

# Recognizing and Acting against Discriminatory Practices

Recognizing and taking a stand against discriminatory practices and behaviours is identified as a skill for Active Democratic Citizenship in the Manitoba social studies curriculum (S2-S-105). What exactly is discrimination and how can teachers and students achieve this outcome successfully in the classroom?

**Discrimination** refers to differential treatment of individuals or groups on the basis of prohibited grounds such as race, colour, sex, religion, and other factors. It is the action resulting from stereotypes and prejudice and is usually considered unfair and humiliating. Discrimination may be **direct**, as in being shunned by schoolmates because of colour; **indirect**, such as an employment application not being considered because of a personal trait that is not acceptable to a company; or **systemic**, which is the general result of policies and practices of employers and organizations leading to disproportionate employee representation in relation to the makeup of society as a whole.

Discrimination is often thought of as something that was government sanctioned and occurred only in the past (e.g., internment of Japanese Canadians or slavery in the United States). Discrimination, unfortunately, includes many other forms of action by individuals, groups, and communities that occur on a daily basis. Perhaps many Canadians are in denial about the existence of discrimination in their own communities or they are not aware that it exists because they have not been victims of it. They may not have learned how to recognize it around them. Discrimination, in some form, likely exists in most communities and, indeed, in most schools and classrooms throughout Canada.

## Recognizing Discriminatory Practices and Behaviours

In order to deal effectively with issues related to discrimination, students and teachers must learn to **recognize** what it is and the various forms it can take. An important starting point is to acknowledge that the history of our country includes many examples of discrimination and, further, that many of the issues and challenges we face as a society today are the direct result of past discriminatory events and practices. Secondly, we must recognize our own prejudices and stereotypes that may lead us, consciously or subconsciously, to act in discriminatory ways. Such actions often come from fear of the unknown; lack of understanding or knowledge of those who are different; attempts to change or control others; or from feeling threatened by others for a variety of reasons.

At community, school and classroom levels, discrimination may take a variety of forms, many of which may not be recognized by young people as discriminatory or hurtful. Aside from the most obvious example of racism, discrimination may include differential treatment of others on the basis of gender, age, cultural background, religious beliefs, physical appearance, income level, sexual orientation (homophobia), academic, literary and verbal skills, possessions, clothing, place of residence, companions (e.g., peers, friends, family) and other factors. Behaviours may include dismissive or derogative comments, gossip, ignoring others, judgemental attitudes, isolating others, laying blame, lack of respect, labelling, intimidation, name calling, bullying, and physical altercations. When young people begin to understand that these forms of treatment and behaviours are discriminatory, they will be well on the way to **recognizing** what discrimination is all about.

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## Taking Action against Discriminatory Practices and Behaviours

It is sometimes said that the first and most important form of **action** in dealing with any issue is to acknowledge the problem; to learn more about it; to admit that you as an individual may have your own issues; and to make a conscious decision to change yourself. In other words, anyone in denial about the existence of discrimination, in any form, cannot be part of the solution.

Taking action against discriminatory practices and behaviours may involve both individual and group initiatives. At the **individual** level, actions might include finding ways to help others understand you better; telling your story; speaking up for yourself rather than remaining quiet; treating others with respect and understanding; developing a positive attitude about yourself, becoming more assertive; making decisions and gaining more control over your life; getting rid of guilt; taking full responsibility for your own behaviour; learning more about your rights and responsibilities; speaking out when you see discrimination; and deciding to join a group.

**Group** actions against discriminatory practices and behaviours may have their beginnings when individuals discover others with similar experiences and concerns and find them to be a source of understanding and support. Sharing experiences may lead to the realization that there is strength in numbers, and ideas for some form of collective action may evolve. Actions may include developing a formal support group, learning more about discrimination and its root causes, planning meetings, hosting a forum, developing an educational activity for schools or the public, and participating actively and positively in school and community events.

In a classroom context, the teacher has a vital role in establishing the kind of environment in which all learners can feel comfortable, in which prejudices and stereotypes (past and present) can be openly discussed, and in which all individuals, irrespective of background and interest may develop their full potential as learners and members of society.

## Assessment of Skills in Recognizing and Taking Action against Discriminatory Practices

The dilemma facing the classroom teacher is that recognizing and taking action against discriminatory practices is a prescribed outcome in the curriculum, and as such requires some form of assessment to determine if it has been achieved. But how can one objectively assess a skill that is very personal in nature, one for which visible behaviours or verbal expressions may not be evident, or one that is processed and demonstrated by students in their own respective ways inside and outside the classroom?

A form of student self-assessment may be the most appropriate means to assess this outcome. This form of assessment removes the fear students may have regarding the objectivity of the teacher's interpretations and conclusions about this very sensitive and personal realm in their lives. Indeed, it also frees the teacher from the obligation and risks of making interpretations and drawing conclusions that may not reflect the true nature of the students' skills in this important area. The Discriminatory Practices: Self-Assessment (BLM G-14) may be a useful tool for student self-assessment in that it allows students time for thought and private response, it provides specific prompts for student responses, and also encourages students to make any comments that may be helpful in their own assessment.