Program Support Notes

Racism in Australia

Produced by Video Education Australasia

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Suitable for:

Aboriginal Studies  Sose

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Introduction

This 24 minute program examines racism in Australia in 4 sections:

- Settlement or Invasion - the experience of Aborigines
- Immigration
- Multiculturalism
- Dealing with racism

It begins by defining words which are commonly confused:

Racism: a belief that human races have special characteristics which determine their particular cultures, usually involving the idea that one’s own race is better than any other, and offensive or even violent behaviour to members of another race arising from such a belief.

Bigotry: being unreasonably convinced of the rightness of a particular opinion or practice.

Ignorance: lacking particular knowledge, uninformed, ill-mannered.

Prejudice: an opinion, usually unfavorably formed beforehand or without knowledge, thought or reason

1. Settlement or Invasion

Here Andrew Marcus of Monash University makes some telling points about our racist history. To a great extent it has been based on ignorance and prejudice. Darwin’s ideas have been twisted. Aborigines were seen as uncivilised and therefore had virtually no rights at all in their own land. Convicts were able to supply labour, so Aborigines were not needed by white settlers. Instead, they were seen as a threat in a land which already posed extreme survival problems. These three factors set the scene for a drawn out tragedy.

Aboriginal activist, Sharon Firebrace, brings us up to date with an account of the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, a practice which continued right into the 1970’s under the policy of Assimilation. According to her, it has been a major factor contributing to basic weaknesses in Aboriginal society. (An official inquiry is currently being conducted into forced removal; it is obvious already that there were few successes and many tragedies when Aboriginal children went to live with white families)

Finally, we look briefly at racism in the 1990’s as white Australians have been forced to confront the ‘awfulness’ of racism in football and other sports.

The quote from the President of the Collingwood football club, Alan Macallister, presumed to speak on behalf of his own club supporters and possibly many other Australians at the time: ‘if they behave like us, we’ll accept them”. No mention of the drunken white louts who follow the game! This was very much a throwback to the ideas which underlay the policy of Assimilation which did so much harm.

2. Immigration

In this section, we see how immigration has been an important element in our population growth and a major source of conflict in our society. Since the gold rush days, the Chinese, the Turks, the Arabs, the Japanese and the Vietnamese have been targeted at different times in our history. Marcus tells how we proceeded to dismantle racist legislation in the 1950s and 1960s (eg, right to vote, to drink etc) but found it hard to let go of the White Australia Policy and its infamous dictation test. Clearly, we couldn’t claim to be non-racist with such a policy in place and eventually the Policy was consigned to the ‘dustbins of history’.

In this section, racist cartoons reveal something of the treatment which different races have had to endure.
3. A Multicultural Society
Multiculturalism (or cultural relativism) is based on the idea that ‘you may be different but you’re not necessarily inferior’. In Australia it is protected by laws and permeates government policies. But how good are we at practicing multiculturalism? Students interviewed have depressing stories to tell. Clearly many Australians do not accept the right of different ethnic groups to be here and to live alongside Australians. To Professor Trang Thomas of the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission, this is due to bigotry rather than racism. To Joe Wakim of the Arabic Council, it is ignorance and this, to him, is the basis of racism.

Also in this section, we examine the role of the media. Wakim uses the media treatment of Arabs to show how excessive simplification of issues causes problems for people of his ethnic background. Most Arabs in Australia are Christians not Muslims, whether fundamentalist or not. Students also tell us that *Dolly* magazine and *Neighbours* are almost exclusively Anglo-Saxon.

4. Dealing with Racism
In this section, we discuss legislation (such as EO, antidiscrimination, and land rights), official procedures relating to how races are to be treated, education, the importance of different perspectives (such as humour), the role of heroes (such as Yothu Yindi, Cathy Freeman etc) and, perhaps above all, the role of human interaction in breaking down the barriers caused by ignorance and prejudice.
Activities Prior to Viewing

1. Some awareness of Aboriginal history and the history of immigration would be helpful.

2. Students could be asked to define racism and to describe their own racist feelings and attitudes and how justified they think they might be.

3. Terms used in the video could be explained:
   - Racism
   - Ignorance
   - Prejudice
   - Bigotry
   - White Australia Policy
   - Social Darwinism (the mistaken extension of Darwin’s theory of evolution from biology to society’s overall evolution. The result was that rampant capitalism was excused as the triumph of the fittest and the actions of white races in the colonies were similarly excused. Darwin said nothing of social evolution).
Activities after Viewing

The topic lends itself to a wide range of activities across several subject areas, especially in English, History and Social Education. Some of the questions teachers may ask to a class or in essays include:

1. Have we been a racist country? If so, how and why? Are we still a racist country? What degree of racism would be required to make us a racist country? 10% of people expressing racist views? 25%? 50% or more?
2. What statistics are there on the extent of racism in Australia? How do we compare with other countries, such as the USA, NZ and the UK? Which country is thought to be the most racist in the world?
3. What does it feel like to be the victim of racism? How does it compare with other forms of prejudice?
4. Examine the media over a 2 week period. What examples of racism can be found?
5. Why do Dolly and Neighbours and others exclude other cultures? Is it purely a marketing imperative?
6. How significant is racism in sport? What does it say about people when they stand in a group and scream at a player about his colour? What difference has the recent publicity made?
7. What should be done about racism? Is legislation the way to go? Can education solve the problem? Is there a danger that multiculturalism simply makes the problem worse by highlighting our differences?
8. In talking to your parents, friends and relatives, what examples of racism do you encounter. Again a study over a few weeks could be conducted.
Other Program available from VEA

More than Skin Deep  
The Immigration Debate  
Living with Difference  
Countering Racism  
Golden Mile: A Case Study in Racism

Other Reference Material

A few of the many books you will find helpful include:


Each of the publications by Healey contains additional resources and references.