

Facilitating Conversations About Racism - Navigating common challenges

Exploring issues of racism and discrimination in schools can lead to increased intercultural capability within the school community, positive learning environments, and a greater sense of inclusion and belonging for all. But let's face it - they can be hard and confusing! This guide is intended to explore common queries as to when and how to have conversations about racism, and strategies to avoid common conversation derailments.

- ***Our school staff are aware of potential incidents of racism between students, but we never see it directly. How can we address the situation if we have no proof?***

Building a culture of inclusion and belonging where racism and discrimination are not tolerated, is an ongoing process. There are many different opportunities to have conversations about racism and discrimination within a school context and approaching the subject from different angles is an important part of a whole-of-school approach.

Proactively building knowledge and competency around issues of racism and discrimination is a crucial preliminary step and can be delivered in a variety of ways including:

- Use of public forums such as school assemblies to emphasise school's position regarding racism and discrimination.
- Cultural responsiveness training for staff as part of ongoing professional development.
- Engaging in a reflective process within staff meetings, professional development or classroom settings.
- Emphasising themes of racism and discrimination in existing school-based programs such as [Respectful Relationships](#) or [School Wide Positive Behaviour Support](#) 
- Development of a policy to address racism and discrimination, as well as delivering training (or re-training in case of an existing relevant policy) within staff meetings.
- Incorporation of lesson plans regarding culture, diversity, racism and discrimination into curriculum - see [Intercultural Capabilities Curriculum](#) and [CMY lesson plans](#) 



**CMY
lesson
plans**

Responding appropriately to incidents of racism as they occur within the school context is equally an important opportunity to conduct conversations about racism and discrimination. Particular scenarios may include:

- Using a restorative approach to address incidents of racism that occur between students, or between students and teachers.
- If themes or patterns of racism emerge, group discussions are appropriate. They may occur in classrooms, year levels, home groups, staff teams, student leadership groups. Methods such as [The Circle Way](#) or [World Cafe](#) provide structured approaches that can be adapted to these settings. Particular strengths of these approaches include articulating aims and intentions of the discussion, and providing opportunities for everyone to contribute.
- In case of an event of racial violence or disharmony within the broader community, using a whole-of-school forum to acknowledge, reflect and reassert school pride in its diversity and zero tolerance position towards racism and discrimination – see [Strengthening Community Harmony](#)



- Our school staff are aware of potential incidents of racism between students, but we never see it directly. How can we address the situation if we have no proof?

This is a common challenge for schools who are often compelled to respond to the aftermath - such as retaliation from students who experience racism - without evidence of the initial incident of racism.

First and foremost it is essential to respond to the student's experience of racism, this includes:

- Providing assurance to the student that you believe what they are reporting.
- Validating that the racism they experienced is not ok, and you are taking this situation seriously.
- Explaining to the student any limitations the school may have in responding to the incident of racism by the student alleged to commit it, in light of no evidence.
- Explaining to the student any disciplinary actions you may need to take in response to any acts of retaliation. Validating the perceived unfairness may assist in conveying empathy.
- Exploring strategies that the student can use if this experience happens again, such as reporting it straight away to the teacher before retaliation or asking witnesses to come forward as well.
- Exploring options of engaging in a restorative process to explain to the student involved in the racist behaviour the impact of their actions, and to clear up any misunderstandings that may have occurred in the interaction.
- Asking the student if there are any other supports they require in relation to these incidents.

Other indirect actions that can be taken include:

- Use of public forums such as school assemblies or classrooms to emphasise your school's position regarding racism and discrimination.
- Incorporation of specific lesson plans regarding racism and discrimination into curriculum.
- Explore the [Intercultural Capabilities Curriculum](#) for ideas on how this can be achieved across subject areas!
- Raising the issue with senior school staff to develop a strategy to respond to the issue.



- ***A staff member has identified a number of incidents of racism occurring in the classroom and throughout the school. The staff member has raised these issues with their school leaders but there has not been any action or follow through.***

When students report issues of racism only to have their concerns dismissed or not followed up, it serves to compound the harmful impacts of racism. Similarly when an incident occurs within a classroom setting without repercussions, it sends the message that racism is permitted and it's ok. It can be disappointing or disempowering when a school leader doesn't follow up concerns raised by the teacher, but in light of the serious nature of racism in the classroom, it is important that you persist.

Here are some strategies that may assist:

- Continue to follow due process – even if your school does not have a specific policy responding to racism, incidents of racism will still be covered in a policy regarding behavioural conduct.
- Document the issues including the actions you have taken – this may include through systems such as Compass, emails you have sent regarding the matter, and personal notes.
- If you are not satisfied with the response, discuss your concerns with your school leader – it can be helpful to bring the relevant policy documents and prepare dot points on why you think this is a serious issue that must be responded to in a timely manner.
- If you are still not satisfied with the response, escalate the issue with a senior staff member such as an Assistant Principal.
- Speak to your school wellbeing team to see if they can work with you to develop an appropriate response.
- Take action in your classrooms – outline to the class that you expect a culture of mutual respect, and explain what behaviours you consider to be respectful and disrespectful.

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- ***A colleague repeatedly makes negative comments in relation to a group of students' ethnic background. You are concerned that this behaviour may be the result of an underlying prejudice or a bias, but are unsure what to do about it.***

- Call out the behaviour – in a non-judgemental way, point out to the staff member that their comments could be perceived as stereotyping or racially profiling certain groups of students. It may lead to a productive conversation about implicit bias and awareness of behaviour. If your feedback is not well-received at least you have expressed that you don't agree with the opinion and behaviour.
 - Raise your concerns with your school leader – if this staff member's behaviour is problematic then you may not be the only person who has reported concerns.
 - Seek professional development – suggest to your school leader that staff may benefit from cultural responsiveness training or reflective practice.
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- ***Two ethnic groups are displaying conflict and threatening behaviour towards each other. You are aware this problem extends outside the school ground and are worried that it is escalating.***

What can be done?

At times, schools will be required to respond to incidents of inter-cultural conflict that has crossed over from the community into the school yard. Where possible, a preventative rather than reactive approach is key. Behaviour suggestive of conflict can include rumours of distrust or hostility, negative comments between groups, clear separation of social groups along ethnic lines, or incidents of disharmony in the community.

Interventions which can be taken both preventatively, and in response to incidents, may include:

- Use public forums such as school assemblies to emphasise your school position regarding racism and discrimination, and outline behavioural expectations.
- Utilise knowledge and expertise of mentors, peer support, bi-cultural staff or community cultural groups to build rapport with the students, provide culturally-based insight into the nature of the conflict, and work with school to develop a response.
- Look for opportunities for collaborative programs involving a mix of students from the different cultural backgrounds such as sports, music, student leadership, personal development or peer support programs. Doing so in conjunction with mentors, peer support workers, bi-cultural staff or community groups will aid the effectiveness and safety of such initiatives.
- Where incidents of conflict have arisen between students, use a restorative approach to conflict resolution using the expertise of cultural support workers listed above, and involving parents where possible.
- Ensure that these students maintain a sense of belonging and inclusion within the school. Use of cultural mentors, peer support, bi-cultural workers and community groups are a wonderful resource and can bridge the connection between the students and the school. But be aware that if students are too readily referred to cultural workers for disciplinary, behavioural or communication issues then it can help reinforce cultural divides and the sense of exclusion felt by students. Cultural workers are most effective when used to guide and support actions taken by the school.
- Continue to focus first and foremost on the students' engagement and positive interactions with the school.

- ***Students are labelling teachers as racist if they try to enforce school rules.***

Staff response to accusations of racism can be tricky. On the one hand students are often frustrated when legitimate concerns of racism are frequently not recognised and responded to, yet on the other hand racism can be so pervasive in a student's life that it can be easy for them to conflate critical or disciplinary behaviours towards them with racism. Such experiences can be a useful learning opportunity.

Some options for resolution may include:

- Use of bi-cultural workers/mentors to aid in bridging understanding between teachers and students.

- Continue to enforce school rules in an objective manner. In cases of differing cultural perspectives it may be important to separate the impact of the situation from the behaviour itself. Furthermore if this rule is to be enforced with one group of students, it must equally be applied to other groups of students.
- Another important element in this issue is how a message is delivered. Students – particularly those who have experience in racism and discrimination – will be attuned to the difference in the way a message is delivered to students of their cultural group compared to students from different groups.

- As a teacher, how should I adapt conversations or lessons regarding racism and discrimination for different age groups?

- Commonly expressed is the concern that content around racism and discrimination may be inappropriate for younger audiences. Indeed consideration must be paid to age when discussing any complex content, however students of all ages are exposed to racism and discrimination – whether or not they understand it as such. Therefore developing knowledge and capability around discussing concepts such as racism and discrimination is beneficial. For younger year levels it can be useful to focus on foundational concepts such as culture, diversity and respect. For the more senior year levels introducing reflective practice can be a great way for students to interact with the content, and broaden their understandings.

If you would like to know how to adapt content to different year levels, please check out this wonderful resource by the Australian Human Rights Commission involving lesson plans regarding racism and related concepts:

humanrights.gov.au/education/teachers 

For ideas on reflective practice for senior students please refer to Our School - a tool for reflection or CMY's Lesson Plans:



Preparing for common ‘conversation derailments’

Racism is a confronting topic for all. It is common for those who have not directly experienced racism and discrimination to have difficulty acknowledging the ways in which it exists, how they may have benefited from others’ experiences of discrimination, and therefore they may attempt to distance themselves. Being aware of common ‘conversation derailments’ may assist people to work through these ‘sticky points’ and keep the focus on track.

- **“It’s not racism, it’s bullying and we already know how to respond to bullying.”**

Racism can include an interpersonal element such as name calling and exclusion but it also occurs on a systemic level through the way groups of people are stereotyped, the qualities and characteristics that are subconsciously attributed to them and the subsequent subtle difference in the way groups and individuals are treated. Furthermore whilst bullying tends to focus on one person, a student may experience racism personally as well as seeing it experienced by friends, family and their broader community. These differences are important in acknowledging how the experience of racism can be a repetitive and pervasive experience for a person.

[DET’s Information Sheet on Addressing Racist Bullying provides practical steps on how to prevent racist bullying.](#)¹



- **“Racism isn’t a problem in our school / our community / Australia.”**

Research in Australia demonstrates that the experience of racism and discrimination is still highly prevalent in schools and the broader community, and is of significant concern:

- [Australian Human Rights Commission – Face the facts: Racism – It stops with me](#)²
- [Findings from the 2017 Speak Out Against Racism \(SOAR\) student and staff surveys](#)³

The disparities in education, socio-economic status, health indicators, life expectancy, employment and incarceration across different cultural groups within Australia, point to sustained structural inequality and discrimination. Therefore the assumption that racism does not exist or isn’t an issue is contradicted by evidence.

¹ Department of Education and Training. (2019) *Bully Stoppers*. Accessed online: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/bullystoppers/Pages/default.aspx>

² Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC] (2017) Fact Sheet: *Racism. It Stops With Me Community Service Announcement Awards 2017*. Accessed online: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/fact-sheet-racism-it-stops-me-community-service>

³ Priest, N., Chong, S., Truong, M., Sharif, M., Dunn, K., Paradies, Y., Nelson, J., ... Kavanagh, A. (2019). *Findings from the 2017 Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR) student and staff surveys*. Centre for Social Research & Methods - Australian National University

- **“The racist attitudes come from parents so there is nothing we can do. Racism is human nature.”**

It is the right of children and young people to feel safe and be provided opportunities to learn, grow and thrive. Whilst it is difficult for schools to influence parental or community values and attitudes, school can greatly influence the school culture through promoting a zero tolerance approach to racism, embracing diversity and promoting a culture of inclusion and belonging. Furthermore schools aim to prepare students for life in Australia and in an increasingly interconnected and globalised world.⁴ Even if the issue of racism is not obvious or overt in the school community, it is imperative that students have an understanding of diversity, how systems and structures may benefit some and disadvantage others, and actively participate in systems and structures around them.

- **“I treat everyone equally. I don’t see colour/race in my students.”**

Striving for equality for all students can unwittingly lead to systemic discrimination against some.⁵ This is because equal treatment does not take into account the different barriers and opportunities faced by different students on the basis of culture and ethnicity. School policies and procedures can often be developed according to one set of cultural expectations that cannot always align with the expectations from another culture. Furthermore, given the frequency in which some students and their families experience racial profiling and stereotyping, ignoring this fact can lead to lack of recognition of their day-to-day experiences.

⁴ Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA] (2019). *Intercultural Capability*. Accessed online: <https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/intercultural-capability/introduction/rationale-and-aims>

⁵ Berman, G. and Paradies, Y. (2010). Racism, disadvantage and multiculturalism: towards effective anti-racist praxis. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 33(2), pp.214-232
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