

What do policies that address racism in schools look like in practice? - Case Studies



Schools sticking up for students

A student from **School A** approached a local Real Estate Agency to request the opportunity to complete his work experience for school. The agent replied to the student that the business wouldn't accept students "... like him". The student asked if this was because of his race - the agent confirmed "Yes, that is the issue".

Dejected, embarrassed and angry, the student relayed the interaction to his teacher. The teacher immediately notified the school leadership and school wellbeing teams. Representatives from these teams personally presented to the business to lodge a formal complaint on behalf of the student and school. **School A** informed the business that they would refuse to have dealings with the business and notified them of their intention to make this known to the school community.

The school staff followed up with the student to update him as to their actions, reiterate the unacceptable nature of the incident, and to monitor his wellbeing.

The school staff addressed the entire year level to ensure they understood their rights in regards to discrimination, harassment, and bullying in the workplace and general community.

The school addressed its curriculum to ensure that this information will be covered in the relevant subject for the subsequent year levels.

Rethinking responses to incidents of racism in schools

A Year 7 student from **School B** was play fighting with his friend, which escalated into an argument. The friend called the student the "N" word. This was not the first time this situation had occurred and was noticed by school staff who intervened in the argument to separate the students. The student, feeling upset and hurt by the comment, informed his sister - a Year 12 student of **School B** - of the incident. She then approached the school to discuss the matter.



The school staff assured the mother (who had been notified by the school) and sister that the friend would be reprimanded for his racist language and given a suspension. The sister raised her concerns with this response stating that whilst the friend may understand he is being punished for his comment, she does not believe that this will lead to any medium or long term change or resolve the issue for her brother. The sister offered to meet with the friend to discuss the impact of his words and to explain why it was an issue.

A member from the school wellbeing team facilitated a meeting between the sister (on behalf of her brother) and the friend (with consent from his parents). The sister spoke to the friend, explaining her brother was very upset about this comment and it is not fair to pick on something that a person cannot change, or for the things making them different. The friend, visibly uncomfortable, quickly stated "I am not a racist". The sister responded stating she knows he is not and she can see he is a nice person. The sister went on to explain being from an African background, her family often faces racism and discrimination based on their appearance which is very difficult for them, so even when comments are meant as a joke, they can be hurtful. The friend expressed his regret for his action and stated that he would apologise to the student.

Although the sister did not realise it at the time, what she and the school had engaged in was restorative practice – a process whereby students can have the opportunity to develop awareness of their behaviour, take personal accountability for their actions, and use conflict as a learning tool to move towards repair and resilience. The friend was able to reflect on the impacts of his behaviour not from a place of blame, but from a more objective understanding of the situation. As a result he was motivated to genuinely apologise to the student, and their friendship resumed without further conflict of this nature.

The benefit of this approach was noted by the school, who reviewed their disciplinary procedures in regards to racism and discrimination, as well as other forms of interpersonal conflict, and implemented a restorative practice approach into their policies and procedures.



Embedding inclusion

In reviewing their policies and practices, **School C** considered the degree to which they may be inherently inclusive or discriminatory. The school identified that their school uniform reflected the needs and requirements of a dominant culture, and whilst alternative options were available for students with different cultural requirements, they were "additions" and not part of the core uniform. The school reflected that this may inadvertently send a message that there is a "cultural norm" within the school, and that those students who sit outside of this norm are different, separate or an after-thought.

As a result the **School C** incorporated what were previously "additions" into the official school uniform including hijabs, ankle length skirts, turbans and non-gendered trousers and shorts. In doing so, these items were matched to school colours, patterns and displayed the school logo.

School C noted that these actions were well-received by the students and families, and contributed to a sense of cohesiveness within the school.

Building positive family relationships

School D noticed its relationship with the families of their Pasifika students was strained, the families appeared uncomfortable during contact with the school, and as a result the students' experience at school was being negatively impacted.

The school consulted with the the [Le Mana \(Empower\) Pasifika Program](#) - a Centre for Multicultural Youth community development program providing support to Pasifika youth and their communities - who assisted the school to identify what some of the issues may be. One issue highlighted was the fact that communication from Reception staff was not conveying respect to the adults of the community. The school staff also acknowledged they had difficulty pronouncing Pasifika surnames so provided a list of those family names to the Le Mana staff for support in using the correct pronunciation.

The Le Mana staff were also able to convey that families felt they were only contacted when the matter had to do with a behavioural or disciplinary issue with their child. The school explored ways in which they could develop a positive, strengths-focused perception of their Pasifika students, one outcome of which was to display photos and videos from community events, promoting cultural pride.