Language, culture and identity

Teacher’s handbook
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How to use this handbook

Objectives
This module explores:

• the significance of language, culture and identity
• the uses of markers of identity and stereotypes
• the dangers of markers of identity and stereotypes
• the importance of understanding and countering prejudice.

Structure
The topics covered are:

• The language of prejudice in early childhood
• What do we share?
• Stereotypes

Organization
Each activity:

• starts with teacher’s notes which set out the purpose of the activity, the materials required and instructions for how to proceed
• Is followed by the relevant OHTs and handouts.

Key

Teacher's notes  
Handout  
OHTs
Language, culture and identity objectives

This module explores:
• the significance of language, culture and identity
• the uses of markers of identity and stereotypes
• the dangers of markers of identity and stereotypes
• the importance of understanding and countering prejudice.
The language of prejudice in early childhood

Purpose
To look at how prejudice develops in and affects young children.

Materials
- Language of prejudice: research findings handout
- Prejudice and childhood OHT
- Prejudice and childhood key handout

Instructions
Distribute Language of prejudice: research findings handout
Ask participants to discuss the findings in pairs or small groups.
Now explain that you are going to do an exercise that looks at the implications of children’s attitudes to difference.
Display Prejudice and childhood OHT.
Ask participants once more to discuss the questions in pairs or small groups.
Distribute the Prejudice and childhood: key handout and allow participants enough time to read the comments.
When you take feedback, focus on:
- The fact that young children are far more capable and thoughtful than adults often allow them to be
- the role of adults in facilitating and mediating sensitive encounters between children.
The language of prejudice in early childhood: research findings

Research with young children shows:

- In normal development, children as young as two years old notice differences as they learn about their worlds.
- They start to use words to label things and people in their environment, e.g. boy, girl, red, green, black, blue.
- Many lessons are informal and young children pick up the terms that people around them use for differences in skin colour, gender and physical attributes.
- They notice that some differences are more highly valued than others.
- Other people, what they see and hear on the radio and TV and what they read in books and magazines, all influence young children’s opinions about their own identity and the identity of others.
- By the age of three, children show evidence of being influenced by the biased attitudes around them.
- Between three and five years, children are increasingly concerned about their identity and where they belong.
- They may ask questions like: “Can I turn into a girl if I put on a dress?” or “Can I wash off the black on my skin to be white?”
- They internalize the biased messages and use them in their play and interactions.

Further reading
Prejudice and early childhood

- If we leave children to play and learn alongside one another, they will grow up without being prejudiced and biased.
- If you are a principal of a school where all the learners are ‘black’, you don’t have to concern yourselves with prejudice.
- It is important to balance negative perceptions of cultural practices with examples of positive practices, so that children see the whole picture.
- Our syllabus is very full already. There isn’t time to worry about multilingualism and intercultural communication.
- When young children treat people in a prejudiced way, teachers must make it clear this behaviour is unacceptable.
- Stereotypes are often used to exclude ‘outsiders’.
- It is not possible for young children to empathise with others or imagine what it would be like if they were in that situation.
The language of prejudice in early childhood: key

• Children don’t notice difference. If we leave them to play and learn alongside one another, they will grow up without being prejudiced and biased. *Children do notice all kinds of differences. They will learn to be negative about things the values ascribed to differences are negative ones, e.g. a ‘white’ child is referred to as looking like a pig, or a child with an Afro hairstyle is ignored and one with straightened hair gets told she looks beautiful.*

• You are a principal of a school where all the learners are ‘black’. This means that you don’t have to concern yourselves with issues of discrimination and prejudice. *There are many areas where people discriminate and are prejudiced. Sometimes children’s language is ignored when it is a minority language or a language of lower status, sometimes children are bullied because they may be overweight, or disabled, or have family members with HIV Aids.*

• It is crucial to help children and adults understand the way that all groups of people have both repugnant and attractive cultural practices. *When a topical issue arises relating to a particular social or cultural group arises, it is important to give children counter examples of positive and negative traits and practices and positive and negative role models in other sections of society.* This will help them to grow up into adults who are able to see when behaviour is prejudiced and people are being discriminated against on the basis of stereotypes.

• Our syllabus is very full already. There isn’t time to worry about multilingualism and intercultural communication. *We all live in multilingual societies where intercultural understanding, respect and tolerance is vital for the well-being of all. Multilingual and intercultural education needs to be developed as an integral part of the whole curriculum, so that children see it as normal that there are other ways of doing things and expressing ourselves and become curious to find out about others.*

• When young children begin to treat people unfairly according to the values they have, this is prejudice and it needs to be dealt with. *When young children begin to treat people unfairly according to the values they have, this is prejudice and it needs to be dealt with.* Young children are often not aware of the wider implications of what they say or do, because they have only had limited experiences and understanding. However, young children sometimes do express prejudice and can be prejudiced. Adults need to keep this in mind so that they do not react too harshly, frighten a child, or take sides. They will help children to understand when something they have said or done is unacceptable by explaining things in a way that is compassionate and kind, but firm.

• Stereotypes are often used by people to exclude ‘outsiders’ from their group. *Stereotypes are often used by people to exclude ‘outsiders’ from their group.* Adults and children do this. When a school won’t allow a child to start because they do not know English well, it is because of a perception that this child will be a problem, because of his or her mother tongue. Children often exclude their peers from playing in groups that are formed on the basis of certain attributes.

• It is not possible for young children to empathise with others and imagine what it would be like if they were in that situation. *It is not possible for young children to empathise with others and imagine what it would be like if they were in that situation.* Young children love playing and they learn through play. They regularly pretend to be other people and teachers can exploit this ability by getting children to think how they would feel if they were in a particular situation, e.g. if you were the only child who spoke a different language, how would you feel? What would you do? How would you like others to behave towards you?
What do we share?

Purpose
This activity is a good icebreaker, which also helps people to think about identity by pointing out that we have things in common with each other as well as differences.

Materials
- Pens, pencils
- Markers of identity OHT
- What do we share? Activity

Instructions
Display Markers of identity OHT
Give out What do we share? Handout. Participants should work in pairs. Each pair uses one handout.
Get them to look at the completed form for Mel and Zola.
Ask them to write down words or phrases that describe themselves briefly under the different headings.
They should then look at each other's descriptions to see what they have in common and what is different.
When taking feedback, focus on:
- The fact that there are always things we hold in common with others.
- People place different value on different aspects of themselves depending on the context they are in and on their experiences.
- We usually have a range of identities, some of which we share with different groups of people.
Markers of identity

- We use a range of labels, e.g. gender, size, age, ethnicity, ‘race’, to describe ourselves and others.
- These labels are not neutral. They are often value laden, and highly contentious.
- Some labels imposed on groups of people, and some are self-imposed.
- ‘Race’ is widely accepted to be a social construct. Labels that focus on skin colour have been used to discriminate against people in many African countries, especially South Africa.
- We may wish to adopt some labels, and to reject others.
# What do we share?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>Zola</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GENDER</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LANGUAGES</td>
<td>English, Afrikaans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATIONALITY</td>
<td>South African</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERSONALITY</td>
<td>reserved, calm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORK</td>
<td>education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTIVITIES</td>
<td>Church, football, dancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIKES</td>
<td>dancing, dogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISLIKES</td>
<td>rain, hot food</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Purpose
To try to understand how stereotypes work and why teachers need to be aware of the dangers of stereotyping children and their families.

Materials
Right face for the job handout
Stereotypes OHT

Instructions
• Ask participants to divide into groups of 5 or 6 to discuss the task on the Right face for the job handout.
• Take each photo in turn, and establish what work participants think the person in question might do and why they think so.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The right face for the job: key</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. hospital porter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. pre-school teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. dentist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. cook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. taxi driver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. cleaner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When you take feedback, focus on:
• the way that gender and ‘race’ often influence choice.
• the danger that social expectations may influence people’s behaviour towards members of other groups.
• how easy it is for us to create stereotypes.

Now display Stereotypes OHP. Allow participants to reflect on this summary and invite any further comments.
The right face for the job?

Match the following jobs to the people in the photographs:

- Hospital porter
- Taxi driver
- Cleaner
- Pre-school teacher
- Dentist
- University lecturer
- Author
- Cook
- Nurse
Stereotypes

- a kind of social shorthand, which allows us to build up a picture (usually a value judgement) of a person or a group on the basis of very limited evidence
- can be very dangerous and lead to discrimination
- usually contain an element of truth, e.g. many Afrikaans-speaking people like eating boerewors (sausage)
- often used for political reasons to draw attention to differences that threaten the well being of the group, e.g. dishonesty, dirtiness, meanness
- can stress the positive, e.g. ‘appropriate’ behaviour
- one observable characteristic tends to trigger the whole range of the stereotype, e.g. Black children are good at dancing and sports, but can’t do maths and other academic subjects.
Language biographies

Purpose
To make participants think about their own patterns of language use and the links between language, culture and identity.

Materials
Language biographies activity
Patterns of language OHT
Language, culture and identity OHT

Instructions
Distribute the Language biographies activity and explain how the model drawing was produced.
Ask participants to make their own drawings.
Choose several participants to share their silhouettes with the whole group.
Display Patterns of language OHT which should sum up some of the points which will have arisen from the discussion.
Now display Language, culture and identity OHT. Ask participants to consider in pairs or small groups whether these summary statements correspond with their own views and experiences.
The drawing below was produced as part of a language biography workshop. Participants were given a silhouette and asked to find a way of indicating which languages they associated with different parts of their bodies.

Fill in your own silhouette to show the associations you have with the languages you speak.
Patterns of language use

We switch from one language to another according to:
- who we are speaking to, e.g. sister, employer
- where we are at the time, e.g. church, school
- what we are talking about, e.g. food preparation, politics
- what we are doing, e.g. speaking, writing.

Language, culture and identity

- Our languages are an essential and often intimate aspect of our identity (who we are).
- Language is very closely integrated with our cultural practices (the ways we do things).
- In all societies, power relations determine issues of language, culture and identity.
- Our identities are not fixed, but shift and change throughout our lives, depending on our circumstances and experiences. In fact, we all have multiple and overlapping identities.
- Young children are still in the process of developing a sense of identity. Teachers need to appreciate and understand the role that language and culture plays in identity formation.