

University of Nevada, Reno

Improving intergroup attitudes with *Harry Potter*

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by

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Abstract

Reading certain literature is proposed to augment individual views toward others in society and increase intergroup attitudes (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Vezzali et al. (2015) argued that the *Harry Potter* novels are an effective tool for improving attitudes toward stigmatized groups due to their popularity, accessibility, and ability to be easily integrated into school curriculums. Utilizing a six-week long reading intervention and a corresponding discussion with elementary school students, the goal of this study is to test the influence of the series' underlying themes of social inequality and injustice. It aimed to validate research that *Harry Potter* is effective at improving intergroup attitudes by utilizing a group of more socially disadvantaged and diverse students.

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Literature Review

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of racialized violence across the United States. Given these gross injustices, it is important as ever, to combat these prejudicial attitudes and behaviors head-on. A significant component of fighting racism is learning to appreciate difference. In our ever-changing society, we need to do this work now. Over the past three decades, the United States has become increasingly multi-ethnic and more diverse communities have developed across the nation as a result (Lee, Iceland & Sharp, 2012). This trend is projected to continue into the future with the number of non-Hispanic white children decreasing by 23% over the next 50 years. Over the same time period, it is expected that the population that is foreign born will also increase (Colby, Ortman, & U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). While non-Hispanics are expected to remain the largest ethnic group, they will no longer comprise the majority of the population. Many communities, particularly in metropolitan areas and along the U.S.-Mexican border, have become 'majority-minority' communities. These types of communities are where the majority of the population consists of individuals from recognized minority groups (Lee et al., 2012). In addition, communities that are majority white have decreased by a third over the past 30 years (Lee et al., 2012). With the United States becoming more diverse, members of the majority society often feel less favorable toward members of growing minority groups. Stigmatization and bias has always been a controversial and prevalent topic in the United States, and it is necessary to fix this. To increase social harmony, there is greater need to foster understanding and reduce negative intergroup attitudes. This is a serious challenge because stereotyping and prejudice develops early given the systemic integration of prejudicial and racist attitudes, and studies have revealed high levels of bias in children as young as six years of age (Bigler & Liben, 2007).

In the present research, we utilize an intervention aimed at reducing prejudice in young children. Expanding on research previously conducted in Italy, we rely on a paradigm that engages elementary school students in reading passages from the internationally successful book series, *Harry Potter*, by J.K. Rowling. This literature has previously been shown to reduce prejudice while being moderated by the participant's identification with the protagonist (Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza & Trifiletti, 2015). This research seeks to replicate and expand the findings of Vezzali et al. (2015) in the United States while focusing on a more socially disadvantaged and diverse population. Focusing more on the evaluation of ethnic groups and immigrants, this intervention will validate the findings of Vezzali et al. (2015) in a new context. We specifically use the *Harry Potter* series because it deals with strong themes of intergroup hostility, is extremely influential, and has expanded into a popular franchise including movies, plays and theme parks since its publication. For these reasons, this particular children's literature is ideal for exposing children to ideas of tolerance and understanding.

Prejudice in Children

Racial prejudice is the holding of negative attitudes and reacting unfavorably to members of a group due to a set of personal characteristics of a racial or ethnic group (Aboud, 1988; Bigler & Liben, 1993). With expressions of intergroup hostility starting early and children growing up with hostile out-group attitudes, it is necessary to start any prejudice reducing intervention early. Children are attempting to make sense of their social context and relate it to the identity they are in the process of establishing (Abrams & Killen, 2014). Children will single out and associate certain characteristics with groups, thus developing stereotypes and prejudices (Bigler & Liben, 2007). They are quick to identify similarities and differences between in-group and outgroup members (Aboud, 1988; Bennett, Barrett,

Karakozov, Kipiani, Lyons, Pavlenko, & Riazanova, 2004). In previous studies, researchers showed that in-group favoritism develops quickly and strongly in children of younger ages, and that they possess high positive in-group attitudes (Aboud, 2003). In one study asking elementary school students to attribute positive and negative traits to groups of white or black people, researchers found significant levels of bias toward outgroup members (Bigler & Liben, 1993). Children will associate positive trait attributions with group members similar to themselves and negative attributes to dissimilar ones (Lapan & Boseovski, 2016). While racial prejudice is thought to be low in educational settings, research has revealed high levels of racial bias in children as young as six years old (Aboud, 2003; Bigler & Liben, 1993).

Children first sort people into different groups in an attempt to structure their developing knowledge. This schematic formation of stereotypes and negative attitudes in children is explained in developmental intergroup theory (Bigler & Liben, 2007). The most common salient features identified by children are race, gender, age and attractiveness (Bigler & Liben, 2007). The child's classification skill and environmental experience both affect the degree to which the way this categorization happens (Bigler & Liben, 2007). Children then attach meaning to these groups in the forms of beliefs and prejudice (Bigler & Liben, 2007). Children who exclude others based on stereotypes may continue this pattern into adulthood and further social inequality (Abrams & Killen, 2014). More intervention programs for decreasing racial stereotyping in children are called for, with the ultimate goal of eliminating racially biased responding when assigning traits based on race (Bigler, 1999).

Intergroup Contact

Intergroup contact is one of the most successful approaches to decreasing intergroup prejudice (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Allport (1954) suggested that prejudice is the result of hasty generalization of a group and that contact changes how in-group

members categorize outgroup members. He outlined four conditions for optimal change with intergroup contact: equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and authority or social support (Allport, 1954). One famous study, the Robber's Cave experiment (Sherif, 1988), supported Allport's findings (1954) for intergroup cooperation and common goals. Sherif (1988) formed two groups at a boys' summer camp and had them compete against each other to maximize intergroup hostility. After establishing high levels of bias and preference for in-group members, he encouraged participants to achieve harmony between intergroup members through close contact and superordinate goals (Sherif, 1988). To achieve this harmony, in-group members found it was easier to foster intergroup contact if they had the support from the authority member of the in-group (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). Among the four conditions outlined by Allport (1954), equal status of the participants within the situation, and social and institutional support are the most important factors to encourage intergroup contact (Liebkind & McAlister, 1999). The technique of intergroup cooperation has also led to positive findings in classrooms with students (Pettigrew, 1998). The problem that arises with Allport's theory (1954) is that he only predicts when contact will lead to change in intergroup attitudes; he does not discern how or why the change occurs (Pettigrew, 1998). In social functioning, perspective taking is critical, and empathic arousal is produced when someone imagines how someone else is affected by a situation (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Intergroup contact facilitates empathy and taking the perspective of outgroup members (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

Extended contact. This study administers what other research has called an "extended intergroup contact" intervention. With this intervention, the reduction of bias comes from people obtaining knowledge of outgroup members (Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Instead of a person being exposed over time to a different group, exposure is across social

groups, emulating social contact in the form of concentric circles. In other words, bias can be reduced or eliminated if one knows about another group through communicating with someone else who has ties to that group. Simply knowing that an in-group member has an outgroup friend is sufficient to decrease bias (Vezzali et al., 2015). Research suggests extended contact with members of a stereotyped group increases the chance of a change in intergroup attitudes (Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Interventions to promote children's positive intergroup attitudes toward a stigmatized group and evaluating the effectiveness of extended contact have been previously conducted (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Cameron, Rutland, & Brown, 2007; Liebkind & McAlister, 1999). Extended intergroup contact helps people to not only reduce bias towards other groups, but also help be more open-minded when they finally meet members of these other groups (Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Ultimately, these benefits of extended contact have the potential to reduce widespread prejudice (Cameron & Rutland, 2006).

Parasocial Contact Hypothesis

Horton and Wohl (1956) first operationalized the term parasocial interaction (PSI) in order to extend the concept of intergroup contact to mass-media communication, specifically television. They proposed that media and fictional characters can create this intergroup contact and significantly reduce prejudice toward outgroup members (Schiappa, Gregg & Hewes, 2007). PSI is a one-sided relationship in which intimacy is created through viewing the personality of characters over time (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Even when the audience member is not deliberately engaging with the character, they develop emotional bonds and have the opportunity to interact with varying social groups that are not present in their immediate environment (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Characters represent distinct social groups and can influence attitudes in the same way as direct intergroup contact, particularly

if there is limited opportunity for interpersonal contact between minority and majority groups (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2007). Claims arguing for a correlation between television viewership, and social and civic disengagement are disputed (Putnam, 1995). Kanazawa (2002) examined US General Social Survey data, and argued that audience members should not be able to distinguish between their actual friends and imaginary characters they view on television “because evolved psychological mechanisms have difficulty comprehending entities that did not exist in the environment of evolutionary adaptedness (EEA)” (p. 168).

Previous research has shown the effectiveness of parasocial research with regard to tolerance and prejudice. Studies regarding positive exposure to people who are in the LGBTQ+ community in television shows are consistent with the PSI hypothesis. Lower levels of sexual prejudice were found to correlate with increased viewer frequency and the social attractiveness and perceived realism of characters (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006). The relationship between exposure to gay characters on television and heterosexuals’ endorsement of gay equality has also been found to support PSI (Bond & Compton, 2015). Factors required for the effectiveness of PSI include sustainability over time, diverse representation of the minority group in question, and the formation of positive opinions from the audience towards the characters (Schiappa et al, 2006). In addition, research regarding the correlations between news consumption and attitudes toward Muslims have been examined as a part of PSI (Abrams, McGaughey & Haghghat, 2018).

Research supporting various parasocial relationships is extensive, and includes television newscasters, television shows, commercials, radio talk shows, and celebrity influencers and personalities (Giles, 2002). Research regarding narrative fiction and children’s literature is less extensive, but no less important. Children are exposed to reading

and literature in schools, and often identify with the fictional characters in stories.

Historically, narrative fiction was represented solely as a form of entertainment in the field of psychology, but contemporary research has proposed that reading literary narratives offers a mental representation of different social worlds (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Narrative fiction is able to engage the reader in perspective taking and simulate interpersonal interactions through indirect models called characters (Johnson, Jasper, Griffin, & Huffman, 2013; Mar & Oatley, 2008). These simulations help the reader understand and predict complex behavior when access to information cannot be direct, and they often project readers into the represented events (Mar & Oatley, 2008). The perspectives people take while reading are spontaneous, and engagement is never explicitly directed (Johnson et al., 2013).

Narrative fiction fosters the complex development of empathy and understanding others (Johnson et al., 2013). Theory of Mind (ToM) is the ability to understand others' mental and subjective states, which helps people understand social relationships and others' emotions (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Previously, short-term effects of reading literary fiction have been found to lead to stable improvements in ToM processes (Kidd & Castano, 2013). These ToM skills are consistent with theories of prejudice, particularly in children (Lapan & Boseovski, 2016) as they give rise to empathy, which tends to reduce prejudice and stereotyping with readers' taking perspective (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). The practice of reading fiction is believed to expand the general knowledge of the lives of others and help individuals recognize similarities with out-group members (Kidd & Castano, 2013).

The *Harry Potter* Series

Vezzali et al. (2015) argued that the *Harry Potter* novels are an effective tool for improving attitudes toward stigmatized groups because they are accessible and easily integrated into the school curriculum. The *Harry Potter* novels consist of seven books

portraying the life of an orphan boy, Harry Potter, who discovers he is a wizard and that magic is real. Harry attends a school where he learns to perform magic, and conflict arises as he fights against the dark wizard who killed his parents. Positive influences of the series include educational benefits of improved reading ability and engagement (Vezzali et al., 2015). The series is a popular and accessible franchise that sends a message of anti-prejudice, while at the same time transporting ideas promoting tolerance and intergroup understanding.

In the novels, one underlying theme is the social inequality and injustice in the world in which the characters live. The real-world parallels are represented in this stigmatization against “muggles” (people without magic), “muggleborns” (witches or wizards born with no magical parents), and a variety of magical creatures (Vezzali et al., 2015). The academic structure at Harry’s wizarding school fosters high potential for intergroup conflict and is ultimately the main source of conflict in the novels. Intergroup tensions increase when groups are created based on distinctive characteristics, group membership is obvious, and inequality is emphasized (Beers & Apple, 2006). Students at Harry’s wizarding school are immediately sorted into one of the four groups called “houses” that are each represented by one of four traits (bravery, intellect, ambition, or loyalty) (Rowling, 1998). From here, group membership is obvious as each house has a different animal and color scheme, and students live in segregated parts of the school. Throughout the novels, preference is shown to Harry’s house Gryffindor, while negative stereotypes are used against the rival house of Slytherin. The inequality emphasized between the two groups and the favoritism shown only to Gryffindor serves to maximize intergroup tension (Beers & Apple, 2006). As Allport (1954) outlined, in order to combat this tension, group members must feel of equal status, actively share common goals, limit intergroup competition, and not face opposition from a salient authority (Pettigrew, 1998).

The Present Study

The goal of this study was to test the influence of these themes and extend the original findings by Vezzali et al. (2015). This research aimed to replicate the study in the U.S. with a more socially disadvantaged group of students who have less exposure to the literary content than the participants in the original Italian study. Moreover, the group of students in the U.S. was more ethnically diverse and had higher racial stereotypes and status expectations (Aboud, 2003). The first goal of this study was to reproduce the original findings (improvement of intergroup attitudes moderated by the identification with the protagonist) in this new population of students. The present group was also less likely to include regular readers. The students were members of a literacy program for disadvantaged children through the Boys & Girls Club of Truckee Meadows. This program is an intervention program through the University of Nevada-Reno aimed at improving literacy skills and helping children catch up in their education. Its goal is to foster student improvement in all subjects at school and to help keep children out of the legal system. While the demographics of all students in the Boys & Girls Club are unknown, the program is popular with lower social and economic class families, and no child is ever turned away due to financial reasons. Combined with the observation that this study's group of participants seem to be highly vulnerable to hold out-group stereotypes, this study validates the Vezzali et al. (2015) original findings in a new context.

Method

This study consisted of a 6-week long intervention utilizing passages from the popular series *Harry Potter*. Data was gathered using pre- and post-questionnaires.

Participants

A total of 31 elementary school children (9 males, 22 females) ranging from 9 to 11 years old participated in the present study. Grade level ranged from 2nd to 6th grade ($M = 4.48$). All students were part of the Literacy Program with the Boys & Girls Club of Truckee Meadows, spread over two location sites, the Neil Road Youth Center and the Donald W. Reynolds Facility, in Reno, NV. The majority of the Boys & Girls Club student population is comprised of economically disadvantaged youth who are already involved in a program that specifically caters to educationally challenged children. This club was optional for students and took place during their recreation time at the Boys & Girls Club. Students volunteered for this club after it was announced during the daily assembly.

Demographics. The students who participated in this study were ethnically diverse. Around half of the students identified as White (51.6%), almost a quarter identified as Black (22.6%), another fifth identified as Hispanic (19.4%), and a third of the students identified as Other (32.3%). Only one participant identified as Asian (3.2%). Students were allowed to select multiple ethnic self-descriptors while filling out the questionnaire. Almost two-fifths of the students (38.7%) said that at least one parent was an immigrant to the United States, with countries of origin including Mexico, El Salvador, Columbia, Germany, and unspecified others. In addition, 15 of the students (48.4%) self-identified as American, another 15 self-identified as being from Reno, NV (48.4%), and 14 (45.16%) of students self-identified as being from somewhere else.

Dropouts. Due to the nature of this after-school program, there was a significant number of dropouts from the study. A total of 10 participants (32.3%) did not complete the study to the end and fill out the post-questionnaire. Of the students who dropped out, immigrant children were less at risk of not completing the study (8.3%) compared to non-immigrants (47.4%). However, dropout occurred equally across both the experimental and control conditions (5 of 19, and 5 of 12, respectively) with the dropout rate being slightly, but not significantly, higher in the control condition. All data comparing attitudes across time excluded all students who dropped out. All the dropouts occurred at the Donald W. Reynolds Facility possibly due to the larger premises, number of students, and more activities. The Neil Road Youth Center was much more compact and it was easier to find club participants on the premises.

Procedure

This study was an experimental longitudinal study with a six-week long intervention, similar to the original experiment by Vezzali et al. (2015). The researcher visited the Boys & Girls Club sites one week before the start of the study to meet the students and inform them about the study. If they decided to participate, students then signed-up with a staff member over the course of the next week. The researcher visited the program one week later and confirmed the student's verbal assent. With approval of the Institutional Review Board, written parental or guardian consent was not obtained. This research was minimal risk and the study sites had already obtained consent from parents to participate in any club-sponsored activity. This study (known as "*Harry Potter* Club") fell under the pre-existing Literacy Program.

During the second week, the researcher explained to the students that they would read a short passage from one of the *Harry Potter* books and discuss it in a group. The

reading level of the *Harry Potter* novels is 5th and 6th grade, and the passages adhered to this. General discussion questions were created beforehand for each passage. First, at the Donald W. Reynolds Facility, students were split into either the control condition ($n = 12$) or experimental condition ($n = 12$) based on who volunteered first. Then, at the Neil Road site, all students ($n = 7$) were placed into the experimental condition. This condition was decided randomly after the students at the Donald W. Reynolds Facility were assigned because it took place later in the week. Students in the control condition read a selection of neutral passages from the *Harry Potter* books, which were unrelated to prejudice, while in the experimental condition passages focused on the theme of prejudice. In each condition, students then discussed the material with the researcher and the other students using the prepared discussion questions. The control condition centered on the plot of the passage read (see Appendix C), whereas the experimental condition focused on relating their passage to the treatment of a stigmatized group (see Appendix D). The control group's discussions were general, but topics in the experimental condition were guided with the purpose of the students connecting their own personal experiences with discrimination and bullying to the issues discussed in the book. They were asked to empathize with the characters who were being discriminated against and connect it to their own lives and the lives of the other club members. Regardless of conditions, students completed a questionnaire before and after reading six different *Harry Potter* passages and discussing them.

Incentives. In order to augment the retention rate, students received small incentives such as small party favors (slime, bouncy balls, pencils, etc.) after each passage. A larger incentive was promised for the end of the study for those with high attendance rates¹.

¹ At the time of this writing, a promised pizza party has yet to be scheduled.

Measures

Students completed pre- and post-intervention self-reported questionnaires. Unless indicated otherwise, they responded to all items by circling one of five faces that ranged from extreme frowning to smiling with each face also marked by numbers from 1 to 5. The questionnaires included questions on the students' demographic information, parental demographics, how exposed they were to the *Harry Potter* series, the assimilation of immigrants, and overall enjoyment of reading. For a complete copy of the pre- and post-intervention surveys, see Appendices A and B, respectively.

Ethnic groups and evaluation of immigrants. Four items asked participants to rate Asian, Black, Hispanic and White based on how likeable they thought each one was as a group. Questions on the cultural assimilation of immigrants were adapted from the original Vezzali et al. (2015) questionnaires, and from the scale by Liebkind and McAlister (1999). These items appeared on both questionnaires.

Intercultural relations. Two items asked participants to rate how much the student wanted to learn about other cultures and if they ever call other people bad names referring to race or nationality. These items appeared on both questionnaires.

Exposure to Harry Potter series. Two items asked participants if they had read or watched any of the *Harry Potter* books or movies, and exactly how many. These items appeared on both questionnaires.

Identification with characters. On the post-questionnaire only, two questions each assessed the student's identification with the contrasting characters Harry Potter and Voldemort. They focused on whether the student wanted to be more "like" or "similar" to these characters.

Manipulation check. Four items assessed how likable, nice, funny and easy to understand the passages were. These appeared only on the post-questionnaire after the students had read all of the passages.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Before the intervention, 7 of the students (22.6%) reported they had never read a *Harry Potter* novel and 5 of the students (16.1%) reported they had never watched one of the movies. After the intervention, 2 of students (9.5%) reported they had never been exposed to the *Harry Potter* books, and another 2 students (9.5%) reported they had still not watched any of the films. *Table 2* reports the average number and deviation of novels and films watched before and after the intervention. On average, the mean number of novels read increased by about one book, while the average number of films watched stayed constant. Overall student enjoyment of reading was evaluated during both the pre-questionnaire ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.87$) and the post-questionnaire ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.81$), and we found little to no difference between the experimental and control conditions.

Likability of ethnic groups

In the first step, the likability of four different ethnic groups (Black, Hispanic, Asian and White) as a whole were evaluated. We expected a differential improvement of attitudes in the experimental condition relative to the control condition, indicated by a significant Time x Condition interaction. This pattern emerged across all dependent variables, but only surpassed significance for one. For the Black ethnic group, the Time x Condition interaction was significant, $F(1, 19) = 6.71$, $p = .018$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.26$, and is displayed in Figure 1. Specifically, in the experimental condition, the favorability of the rating increased significantly ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.92$ vs. $M = 4.79$, $SD = 0.43$), simple effect $p = .001$. At the same time in the control condition, the favorability of ratings declined non-significantly ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.76$ vs. $M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.79$), simple effect $p = .60$.

For Asians, $F(1, 19) = 0.80, p = .38, \eta_p^2 = 0.04$, Hispanics, $F(1, 19) = 0.12, p = .73, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$, and Whites, $F(1, 19) = 0.01, p = .91, \eta_p^2 = 0.001$, the same interaction was not found to be significant. When the interaction was evaluated for combined responses across all ethnic groups it was found to approach significance, $F(1, 19) = 2.62, p = .12, \eta_p^2 = 0.12$. The general pattern of an increase in favorability in the experimental group, but not the control group was found, even if it was not significant.

Evaluation of immigrants

The two items assessing attitudes toward the integration of immigrants were combined due to their substantial correlation (Time 1, $r = .40$). There was an overall improvement of attitudes toward immigrants, $F(1, 19) = 4.28, p = .053, \eta_p^2 = 0.18$. However, this change occurred differently in the experimental condition than in the control condition, as revealed by a Time x Condition interaction that approached statistical significance, $F(1, 19) = 3.30, p = .085, \eta_p^2 = 0.15$. Once again, a pattern emerged across the dependent variables. In the experimental condition, the evaluation of immigrants increased ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.27$ vs. $M = 4.36, SD = 0.77$), simple effect $p = .003$ (see *Table 1*). At the same time, in the control condition, the evaluation of immigrants was found to remain constant ($M = 3.93, SD = 0.84$ vs. $M = 4.00, SD = 0.76$), simple effect $p = .88$. On average students responded 1 point higher in the experimental conditions (see *Figure 2*).

Intercultural relations

When the same analytical design was applied to the two items assessing intercultural relations, we observed a slight decline in the tendency to call people a bad name by referring to their nationality or skin color ($M = 1.57, SD = 1.22$ vs. $M = 1.21, SD = 0.58$); however, this change failed to reach statistical significance, $F(1, 19) = 1.77, p = .20, \eta_p^2 = .09$. However, the Time x Condition interaction was far from reliable, $F < 1, \eta_p^2 < 0.01$. Relatedly, interest

in a different culture across both conditions seemed to increase a little ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.28$ vs. $M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.03$), though neither this increase nor any differential pattern between conditions was significant, both $F < 1$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.03$ (see *Table 1* for a summary).

Identification with characters

Questions regarding the students' identification with Harry Potter were combined due to substantial correlation ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.94$, $r = 0.64$). The two items pertaining to students' identification with Voldemort were also combined for the same reason ($M = 1.40$, $SD = 0.44$, $r = 0.41$). When comparing conditions, we found slightly higher levels of identification with Harry Potter in the control condition ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.85$) compared with the experimental condition ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.90$), $F(1, 19) = 3.34$, $p = 0.08$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.15$. This finding contradicts the idea that the observed changes were driven by a differential increase of identification with Harry Potter in the experimental condition. Similarly, in the control condition, slightly higher levels of identification with Voldemort were observed ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 0.48$) compared with the experimental condition ($M = 1.29$, $SD = 0.38$), $F(1, 19) = 3.52$, $p = 0.08$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.16$.

Contrary to the Vezzali et al. (2015) study, identification with Harry Potter at Time 2 did not moderate the effects of the experimental manipulation on intergroup attitudes with either of our significant dependent variables. Regarding identification with immigrants there was a nonsignificant effect, $F(1, 17) = 0.20$, $p = 0.66$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$. The same was found with likability of the Black ethnic group, $F(1, 17) = 1.07$, $p = 0.32$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$. This analysis was accomplished by centering the identification variables (i.e. rendering their mean zero) and then adding them as continuous predictors to the above design. The same analysis was conducted to discover whether identification with Voldemort at Time 2 moderated the effects of the experimental manipulation. There was once again a nonsignificant effect for

both the evaluation of immigrants, $F(1,17) = 0.08, p = 0.78, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$, and Blacks, $F(1,17) = 0.46, p = 0.51, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$.

We conducted a similar analysis for the potential effect of prior exposure, as reflected in the number of *Harry Potter* books that participants had read prior to entering the study ($M = 3.86, SD = 2.54$). The interactions were nonsignificant regarding both the evaluation of immigrants, $F(1,17) = 0.42, p = 0.53, \eta_p^2 = 0.02$, and the likability of Blacks, $F(1,17) = 0.21, p = 0.65, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$. Results did not vary as a function of how many *Harry Potter* books a student had read before beginning the study.

Finishers versus Dropouts

To account for the possibility that results are distorted through differential dropout, we ran a Condition x Completion factorial analysis for all relevant dependent variables. We were especially attentive to instances of a significant Condition x Completion interaction because it would suggest that students with certain characteristics were more likely to remain in one condition, whereas students with the same characteristics were more likely to drop out in the other condition. Focusing our analysis on Time 1 only, we did not find that any differential dropout occurred regarding the likability of Black ethnic group between dropouts and finishers of the study ($M = 4.30, SD = 1.06$ vs $M = 4.29, SD = .90$), $p = 0.95$. The same was found for the evaluation of immigrants during Time 1 between dropouts and finishers ($M = 4.30, SD = 0.71$ vs $M = 3.48, SD = 1.17$), $p = 0.92$.

Discussion

This research examined the effects of children's literature on attitudes toward stigmatized groups. Using passages from the series *Harry Potter*, we manipulated whether or not participants read and discussed sensitive issues regarding prejudice, bullying and various ethnic groups. The original findings by Vezzali et al. (2015) were partially replicated in that we observed a slight reduction in negative views toward stigmatized groups in our sample of socio-economic and educationally disadvantaged children. Whereas this pattern emerged more or less consistently across all dependent variables, statistical significance emerged for only a few select variables, namely the evaluation of immigrants and likability of the Black ethnic group.

The original participants of the Italian study were 34 Italian fifth-grade elementary school students from a school located in Northern Italy (Vezzali et al., 2015). The intervention took place in classrooms, and the researchers provide little to no detail about the ethnic or cultural backgrounds of their students. As only 10% of primary school students in Italy are foreigners (Italian National Institute of Statistics, 2015), it is unlikely that the students in the Vezzali et al. (2015) study were heavily exposed to ethnic and racial diversity in their schools and everyday lives. In the Vezzali et al. (2015) study, the items included as part of their measures specifically focused on attitudes toward foreigners. In contrast, the students at the Boys & Girls Club were already part of a literacy program aimed at improving reading skills in disadvantaged children. This group has higher ethnic diversity and there is uncertainty whether or not there was a diverse group of participants in the Vezzali et al. (2015) study.

Unlike the original Vezzali et al. (2015), there was no evidence of the students' identification with the main character moderating the effects of the experimental

manipulation on the dependent variables. In the present study, identification was only assessed at the end in case students did not know the *Harry Potter* series well enough. There was no evidence that identification qualified the results. Similarly, previous exposure to the content and the student's personal identification with the protagonist and antagonist were evaluated as predictors for the overall pattern but were also not statistically significant.

Identification was also only evaluated between the main protagonist and antagonist of *Harry Potter*. Harry and Voldemort represent two very different sides with clear cuts viewpoints. The first represents good and is designed for the reader to identify with, while the latter is the opposite. Voldemort has little redeeming qualities and represents evil in the series. Naturally, students identify with Harry over Voldemort due to their age and natural inclination to agree with the main character over the villain. The *Harry Potter* series is complicated in the sense that it contains 772 characters throughout all the novels. Future research with more complex narrative fiction such as this should take in consideration other characters. For example, the character Draco Malfoy appeared in several of the passages read with the students. He has many of the same ideals as Voldemort but represents more of the school bully at Hogwarts. As one of the items on this research's questionnaire assessed whether or not students responded similarly to Malfoy in situations ("I sometimes call people a bad name referring to their nationality or skin color"), it would be appropriate to look into the student's identification with this character. Identification supports the idea of extended contact and the parasocial hypothesis; however, in the sense that variability in levels of identification qualifies any attitude changes, there is no evidence in the present context to support that identification was critical for any intergroup improvement to occur. Thus, this study does not necessarily support the conclusions drawn by Vezzali et al. (2015).

Rather, it appears that intergroup-relevant content itself was persuasive enough to influence students, or perhaps the accompanying discussion.

Vezzali et al. (2015) provided very little detail about the content of their discussion. Specially for the experimental group, they “focused on the prejudicial acts committed against stigmatized groups, on their consequences such as the sufferings produced in stigmatized group members, on the role of Harry Potter in addressing these injustices” (p. 109). The present study was more focused on encouraging students to empathize and look for examples in their own lives where they may have been subject to stigmatization or bias. This may have effectively encouraged all students to identify with the “good guy” in the story and may have effectively wiped out the differences that Vezzali et al. (2015) found between the polar characters. In other words, identification may have been critical and would have been maximized through our procedure. However, our procedure may have instead encouraged all students to identify with Harry Potter (and disidentify with Voldemort), and thus reduced any variability in levels of identification that would have been observed otherwise.

Another difference between this study and the original were the dependent variables. Strong effects were found with regards to the rating of Blacks, a heavily stigmatized and disadvantaged group in the United States with a complex history. Vezzali et al. (2015) did not include any questions pertaining to specific ethnic groups. The United States has an established system of ethnic classification via the census whereas Italy has only recently grappled with the influx of people from different nationalities and different races. As a result, our study may have found a more potent effect regarding this specific variable, but the comparison is uneven. It is necessary to evaluate attitudes toward various ethnic groups in the United States in order to translate this research into a new context. Another relevant

difference in this regard is the fact that our study assessed the likability of ethnic groups, while the Vezzali et al. (2015) study did not.

There was an improvement of intergroups attitudes over time that occurred independently of the condition to which students were assigned. This likely reflects an observation effect. Following the initial questionnaire, students may have been more attentive to intergroup attitudes after observing what types of questions were being asked of them. When presented with an almost identical questionnaire at the end, students likely recognized it, and may have felt prompted to express favorable views. Due to the nature of longitudinal interventions, there are inevitably outside influences during the weeks long intervention. With the political climate of the United States, it is likely the topics of ethnicity and immigration have appeared in the student's daily lives. Similar subjects may have even been discussed during school. However, this improvement of attitudes in the control group was not as significant as the experimental group. This indicates narrative fiction and the novels of *Harry Potter* may be the strongest influencer toward intergroup attitudes.

The design of this research was split into two parts: the reading of a *Harry Potter* passage and the subsequent discussion. It is unsure whether reading about stigmatization in the passages was enough to influence the students, or if the discussions were the sole influencers. The *Harry Potter* series likely serves as a springboard for addressing and talking about these controversial social issues, particularly with this group of students. Vezzali et al. (2015) provide little information about the composition of their groups regarding diversity and the schools this study took place in. The reading groups in this study were ethnically diverse and all included non-white students and immigrants. This indicates that the discussion itself encouraged this exchanging of ideas during the session, and this is what provided meaningful intergroup contact. From this perspective, the *Harry Potter* passages

themselves and its anti-prejudice content may not have been what reduced unfavorable attitudes, but instead the opportunity for students to engage in a meaningful intergroup discussion. In our experimental reading group, students were explicitly encouraged to share and reflect on their experiences of exclusion and talk about diversity. The research strongly encouraged each of the students to make the connection between their own lives and the content represented in the passages. This allowed for an opportunity for students to discover and thus appreciate their fellow students, as many of them were not friends before this study. As a result of this, the *Harry Potter* series itself is potentially not as necessary for improving intergroup attitudes, and instead any literature that sparks discussion in a diverse group may be used.

Limitations

Working with an after-school program where attendance is not mandatory presented the initial challenge for this study.

Sample size. The pattern of findings was consistent, but the results were often not statistically significant. The cause is likely the high dropout rate, resulting in a small sample with low statistical power. However, comparisons of control and experimental manipulation on intergroup attitudes revealed no distortion due to any differential dropouts. In the original study, Vezzali et al. (2015) did not report any dropouts. This appears unrealistic when working with children over a seven-week period. While Vezzali et al. (2015) were working with students in the school versus the after-school setting and could perhaps not dropout, there is the question of attendance during the actual intervention. There are naturally absences across a two month period, and the original research does not address this issue. Interestingly, 70% of the 10 students who dropped out in our study were native to the United States and self-identified as white. This trend brings up the question of whether or

not immigrants and non-white individuals are more receptive to the empathetic intergroup messages in *Harry Potter*.

Procedure. Overall, there were limitations regarding time. The weekly discussions were limited to approximately half an hour, which only allowed for our study to work with select text passages. Working with the *Harry Potter* series as a whole would have been ideal.

Geography. There is a need to research the geographical influences on this type of research. The United States is proportionally larger than Europe and is extremely diverse. The results of this research are specific to the Truckee Meadows in Northern Nevada. It targeted a program in Reno, NV designed to bring together many students from diverse backgrounds. The actual distribution of these same students across the school district is not as diverse within each school and numbers may be skewed. Future research on this topic is needed in larger and more socially, economically, and racially diverse cities in the United States such as Houston, New York City, and Los Angeles. As a result, our generalizability is uncertain.

Future Directions

The *Harry Potter* novels were chosen due to their popularity and prevalence in society, and to maintain the student's interest in the subject at hand. Other works of literature should be evaluated for their effectiveness in improving intergroup attitudes, particularly for different reading and age levels. The reading level for the *Harry Potter* novels is between fifth and sixth grade (or 9 to 12 years old). This is the age group in which this study targeted. However, intergroup bias has been shown to emerge many years before this, thus making it necessary to investigate other works of narrative fiction. An analysis is needed of what exactly the literature must contain in order to be effective. This would be preferable to individually evaluating each series of books.

Provisional evidence. We have sufficient evidence that this *Harry Potter* based intervention translates well into the United States context. This specific intervention is not yet ready for wide-scale implementation across schools in everyday curriculum, but youth summer camps provide a unique opportunity for clubs of this sort. One of the problems that arise during this study was the fact that the intervention itself was conducted in the winter time with several snow days where the students stayed home instead of going to their after-school program. Students are much more likely to go to youth camps with regular attendance in the summer time when they don't have school and their parents are working. There is also more time and space available with summer programs, and more students attend them. In general, expanding this research to a more wide-scale intervention with a more numerous sample size is needed.

This *Harry Potter* intervention fits in with a growing field of psychological interventions that are more precise and simpler. In educational settings, they focus on smaller psychological interventions instead of academic content (Walton, 2014). Yeager and Walton (2011) composed a theoretical review looking at the foundations of these social-psychological interventions in education. They argue that social-psychological interventions are beneficial even though it is difficult to see the processes and only the alterations. In addition, traditional educational reforms are large, and do not target students' subjective experiences and change their mindset like smaller social-psychological interventions do (Yeager & Walton, 2011). Our *Harry Potter* intervention focused on using literature in order to encourage students' to reflect on their personal experiences with stigmatization and reduce negative attitudes. These types of interventions look at major social problems and work to change attitudes in everyday life. Narrative fiction is a simple way to do this and is already abundantly used in education settings. These interventions target the students'

psychology and beliefs, and comprise of thoughts, feelings and beliefs (Yeager & Walton, 2011). Social-psychological, or “wise” interventions, are rooted in theory but are heavily dependent on the setting and nature of their environment (Yeager & Walton, 2011). They rely on previous research on persuasion and attitude change, unlike many current educational reforms. There is great promise in these interventions for rendering a beneficial and enjoyable activity for the benefit of intergroup relations.

The focus of this research was the evaluation of ethnic groups and immigrants. Both categories spark major social and political debates in the United States. Previous research has investigated the influences of narrative fiction on other stigmatized groups, but not using the *Harry Potter* series. Controversially, the author of the novels has a character that identifies as gay, in addition to one representing the social struggles surrounding a life with HIV. Using the *Harry Potter* novels to reach the reduction of stigmatization toward both the LGBTQ+ and AIDS/HIV communities is a step forward. The series can potentially be used to create better empathy toward these communities with the template for improving racial bias established above. This proposed research uses similar principles but takes a different direction with this research.

Conclusion

This study focused on elementary age students’ evaluation of immigrants, multiple ethnic groups and cultures, and how children’s literature can be used to change them. We tested the overarching themes of prejudice found in *Harry Potter* and partially replicated the original findings. This study validated the Vezzali et al. (2015) claim that passages from this influential book series were effective in improving intergroup attitudes by utilizing a group of more socially disadvantaged and diverse students.

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Table 1.

Means and standard deviations of dependent variables

	Experiment Condition (<i>n</i> = 19/14)		Control Condition (<i>n</i> = 12/7)	
	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)
Immigrants should try to become as much like Americans as possible				
Pre-test	3.42	(1.43)	2.58	(1.56)
Post-test	2.08	(1.12)	2.75	(1.58)
Immigrants should be able to follow their own culture without being bullied or teased				
Pre-test	4.32	(1.38)	5.00	(0.00)
Post-test	4.69	(1.11)	5.00	(0.00)
I sometimes call people a bad name referring to their nationality or skin color				
Pre-test	1.58	(1.12)	1.50	(1.24)
Post-test	1.23	(0.60)	1.13	(0.35)
I want to learn more about other cultures				
Pre-test	4.00	(1.29)	4.33	(0.89)
Post-test	4.31	(1.18)	4.63	(0.74)

Note: Means and standard deviations pertaining to the pre-test are based on all participants (*n* = 31), whereas means and standard deviations pertaining to the post-test are based only those participants (*n* = 21 total) who completed the study.

Table 2.

Means and standard deviations of exposure to the *Harry Potter* series.

	Pre		Post	
	<i>M</i>	(SD)	<i>M</i>	(SD)
Books	2.94	2.58	4.00	2.61
Movies	4.16	3.12	4.57	2.82

Table 3.

Means and standard deviation of similarity to characters.

	<u><i>M</i></u>	<u>(SD)</u>
“I would like to be like Harry Potter”	3.90	1.14
“I would like to be like Voldemort”	1.57	0.60
“I wish I could be more similar to Harry”	3.81	0.93
“I wish I could be more similar to Voldemort”	1.24	0.44

Table 4.

Means and standard deviation of manipulation check questions.

	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)
“I liked the <i>Harry Potter</i> passages we read together”	4.33	0.97
“I thought the passages were nice”	4.33	0.73
“I thought the passages were funny”	3.81	1.03
“I thought the passages were easy to understand”	4.52	0.75

Figure 1.

Likability ratings of Black ethnic group between conditions pre- and post-intervention

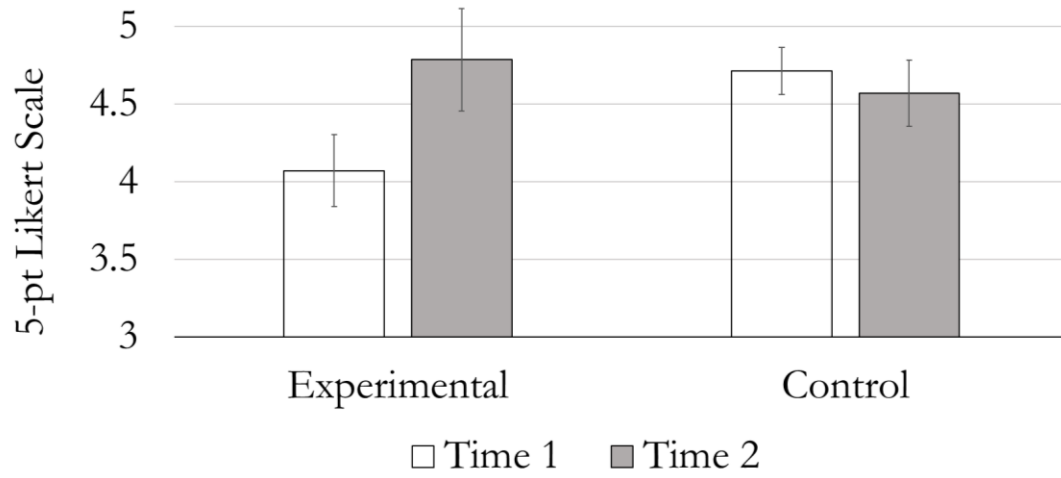
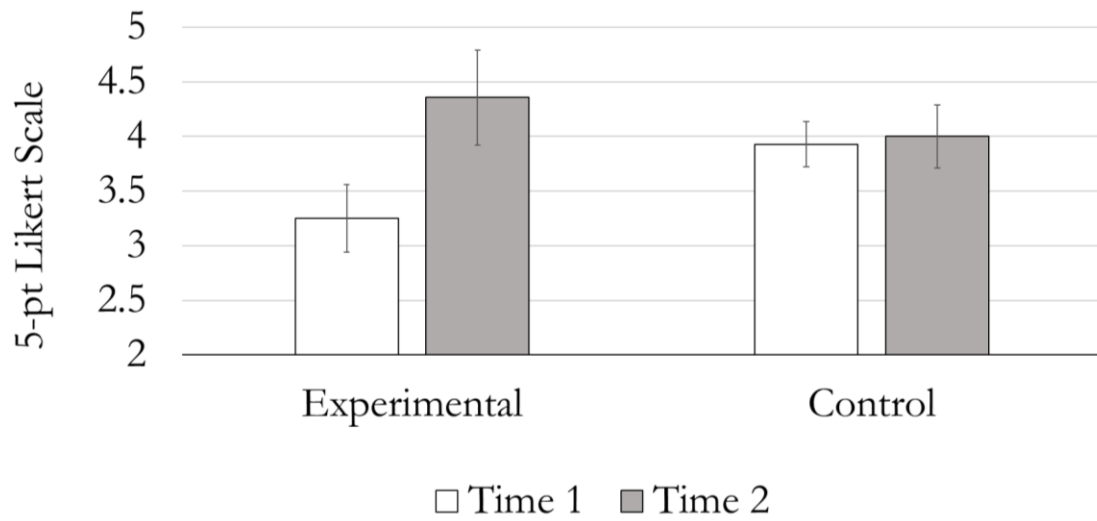


Figure 2.

Evaluation of immigrants between conditions pre- and post-intervention



Appendix A

Complete copy of pre-intervention questionnaire

Age: _____ **Grade in School:** _____

I am: _____ a boy _____ a girl

I am:

_____ Asian _____ White _____ Other

_____ Hispanic / Latino _____ Black

I am: (you can choose more than one)

_____ American

_____ from Nevada

_____ from Reno

_____ from somewhere else

One or both of my parents are immigrants _____ yes _____ no

- **Where are they from?** _____

Do you like to read?



Never

Sometimes

All the time!

Have you read any Harry Potter books? _____ yes _____ no

How many? _____

Have you watched any Harry Potter movies? _____ yes _____ no

How many? _____

On a scale from 1 to 5, how you feel about

Asian people?     
1 2 3 4 5

Black people?     
1 2 3 4 5

Hispanic people?     
1 2 3 4 5

White people?     
1 2 3 4 5

On a scale from 1 to 5, how much do you agree with

Immigrants should try to become as much like Americans as possible.

    
1 2 3 4 5

Immigrants should be able to follow their own culture without being bullied or teased.

    
1 2 3 4 5

I sometimes call people a bad name referring to their nationality or skin color.

    
1 2 3 4 5

I want to learn more about other cultures.

    
1 2 3 4 5

Appendix B

Complete copy of post-intervention questionnaire

Do you like to read?



Never

Sometimes

All the time!

On a scale from 1 to 5, how much do you agree with

1. I would like to be like Harry Potter



1

2

3

4

5

2. I would like to be like Voldemort



1

2

3

4

5

3. I wish I could be more similar to Harry



1

2

3

4

5

4. I wish I could be more similar to Voldemort



1

2

3

4

5

Since we started reading and talking about Harry Potter together...

... Have you read any Harry Potter **books**? _____ yes _____ no

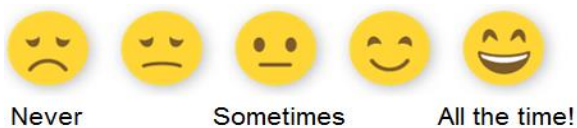
How many? _____

... Have you watched any Harry Potter **movies**? _____ yes _____ no

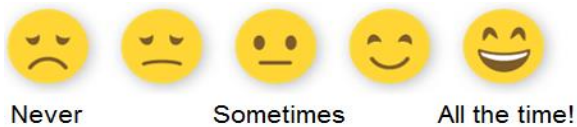
How many? _____

How do you feel about the passages we read together?

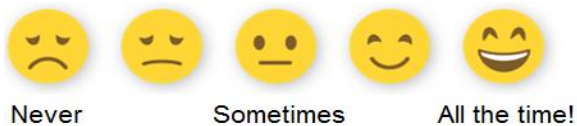
I liked the Harry Potter passages we read together



I thought the passages we read together were nice



I thought the passages we read together were funny



I thought the Harry Potter passages were easy to understand



On a scale from 1 to 5, how you feel about

Asian people?



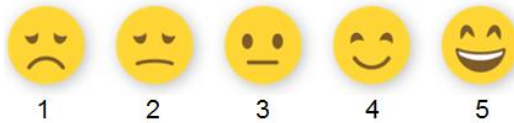
Black people?



Hispanic people?

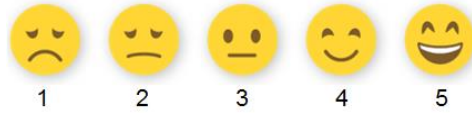


White people?



On a scale from 1 to 5, how much do you agree with

Immigrants should try to become as much like Americans as possible.



Immigrants should be able to follow their own culture without being bullied or teased.



I sometimes call people a bad name referring to their nationality or skin color.



I want to learn more about other cultures.



Appendix C

Discussion guide for the first neutral passage (“Harry’s Curious Wand”)

Synopsis:

- Harry Potter lives at his Aunt and Uncle’s house, but a giant man named Hagrid rescues him on his birthday and tells him he’s a wizard
- Harry has to go get his school supplies, which includes his magic wand

Read passage

Analysis:

- What do you think about Ollivander?
- How and why does a wand "choose" a wizard?
- How do you think Harry feels after getting his wand? (Relieved, excited, happy?)
- What are the three magical substances in a wand? Which one would you want?

Appendix D

Discussion guide for the first prejudice passage (“The New Slytherin Seeker”)

Synopsis:

- Harry goes to the wizarding school called Hogwarts where he plays a game called Quidditch
- There is a conflict over who gets to practice on the quidditch field

Read passage

Analysis:

- Why was Draco made the new Slytherin Seeker? Is he capable?
 - To obtain what you want, do you think people should use money and influence? Or talent and hard work?
- The Slytherin team makes fun of the Weasley's brooms while talking. Why do you think that is?
 - Has that ever happened to you where someone makes fun of you for not being able to afford expensive things?
- Why does Draco call Hermione a Mudblood? What does this mean and what is her reaction?
- Has anyone here ever called someone a mean name?