. At this stage students' attitudes had not necessarily changed but they showed some behavioural change; they took seriously not demonstrating bias in most situations. They had "learned how to play the game" of being politically correct. Students at this stage seemed to understand bias against themselves in specific situations but failed to realize that their own biases could hurt others.

To ensure that many reached this stage, it was important to make a sustained effort throughout the school, in class, in the hallways, in the gym, and on the playground, to help students identify and curb inappropriate behaviour, and to make clear the consequences of not doing so.

Transfer to personal life

Students at this stage were not only able to deconstruct incidents of bias and clearly describe issues of bias, but they were also able to articulate a definite change in attitude towards Native Canadians. Questionnaires were completed by 123 students and 73 of those students articulated a definite attitude change toward Native Canadians. Thirty students acknowledged recognition of struggles in the lives of Native students just like their own struggles. Thirty-three students cited changes in attitude towards people no matter what their race. One student explained that he had become proud of his aboriginal ancestry and five declared their Native heritage, a fact they had previously hidden. A few students who had been the subject of discrimination felt safe to talk openly about it in class. Through the many activities that permeated the curriculum, much of which was steeped in the arts, students developed a new social consciousness. The unit also affected the teachers; for example, one spoke of how explaining to her own children why some jokes were unacceptable had inspired her daughter in high school to become involved in her own antibias quest, and another spoke of having developed a more spiritual connection to nature.

Explanations of Success

To explain the success of the unit in effecting attitudinal change beyond what had been achieved before, participating teachers turned to the arts. In the words of one teacher (edited for clarity):

"We always teach Native Studies. We always teach some kind of antibias curriculum, some kind of critical thinking, and some kind of critical viewing skills. In this project something was different, deeper, stronger. There was something more to it. The students embraced it as more a part of themselves. Other curriculum units all included writing, reflection, reading, and project work. The one factor that was different here, aside from the fact that classes change from year to year and develop their own character, was the arts."³

EN BREF

Le projet *Cultural Awareness Through the Arts* a été conçu pour combattre les préjugés culturels, et plus particulièrement les préjugés à l'égard des Autochtones. Le projet plonge les élèves dans un univers d'études et d'expression artistique qui les aide non seulement à mieux se comprendre mais aussi à mieux comprendre la culture de leur collectivité ainsi que celle de leurs voisins. Grâce à diverses activités du programme d'études, les élèves peuvent acquérir une conscience sociale. En effet, dans les questionnaires qu'ils ont remplis, 73 des 123 élèves, ont manifesté un changement d'attitude notable à l'endroit des Canadiens de souche autochtone.

The language the teachers used to describe and explain the impact of the arts closely paralleled the language of Dissanayake's theory of art as a biological need.³

The arts draw you in. Students were captivated by the telling of the creation legend early in the project, and later, jumped at the invitation to join in the traditional dance of young First Nations dancers.

The arts as a way of knowing. Dissanayake considers music and movement to be universal. Students put long hours into the arts because they could be creative, it was fun, and they could be themselves.

Doing the arts is a humanizing process. Teachers could be co-learners and showed high commitment. The participants saw what they were doing as "real-life stuff". In one teacher's words, "There's so much that's mandated for us to do that you can't really buy into. It's really nice when you can buy into something with your teaching heart and you think this is important work."

The arts as emotion. Art took the project to a deep level. The importance of feeling good was stressed. In the culminating student performance, the audience was deeply moved.

Making the link. The arts brought people together. The arts are a universal literacy, prior to language. They reach out to the viewer over time, space, culture, and language.

Leadership and Teamwork for Success

To be effective, an antibias curriculum effort needs adequate time and the concerted effort of a whole school and its community. The principal can contribute significantly to the success of such a curriculum by encouraging teachers to work together in planning and implementation, by providing opportunities to celebrate the work of the students, by setting a consistent tone of expectations for the students and staff, and by communicating with parents and community about the goals of the school in addressing issues of bias. With proper support, careful planning, and teamwork, and with the power of the arts to draw students and teachers in, bias and racism in school can be reduced and young adolescents can develop a healthy sense of who they are in relation to others whose culture seems different. 🗣️

Live Without Him

Excuse me?

Did our eyes just meet?

Did your heart just cross my path?

The tar I swim in

Blackens me

The air I breathe

Is so heavy

Take a look

Do you see what I see?

Have a listen

Can you hear my silent scream?

When sticks walk by

Don't turn your head

When beauty hits you

Don't think twice

Jump the boat

Out of the tar

Get off this low and reach a high

Leave me here for I can swim

I have been here before

I can live without him

By Alanna Swartz, Riverview High School
Coxheath, Nova Scotia

Reprinted with permission of Writers in Electronic Residence (WIER)

- 1 Carol Butler and Maureen Swain, "Cultural Awareness through the Arts". (Napanee, Ontario: The Lennox & Addington Board of Education, 1996).
- 2 Carol Butler, "Cultural Awareness through the Arts: The Success of an Aboriginal Antibias Program for Intermediate Students". (Kingston, Ontario: Queen's University, 2000). Unpublished M.Ed. thesis.
- 3 Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*. (Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada, 1992).

Carol Butler is an elementary classroom and curriculum resource teacher with the Limestone District School Board. butlcaro@educ.queensu.ca

William Egnatoff is an assistant professor, Faculty of Education, Queen's University. egnatoff@educ.queensu.ca