

What makes stereotypes pernicious?

'Does your family carry and gun?' 'Is it foggy where you are?' These were the two most frequently asked questions in an email exchange between eight year old children in London and Los Angeles, California reported in a national newspaper (Shaw, 2003). No prizes for spotting the stereotype – we can all recognise them when we see them and we come across them all the time.

Stereotypes are generalisations which, while they may not be entirely accurate, contain an element of truth. They are usually applied to groups of people but they can also be applied to places or things. Some stereotypes are positive and emphasise good things. More often than not they have negative connotations. There is also a sense in which stereotypes operate as unthinking, knee-jerk reactions. They tend to be unsophisticated and depend on caricature for their impact and effect.

The term stereotype was first coined nearly a century ago in 1922 by a social scientist, Walter Lippmann. Lippmann noted that rather than interpreting new information on its merits we sometimes generalise on the basis of our existing ideas. Lippmann talked about stereotypes as 'pictures in our heads' and he recognised that they were remarkably rigid. Although there has been much discussion about what stereotypes mean in detail, the term has proved so useful on a general level that it has entered into popular language.

What stereotypes do you and the children you teach hold? Which are positive and which are negative? Are any neutral?

Stereotypes can help us to order our ideas. Current ideas about thinking and learning have identified the importance of generalising and metacognition. It is by seeking patterns and organising our thoughts into categories and groups that we make sense of our experience. While the search for common characteristics is extremely helpful, the problem with stereotypes is that they lack criticality. In a sense this aligns stereotypes with emotional responses - both involve drawing on past experience and allow us to interpret new situations quickly and efficiently. However, the problem with intellectual short-cuts of this kind is that can be misleading.

One area where stereotypes are particularly evident is in our ideas about other countries. Palmer and Birch (2005) report how word association tests with primary school children reveal that their perception of Africa is dominated by exotic and colourful images such as

'wild animals', 'jungles' and 'witch doctors'. It is all too easy for such images to become joined together in what the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie calls 'a single story' (Adichie 2009). Once formed, such stories tend to colour our thinking and attitudes to other people. All too often they lead us to deny the similarities between people and undermine our common humanity.

Can you think of a negative stereotype which you once held about a country but which you have now abandoned? What caused your ideas to change?

Stereotypes develop from an early age. It appears there are a number of processes involved:

- *Social* Tajfel (1981) argues that young children absorb attitudes and prejudices about other people and nations well before they have any factual information about them. He explains that they actively seek information which conforms to the norms of the 'in' and 'out' groups of their surrounding culture as they seek to build their identity.
- *Developmental* There are suggestions that pupils' ideas about the wider world depend on their developmental stage. While very young children tend to focus on their immediate surroundings, by the middle primary years they become more interested in the wider world. Their fear of the unknown colours their understanding and they start to relish stories of hunter-gatherers. Stereotypes from film and advertising tend to compound and distort these images still further.
- *Cultural* Over the past few decades Edward Said (1993) and others have drawn attention to the notion of 'otherness' which equates difference in culture with distance in time. According to this interpretation, the more 'different' people are to 'us' the more they are living in the past. Thus when we describe a place as 'basic' or 'simple' we are tapping, either consciously or unconsciously into euro-centric, post colonial stereotypes.

These considerations suggest that stereotypes are much more complex than they seem at first sight. They involve social, cultural, developmental and political dimensions. They appear to have a role to play in learning and operate on both a conscious and an unconscious level. Understanding how stereotypes operate requires an appreciation of both learning theory and child development.

Take one negative stereotype which some children hold and consider how it might have evolved.

Negative stereotypes can be particularly pernicious and underpin many of the conflicts between different groups of people both within and between countries. It is the teacher's responsibility to challenge negative stereotypes and to seek to present children with up-to-date and realistic images of different people and places. One way of doing this is to avoid generalisations and to focus on specific individuals and instances. Another is to present a range of images which compliment and qualify each other. A third is to focus on similarities between people rather than their differences.

In the context of a negative stereotype, what strategies would you use to alter children's perception?

Wherever you are teaching, you are bound to hear children voicing negative stereotypes from time to time. It may be tempting to ignore them but they need to be challenged, either at the time or in a more measured manner at some later date. As Young puts it, 'If you intend to promote equality and fairness it is essential that you are aware of, and can tackle, any discriminatory views that pupils may express.' (2005 p22) It's harder than it sounds but it's worth the effort.

References and further reading

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