

Promoting wellbeing through school-based anti-racism initiatives

an evaluation of a whole school initiative

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This work was conducted on Kurna Country, where the researchers live and work and where the case study school is located. We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Kurna people as the Traditional Custodians of this land. We recognise their enduring connection to Country and honour their past, present, and ongoing cultural, spiritual, and relational ties to land, waters, and community.

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Executive summary

Racism has well-documented and serious impacts on the wellbeing, safety, and educational outcomes of students and staff in Australian schools. Despite growing recognition of these harms, schools often lack clear policy guidance, consistent reporting mechanisms, and the professional learning required to respond to racism in ways that are educative, restorative, and effective. As a result, racist incidents are frequently underreported, inconsistently addressed, or minimised, contributing to ongoing harm and diminished feelings of belonging for racially minoritised students and staff.

This report presents findings from a school-based research project examining the development, implementation, and outcomes of a whole-school anti-racism and cultural inclusion initiative in a South Australian secondary school. Funded by the Montebello Foundation and conducted by the University of South Australia (now Adelaide University) in partnership with the school community, the project drew on focus groups with students and staff, alongside secondary analysis of school survey data collected between 2023 and 2025. The research documents both the challenges schools face in addressing racism and the conditions under which meaningful change can occur. Prior to the initiative, both students and staff reported high levels of racism within the school, alongside low confidence in reporting processes and dissatisfaction with responses when racism was reported. Racist behaviour was frequently framed as “joking,” was difficult to identify, or was left unaddressed, contributing to escalations in conflict, reduced trust in school systems, and significant negative impacts on wellbeing and belonging.

Survey data demonstrated a clear relationship between frequent experiences of racism and lower levels of student belonging, highlighting racism as a key wellbeing concern. In response, the school developed and enacted a comprehensive anti-racism and cultural inclusion approach with two interconnected components: (1) clear systems for reporting and responding to racism, and (2) explicit education for cultural inclusion, including curriculum, pedagogy, and professional learning focused on racism and anti-racism. Central to this work was strong leadership support, the establishment of a Cultural Inclusion Committee, dedicated resourcing and staffing, and the use of restorative and educative responses rather than purely punitive approaches.



Findings indicate that this sustained, whole-school approach led to a range of positive outcomes. These included increased racial literacy among students and staff, improved confidence in identifying and responding to racism, greater trust in reporting mechanisms, observable changes in student behaviour, and strengthened feelings of safety and belonging across the school community. Importantly, Aboriginal student experiences were explicitly prioritised through differentiated and culturally responsive processes that built on existing Aboriginal Education structures and relationships. At the same time, the report identifies ongoing challenges and areas for growth. These include the persistence of structural and systemic racism, the emotional labour involved in anti-racism work, resistance or discomfort among some members of the school community. Sustained resourcing and action are needed to ensure that anti-racism practices are not viewed or experienced as performative or tokenistic. The findings underscore that anti-racism is not a one-off initiative but an ongoing institutional responsibility requiring continual reflection, leadership, and adaptation.

Overall, this report demonstrates that school-based anti-racism initiatives can play a critical role in promoting wellbeing when they are embedded, adequately resourced, and grounded in educative and restorative principles. The insights and recommendations offered are intended to support schools, education systems, and policymakers to move beyond ad hoc responses and towards systemic, sustainable approaches to addressing racism in education.

Key recommendations from this report suggest:

System-wide anti-racism and cultural inclusion policy frameworks are required to support consistency, accountability, and sustainability across schools, while allowing for adaptation to local contexts.

Clear, trusted reporting and response mechanisms for racism involving both students and staff are essential, including processes that provide protection and confidence for those raising concerns.

Dedicated leadership roles and resourcing within schools are critical to coordinating anti-racism work, supporting students and staff, and ensuring consistent enactment of policy and practice.

Anti-racism education should be embedded across curriculum and pedagogy, rather than confined to discrete programs, with learning introduced early and reinforced across year levels.

Ongoing professional learning is needed to build staff racial literacy, confidence, and capacity to engage in educative and restorative responses to racism.

Cross-school networks and collaborative forums should be supported to enable shared learning, strengthen practice, and scale effective approaches beyond individual school sites.

Introduction

Racism is increasingly recognised as a critical issue affecting student wellbeing, safety, and educational engagement in Australian schools. While schools are widely understood to play a central role in fostering inclusion and belonging, many continue to struggle with how to effectively identify, respond to, and prevent racism in everyday school life. For students and staff who experience racism, the consequences are significant, contributing to emotional distress, reduced feelings of belonging, disengagement from learning, and longer-term impacts on mental health and educational outcomes. At the same time, uncertainty around definitions of racism, low levels of racial literacy, and the absence of clear reporting and response mechanisms often mean that racist incidents remain underreported, inconsistently addressed, or framed as interpersonal conflict rather than structural harm.

This report documents and analyses a school-based anti-racism and cultural inclusion initiative implemented in a secondary school located on Kaurna Country in South Australia, based on research conducted by the University of South Australia (now Adelaide University). Funded by the Montebello Foundation, the research project examined how a whole-school approach - combining explicit anti-racism policy, dedicated leadership and resourcing, restorative and educative responses to incidents, and sustained professional learning - can support student and staff wellbeing while contributing to meaningful reductions in racism over time. Drawing on focus groups with students and staff, alongside analysis of school survey data collected between 2023 and 2025, the report provides a detailed case study of how anti-racism work can be developed, enacted, and refined in a complex school context.

The report has three key aims. First, it synthesises existing Australian research on racism, anti-racism, and wellbeing in school settings to situate the case study within broader national and international evidence. Second, it documents the experiences of students and staff before and during the implementation of the anti-racism initiative, highlighting both challenges and points of transformation. Third, it identifies practices, structures, and conditions that supported positive change, alongside ongoing tensions and areas requiring further development.

Rather than presenting anti-racism as a discrete program or one-off intervention, this report frames it as sustained, relational, and embedded work that requires leadership commitment, institutional accountability, and continuous learning. By centring student and staff voices and foregrounding wellbeing outcomes, the report aims to provide practical insights for schools, education systems, and policymakers seeking to strengthen anti-racism approaches in ways that are educative, restorative, and context-responsive.

Background

Racism affects students from a wide range of backgrounds, including Aboriginal students and students from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Racism has significant negative impacts on the mental health and educational outcomes [1]. For example, prior research has shown that Aboriginal students may experience ‘school withdrawal, deidentifying as Indigenous, emotional distress and internalisation of negative beliefs’ [2]. Although racism is experienced across multiple settings—including school, sport, work, and public spaces—schools are a particularly critical site, as children and young people encounter racism there from an early age, with racist bullying peaking during secondary school [3, 4]. However, schools struggle to identify and respond to racism, and teachers have limited training and knowledge of how to undertake educative work to prevent racism in their classrooms and schools [5].

There is growing recognition in government and in Australian schools of the need to prevent and respond to racism. For example, in New South Wales Anti-Racism Contact Officers (ARCOs) have been appointed in schools since 2015 with a substantial level of management, training and resourcing to support anti-racism work in schools in that state¹ [6]. In Victoria, an anti-racism policy, framework and related resources were introduced in 2025 to support this work in state schools² and the Centre for Multicultural Youth has also produced a range of tools and resources to address racism for school staff.³ Across Australia, a range of advocacy groups are working to increase racial literacy for young people and the broader community, to reduce racism and racism related harm.⁴ In South Australia, a recent report from the Children’s Commissioner highlights the impacts of racism on students and the need for school-based approaches to addressing racism [4].

How do we understand racism

In this project, racism is understood as more than individual prejudice or unkind behaviour. Racism occurs when people are treated unfairly or have fewer opportunities because of their race, skin colour, or culture, and when these attitudes and actions are supported or enabled by power, policies, practices, or systems that advantage some groups while disadvantaging others.

Racism is understood as operating at multiple, interconnected levels:

- Systemic racism, where ongoing racial inequalities are produced and maintained through social, political, and economic structures
- Institutional racism, where organisational policies, practices, and cultures result in unequal outcomes for different racial and cultural groups
- Interpersonal racism, expressed through everyday interactions, language, behaviours, and assumptions between individuals
- Internalised racism, where individuals absorb and reproduce racialised beliefs about themselves or others

¹ racismnoway.com.au

² www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/preventing-addressing-racism-schools/resources

³ www.cmy.net.au/schools-standing-up-to-racism

⁴ alltogethernow.org.au/racism/racism-in-schools

This project recognises that racism in schools is often subtle, normalised, and framed as “joking” or “misunderstanding,” yet can have cumulative and significant impacts on wellbeing, belonging, and educational engagement. Addressing racism therefore requires both educative and structural responses, rather than focusing solely on individual intent or isolated incidents.

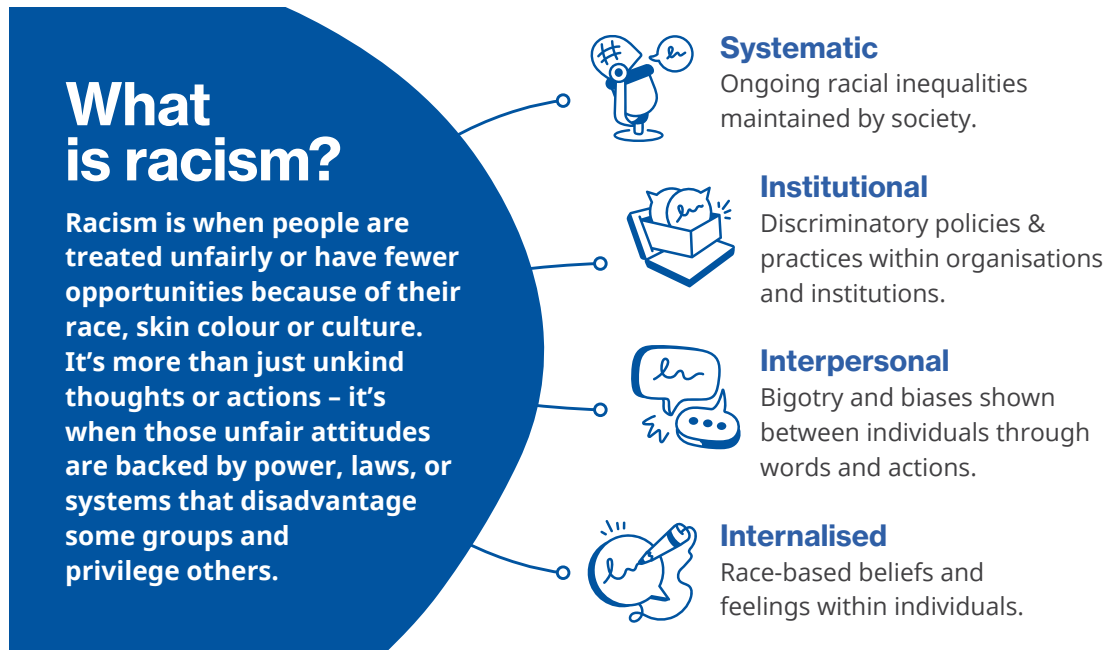


Figure 2 Image developed to support students to understand forms of racism.

Students' experiences of racism in Australian schools

In Australia, a substantial proportion of students experience racism. National surveys indicate that between 40 and 70 per cent of students report involvement in racism, either as targets or perpetrators, with most incidents occurring at school and remaining unreported and unaddressed [7-10]. Of those students who do report racism of any kind (experienced in school or outside of school), around half report it to a teacher and a third to a school counsellor, highlighting the key role of schools in supporting young people regarding racism, regardless of where racism is experienced.

Not only are these rates of racism high, but there are varied and complex experiences of racism across ethnic and cultural groups. A recent review of the literature on the impact of racism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students highlighted various experiences of racism including physical assault, verbal harassment, corporal punishment, aggression, ostracism of parents by school staff, teacher indifference to racism and white supremacy, substandard instruction for Aboriginal students, assimilation expectations of schooling and teachers, and racial and cultural marginalisation [2, 11]. Racism and racial discrimination affects students' mental health—loneliness and depression in particular [12]. Forms of racism include verbal and physical abuse, bullying, and being othered by peers, educators and systemically through education policies [e.g. 13, 14-17]. The visible difference of skin colour for Black students creates particular experiences of being stared at, monitored, having their hair touched and being asked where they come from [17].

Furthermore, research drawing on adults' reflections on their experiences of racism in school contexts shows that systemic racism was often enabled by educational institutions, where speaking up about racism was neither facilitated nor encouraged, leaving students feeling unsafe to disclose or discuss their experiences [15]. Schools are the most common place for young people experience racism, with significant consequences for students' mental health and wellbeing. Members of the school community—including peers, teachers, and school counsellors—are therefore critical sources of support, yet they often lack clear guidance on effective anti-racist educational approaches and responses to racism.

Teachers' attitudes and understanding of racism in Australian schools

Research consistently shows that while Australian teachers often express broad support for diversity and anti-racism, this does not always translate into confident or effective practice. Forrest and colleagues [5], drawing on a survey of 1,309 primary and secondary teachers in Sydney, found strong endorsement of multiculturalism and anti-racism in principle; however, many teachers were uncertain about the implementation of anti-racism policies in their schools, and fewer than half expressed confidence in how such policies were enacted. Although most teachers viewed racism as a societal issue, only just over half recognised it as a problem within schools, highlighting a disconnect between policy awareness, personal beliefs, and institutional practice.

Further studies suggest that teachers' understandings of racism are often shaped by colour-blind or avoidant approaches that limit meaningful engagement with racial inequality. One study identified equality-based, equity-based, and avoidant strategies amongst teachers in primary classrooms, concluding that equity-oriented approaches—which acknowledge racial difference and explicitly address racism—are most effective, yet remain constrained by teachers' confidence, capability, and school context [18]. This finding is echoed in another study emphasising that teachers' willingness to address racism depends on their personal and professional capacity, perceptions of relevance, and institutional support [19]. Other research highlights ongoing barriers, including resistance from parents, colleagues, and school leaders [20], misalignment between policy and practice, and the enduring whiteness of the teaching profession [21, 22]. This body of work underscores the need for sustained teacher education and systemic support, beginning in initial teacher education, where efforts to advance anti-racist pedagogy continue to face institutional resistance [23].

School based approaches for responding to and reporting racism

While research examining teachers' experiences of racism offers some insight into how schools respond to racism, there is very limited Australian literature on school-based approaches to responding to reported incidents, and an apparent absence of research examining formal reporting processes or responses to specific cases of racism. Existing studies instead focus on broader, preventative or educative programs designed to address racism as a systemic issue within schools, rather than on mechanisms for reporting and institutional accountability.

One of the most comprehensive initiatives was the *Speak Out Against Racism* (SOAR) program in New South Wales, a whole-of-school, multi-level intervention aimed at promoting effective bystander responses to racism in primary schools [24]. SOAR incorporated teacher professional learning, curriculum materials, student and parent engagement, and school policies, including monitoring and reporting of racial discrimination. Evaluation findings indicated positive shifts in teacher attitudes and practices, improvements in students' prosocial behaviour

and inter-racial climate, and increased student confidence and self-efficacy to intervene in racist incidents. However, researchers emphasise the need for further development, implementation, and evaluation of comparable programs across diverse school contexts [24].

Other previous school-based initiatives, such as *Building Harmony in the Growth Corridor* [25] and *Enhancing Relationships in Schools* (ERIS) [26] similarly demonstrate modest but uneven impacts. These programs improved attitudes toward diversity, social-emotional skills, and conflict-resolution capacity among students and teachers, particularly when supported by professional learning and community involvement. Nonetheless, findings were equivocal in relation to sustained behavioural change, reinforcing broader concerns in the literature about the limits of programmatic approaches in the absence of clear reporting pathways, consistent institutional support, and systemic accountability mechanisms.

Research on broader anti-racism approaches

Researchers have identified strategies to contribute to anti-racism work in schools such as through building intercultural understanding through curriculum, developing racial literacy, critical reflexivity, decolonial approaches, critical systematic transformative approaches, and culturally responsive practices [13-15, 18, 19, 27-31]. Several scholars argue for moving beyond celebratory approaches to diversity and instead adopting an active stance in which adults engage in open, critical discussions with children about racism, supporting deeper understanding, fostering positive attitudes toward diversity, and challenging stereotypes [13, 27]. There is a need to improve racial literacy, including through ‘*explicit discussions of cultural diversity and racism for all students*’ [18, 19]. Studies have shown not only low levels of racial literacy, but also silencing of talk about race and racism, particularly by diversity and multicultural frameworks, noting ‘*resistance to naming race in curriculum and teaching; critical race educators feel forced to “sneak in” words such as “whiteness”, “race”, or “Black/ Blak”, “people do not want to see it named, brought into their space, and be asked to account for it.”*’ [28] (p. 1540).

Several scholars emphasise the need for racial literacy pedagogies and critically reflexive anti-racism policy that move beyond surface-level inclusion (see [28]). Central to this work is a decolonial approach that directly addresses the whiteness of the Australian education system, arguing that white educators must actively educate themselves about whiteness, critically examine power relations, and recognise how they benefit from racialised systems. Similarly, Onsando et al. [15] call for reflexive approaches that require teachers to interrogate their own privilege and racial assumptions as a foundation for meaningful anti-racist practice.

Research further contends that policy alone is insufficient, advocating instead for systematic and transformative approaches that prioritise intercultural capabilities over multicultural framings, supported by strong leadership and sustained pedagogical resources [29]. As noted by Elias and Mansouri, effective anti-racism requires “broader institutional leadership, adequate resourcing, and context-sensitive enabling strategies,” alongside long-term professional learning that fosters constructive dialogue within and beyond schools [29]. This body of work highlights the importance of explicit teaching and learning that acknowledges systemic and institutional racism and the social structures that sustain inequality [16]. Such efforts necessitate a multilevel approach involving educators, school leaders, students, families, and communities [24]. Fahd and Venkatraman’s framework [30] responds to this need by outlining strategies for racial inclusion across macro (national), meso (organisational), and micro (individual) levels within Australian education (see Table 1).

Macro-National Level	Meso-Organizational Level	Micro-Individual Level
Australian Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (RDA) to Elimination of all Forms of Racism	Anti-racism policy of schools as part of a general Behavior Management Policy or Discipline Policy or standalone	Student and their parents are educated to be aware of their own rights about racist acts
The Public Service Act 1999 (PSA) to manage diversity	Educational session for school staff and students - educate counter racism - attain cross-culture knowledge - get professional development	Bystander Training to behave in a supportive way to students who are being victims
National Anti-Racism Strategy 2012 and The People of Australia—Australia’s Multicultural Policy should be linked to multiculturalism	Promotion of social behavior by - being role models as a Teacher and as a School - celebrating Multicultural events and encouraging participation. - giving incentives and certificates for good behavior	Assertiveness Training to respond assertively and requires the student to be respectful towards themselves and others equally
Government taking steps to eliminate racism and racial discrimination e.g., - Parliament passes legislation to recognize Indigenous people as Land owners - Apology to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander as Stolen Generations - Multicultural E-forum - Social Inclusion Week	Prevention of racial action by - designing curriculum content to develop social skills relevant to counter racism - engaging Students in constructive activities and reducing opportunities for racial behavior e.g., rigorous monitoring - using playground programs - encouraging anti-bullying committees of students - Using ‘no-blame approaches’	Restorative practices to repair any harm made to relationships Students stand against the racial activities
Provision of information and resources for schools to tackle racial problems effectively e.g., video on ‘Bullying—no way!’	Supporting victims provides assistance who are involved by both teachers and students e.g., Buddy systems	Encourage students who volunteer to tackle racial problems Students feel good about their racial heritage
Publicizing certain community groups that have worked with schools e.g., Buddy Bear School Program	Involving parents to counter Racism through - friendly Schools and Families program - developing policies - encouraging their children to cherish their culture and language	Involving student leaders to propagate inclusiveness

Figure 3 Strategic framework for inclusive education system [27]



Early research by Mansouri and Jenkins [7] identified a range of school-based strategies for addressing racism, including welcoming programs for families, curriculum units on diversity and race, clear policies with consequences, targeted support from staff, peer mediation, and opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural interaction. However, students report inconsistent school responses to racism, ranging from preventative approaches to policy-driven responses or inaction, often within the same school, and express a desire for clearer behavioural expectations and consequences [7, 8].

Subsequent scholarship emphasises the importance of culturally reflexive and responsive approaches that move beyond procedural responses. This includes cultural reflexivity training that supports teachers to critically examine their positionality, develop anti-racist practice, and recognise Indigenous cultural authority, with teacher educators modelling this work to build confidence and capability [32]. Whole-school, culturally nourishing approaches developed in partnership with Aboriginal families further centre Learning from Country, Indigenous languages and practices, and sustained professional learning to transform pedagogical practice [33]. Similarly, culturally responsive frameworks that disrupt white hegemony and recentre shared power and knowledge production—including Ubuntu-informed anti-racism strategies—have been shown to support African diaspora students through storytelling, educator professional learning, and the creation of non-racialised, safe learning environments [14, 15, 34, 35].

Research project

Overview

This research project, undertaken by the University of South Australia (now Adelaide University) investigated the implementation and outcomes of a novel school-based intervention designed to both prevent and respond to racism, and drawing on principles of restorative justice. The school where the intervention was conducted had been undertaking more focused work on responses to racism and cultural inclusion since 2023, with several staff also participating in earlier research and professional learning on cultural inclusion with the lead researcher, Associate Professor Melanie Baak, during 2024.

Funded by the Montebello Foundation, the research was conducted in 2025 following ethics approval from the University of South Australia and the South Australian Department for Education. The study involved two primary sources of data: (1) focus group interviews with staff and students conducted during 2025, and (2) secondary analysis of school survey data collected between 2023 and 2025.

In addition, the project established the Coalition for Anti-Racism in Education (CARE) network of educators and school leaders, involving ten schools during the research period, with plans to expand the network in 2026 (for further details see page 49). A related symposium was held in November 2025 at UniSA, attended by the South Australian Minister for Education, Blair Boyer, policymakers from the Department for Education and Catholic Education SA, and students and teachers from six South Australian schools (for further details see page 49).

The case study school context

The school involved in this research had students from Years 7-12 and was located in Adelaide's northern suburbs, with close to 1300 students enrolled at the time of this research. Across the school community, approximately 40 per cent of students had a non-English-speaking background, 7 per cent identified as Aboriginal, and more than 40 national backgrounds were represented. As a category 3 school, a substantial proportion of students are on school card reflecting the socio-economic disadvantage of the school. The school has, amongst many other structures and supports, a specialised team supporting Aboriginal Education, a range of programs designed to promote inclusion and specialist support staff including counsellors and youth workers, Student Support Officers and Bilingual Student Support Officers.

Research project data collection

Focus groups

In total, six focus groups and one individual interview were conducted with staff and five focus groups and one individual interview were conducted with students at the case study school. Twenty-five staff members (19 women and six men) joined in discussions with researchers. Two groups were larger in size (with eight and ten participants in each group), and five staff from these larger groups joined additional, separate discussions, enabling them to speak about their work in the school in more depth. The remaining focus groups had either two or three staff in each. Staff were working in a range of roles across the school including as classroom teachers, school leadership, and a range of ancillary staff working in direct student support. Some teaching and ancillary support staff were working in generalist teaching and support roles, and others in specialist roles working with Aboriginal students and students from migrant and/or non-English speaking backgrounds. Seventeen students (eight boys and nine girls) joined discussions with the researchers, with group sizes ranging from two to four students. Students were in Years 7-12, with a majority (nine students) in Year 10.

Staff and student participants reported a range of cultural identities and heritages, including people who identified as Aboriginal, as white, as having a cultural identity associated with a particular country or region outside of Australia, as someone with a migrant background, as someone born in Australia with migrant heritage, and/or as Australian or Aussie (regardless of where parents or ancestors were born). We do not report on specific heritage to retain anonymity of participants, however, we note that a majority of participants had personal experiences of racism and faced being racialised as 'not white'. Groups were conducted in-person, at the school and were formed with a mix of gender and/or cultural backgrounds, as well as role (for staff), age and year level (for students).

Secondary data

Prior to and during the research project, the school developed and administered a series of surveys as part of its anti-racism initiative, as well as broader surveys focused on student and staff wellbeing and experiences of school life. Findings from these surveys informed the ongoing development and refinement of the school's anti-racism policies and practices. The research team accessed deidentified student and staff survey data collected between 2023 and 2025, alongside key school documents, including multiple iterations of the school's anti-racism and cultural inclusion policies and records of the work undertaken by the school's cultural inclusion team. The school collected three waves of quantitative data from staff and students between 2023 and 2025 to monitor cultural safety, experiences of racism, and perceptions of belonging. These datasets provide a strong foundation for understanding changes over time in school climate and anti-racism practices. Further detail on these surveys is provided in Appendix 1: Quantitative data collected by the school.

Staff Surveys	Student Surveys
May 2023: Preliminary Staff Survey (77 responses)	Term 1, 2024: Initial Student Survey (670 responses)
November 2024: Staff Cultural Safety Survey (74 responses)	Term 4, 2024: Follow-up Student Survey (443 responses)
	Term 1, 2025: Follow-up Student Survey 2 (598 responses)

Research findings

Experiences of racism in the school prior to the development and enactment of the anti-racism initiative

This section provides some examples of how racism was experienced by staff and students prior to the development and enactment of the anti-racism and cultural inclusion initiative.

Challenges with racism, low levels of racial literacy, and lack of policy

In the years preceding this initiative, high levels of racism identified within the school prompted staff to recognise the urgent need for a whole-school approach to reduce racism and associated harms. Experiences of racism were frequent and, at times, had serious impacts on individual students, staff and the broader school community, reinforcing the need for a focused and coordinated response.

Both students and staff described the regular use of name-calling and racial slurs, as well as the common framing of racist behaviour as a “joke.” Participants emphasised that, despite this framing, such comments and attitudes were experienced as harmful and contributed to an unsafe school climate.

Student 1: *they would say stereotypes toward, towards a culture and then it's so normalised because it's, they will say as it's like [a 'joke'] ... but really, it's just them being racist and then trying to put a word like, 'Oh it's just a little joke.' But really, it's just, it's not funny.*

Student 2: *It's racism and it hurts.*

Students also noted differential treatment from staff in relation to racism, where at times students would be the ones to get into trouble even though they were not the instigator of arguments and were instead trying to respond to racism when teachers were not

Student: *When another student was being racist to me, like when I get mad at them, and I will start swearing, the teacher will get mad at me, but then when I tell them what happened they won't care.*

Researcher: *So then you end up getting told off-?... Even though the other person did the wrong thing?*

Student: *Yeah I don't know if they believe it or not, they just – they don't care about what they said...they just shove it off, and ...they just care about what you said to them.*

Staff also described the challenges of addressing racism alongside already demanding academic and behavioural responsibilities. They noted that when racism-related incidents were not addressed promptly, they often escalated, with students attempting to resolve the situations themselves.

Because it was the end of the day the student went and reported it, but then because a lot of staff members they were not there just to follow it up ... left it until the next morning. But then the next morning I think everyone's busy... so the students ...came across each other again and ... it escalated again, so they were screaming... that's when the teachers they had to really get involved because it was a really emergent... Really intense situation.....There was a suspension, I think the two groups of people... involved..... and that student over the phone was so mad about being suspended... said I'm a victim of the racism, why am I being suspended?... (Staff)

Staff and students noted how these types of escalations and serious incidents involving large numbers of students were common in the years prior to the anti-racism initiative. Although they noted the significant impact of these situations, participants also highlighted that less overt forms of racism were also commonplace and had significant impact on mental health and wellbeing for both students and staff.

There's somewhat casual approach when it comes to issues of racism. There are some people that genuinely do not know the harm that racism causes. But there are some people that are aware the harm that this thing causes but because the legislation is not strict enough to enforce. If you have evidence of racism but there is no, how can I put it, recourse to address that in the system. (Staff)

Students also described reluctance to report incidents of racism, as they did not expect reporting to lead to meaningful action or change. This lack of confidence in school responses meant that many students endured racism with few supported options for addressing it.

Teachers won't even say "Stop doing that, don't do that" and that's what makes students think it's more okay...to be racist...There have been so many instances...[of students saying] slurs...and the teachers will just walk by as if they're not listening...they just treat it as if oh nothing's going on, regular school day. But I think they know it's not. (Student)

In previous years, a lack of understanding about racism, combined with a lack of response when racism did occur meant that racism was underreported or the identification of racism was unclear in many situations.

In previous years, the common thing that I have encountered is ... "Miss you're targeting me, you're being racist".... I have to sit down with them, leave everything, whatever I'm doing and explain to them it's just your action and your behaviour. It has nothing to do with where you come from, your skin colour, it's just that you need to follow certain rules in the class, that's it. (Staff)

Participants also noted that experiences of racism were often difficult to identify and talk about openly, at times due to the ways things are framed as 'jokes', but also because of the way negative stereotyping or judgements from others might show up in subtle behaviours or words, with cumulative effect over years for both staff and students.

What I have experienced is silent racism... indirect racism that is not spoken but it targets you, it stereotypes you ...no matter how skilled you are, no matter how many leadership skills you have, you still lose that confidence and maybe I have some good points...but I sometimes hold myself with the fear oh I will be judged... I personally have experienced and I have seen people experiencing it. Sometimes mocking accents and stereotyping.... I know it is joking, I know they don't mean it, but that affects us. (Staff)

Thus, participants spoke about the challenges in clearly identifying and reporting racism, and the barriers to this around fear of reprisals or lack of effective responses and follow up. They highlighted the negative impact of racism for mental health and wellbeing and feelings of belonging and inclusion. Many also spoke about the importance of learning about racism and opening conversations around the topic so that everyone can better understand how to notice, report and respond to racism to reduce incidence and harm over time.

This sort of racism... goes unaddressed as well because it's not spoken, it's just felt. So it's hard to describe and it's hard to address it because people can... get away with saying 'oh I, because I couldn't understand'. (Staff)

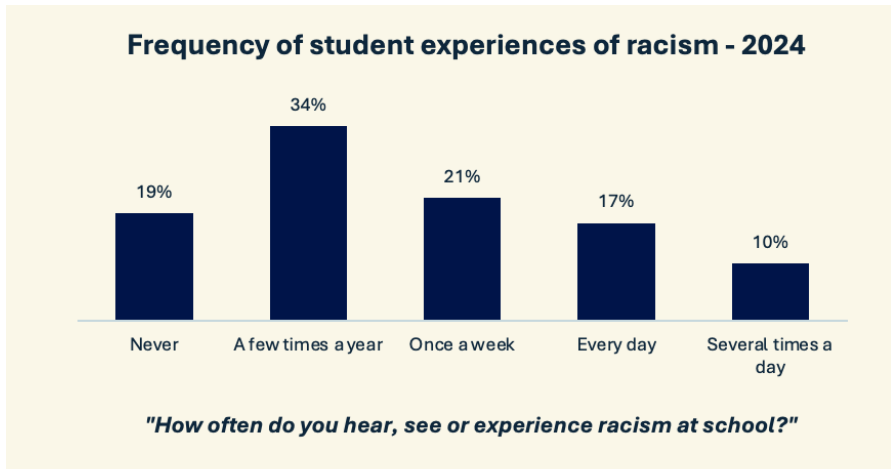
Student and staff experiences and perspectives

In 2023, senior staff identified high levels of racism across the school community, alongside significant challenges in understanding and responding to racist incidents. In response, school leaders initiated a staff survey in May 2023 to better assess the prevalence and impact of racism. The survey was completed by 73 staff members, with 30 per cent reporting that they had personally experienced racism at the school. Of those who had experienced racism, 65 per cent reported the incident; however, 40 per cent of those who reported were dissatisfied with the response. Among staff who experienced racism but did not report it, several cited a belief that reporting would be ineffective, with one noting there was “*no point—nothing would have happened.*”

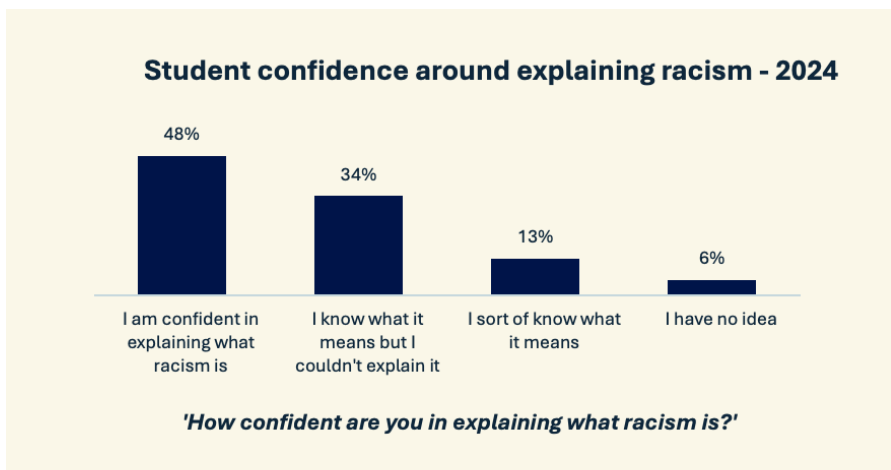
Staff also reported witnessing racism experienced by others, with 60 per cent indicating they had seen such incidents and a further 14 per cent responding “maybe.” Of those who witnessed racism, fewer than half (45 per cent) reported it. Reasons for not reporting included uncertainty about reporting processes, concerns that reporting might worsen the situation, perceptions that incidents were “low-level” or addressed informally at the time, and a lack of confidence that reporting would lead to meaningful action. In several cases, staff managed incidents directly with students or deferred reporting at the request of the student affected. These findings highlighted uncertainty around reporting pathways, inconsistent responses, and limited confidence in institutional processes for addressing racism. This resulted in the school engaging a consultant to assist in the collaborative development of the school anti-racism and cultural inclusion policy throughout the remainder of 2023.

The policy was first enacted in the school in 2024. At the beginning of that year, a whole-school survey was conducted to establish baseline data prior to the implementation of the new initiative. The survey was completed by 640 students in Years 7–12 and included questions about students’ experiences of racism, sense of belonging, and reporting practices.

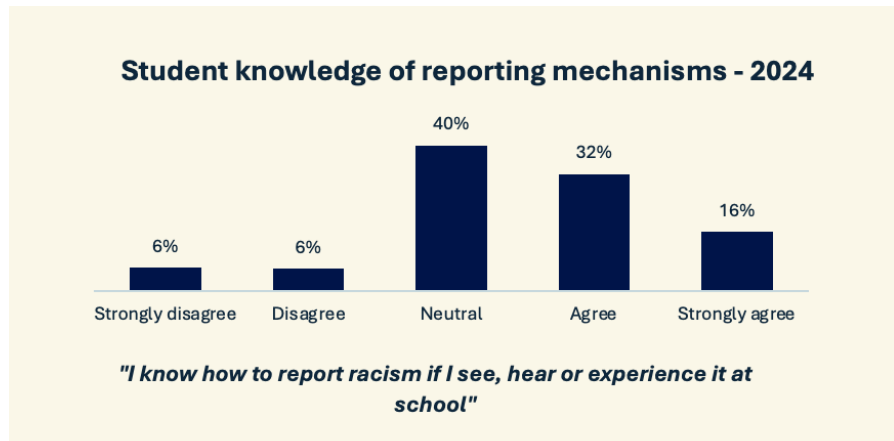
Findings indicated that 48 per cent of students heard, saw, or experienced racism at least once a week, while 27 per cent reported such experiences occurring daily.



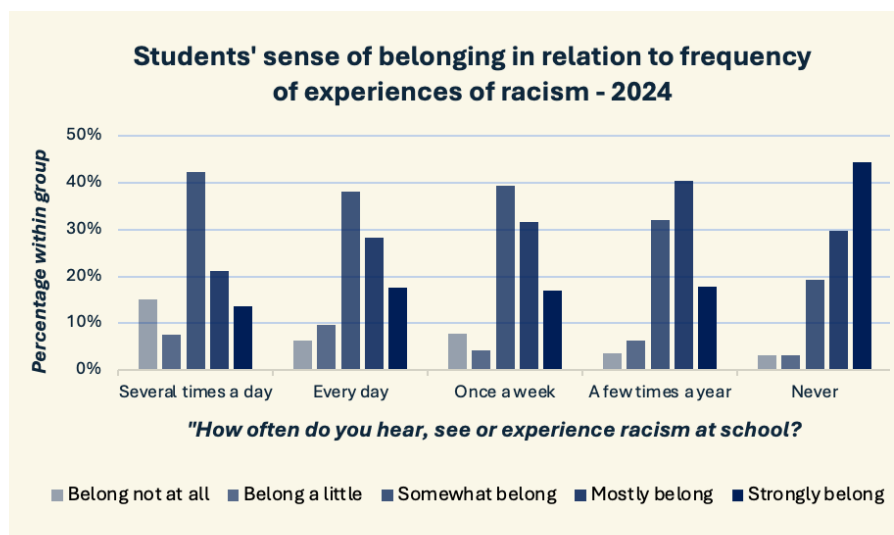
While just under half of the survey respondents (48%) were confident explaining what racism is, around a third (34%) said they understood what racism means couldn't explain it, and the remaining one in five (18%) were unsure.



Forty-eight per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they knew how to report racism if they saw, heard or experienced it at school, 40 per cent responded 'neutral' to this question, with 12 per cent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This suggests that over 50 per cent of students were somewhat unsure how to report racism.



There was a clear relationship between students' sense of belonging at the school and how often they hear, see, or experience racism. Students who reported never experiencing racism were more likely to feel a strong sense of belonging, while those who experienced racism several times a day were more likely to report low levels of belonging. A Kruskal-Wallis test indicated statistically significant differences in belonging across these groups. Post-hoc Dunn's tests showed that students who experienced racism several times per day reported significantly lower feelings of belonging than those who experienced racism a few times a year or never, and that students who never experienced racism differed significantly in their sense of belonging from all other groups.



Developing and enacting anti-racism policy

In the early stages of the anti-racism and cultural inclusion initiative, staff looked to the Department for Education for policy to help guide their actions. However, they found no policy directly addressing issues around racism or anti-racism.

We did a survey about staff experience of racism and then we took that back to staff and we said here is this, what do you think. And from that there was a really clear, we have to have a policy for responding to racism because the department doesn't have one. And that's where it came from. That's why we started to do this work. (Staff)

A core team of staff, which eventually grew to a larger group called the 'Cultural Inclusion Committee', began to work on developing an approach to this work for their school context, with the support of an external consultant.

In the following sections, the cultural inclusion and anti-racism work in the school is discussed via an overview of the two 'arms' of this work, namely: **Reporting and responding to racism**, and; **Education for cultural inclusion: Curriculum and pedagogy that explicitly teaches about racism and anti-racism** (see Figure 1). The two arms were developed and enacted, with ongoing evaluation and adaptations made to this policy over time, in an iterative and responsive process of policy development and enactment. These policies and practices led to a range of positive outcomes in the school, as highlighted in later sections alongside some remaining challenges and ongoing work in the school.

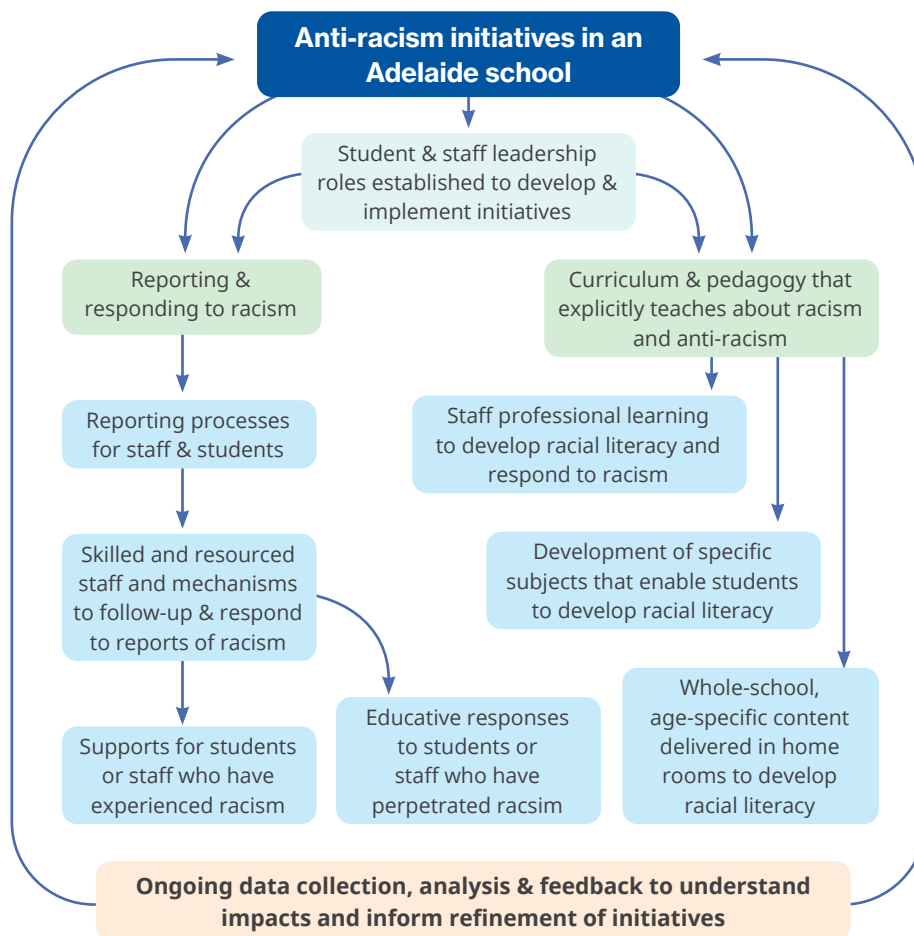


Figure 4 Anti-racism initiatives in an Adelaide school



The Cultural Inclusion Committee

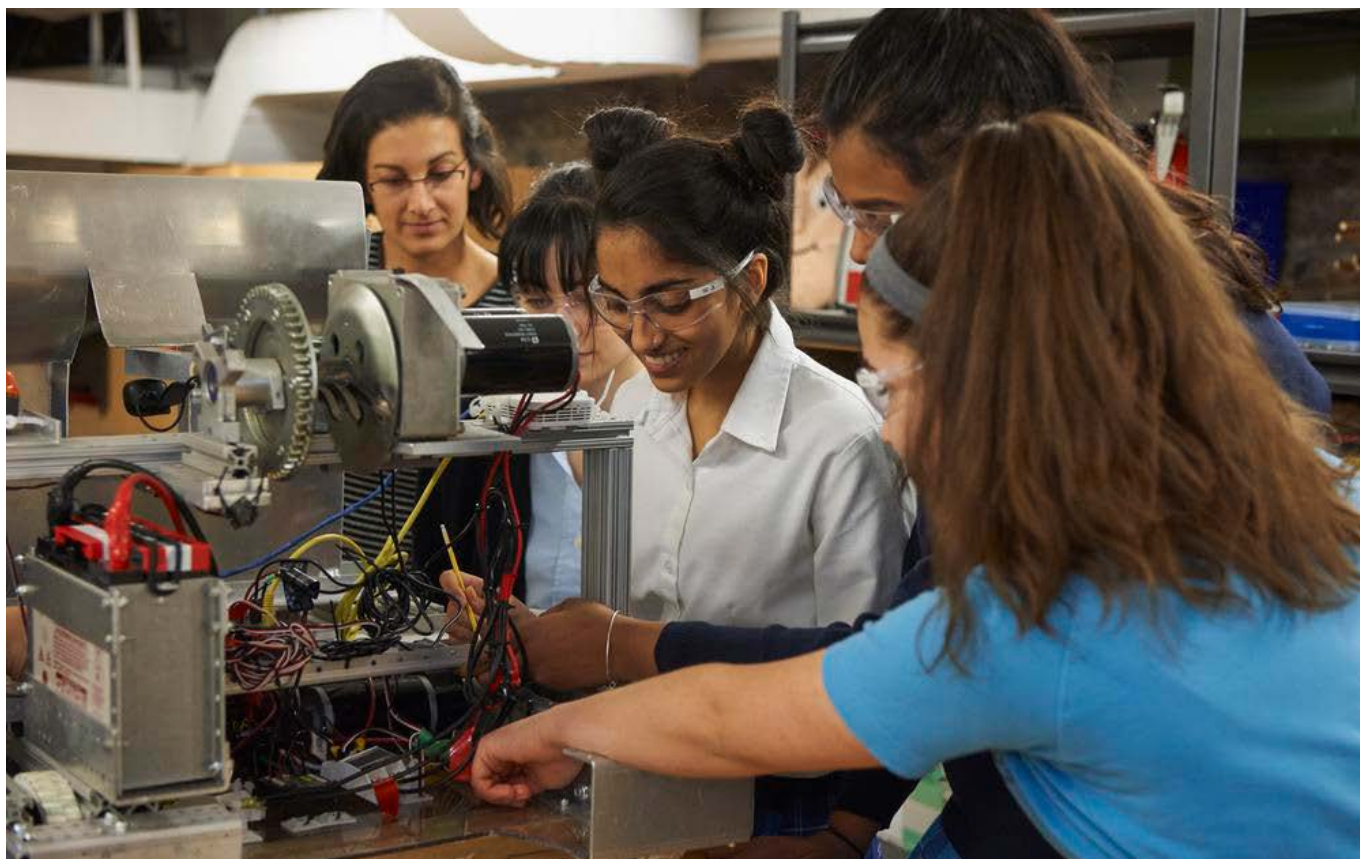
The work around anti-racism and cultural inclusion began with discussions between three leaders within the school, and soon a small group of motivated staff began to work together to influence cultural inclusion. In the early stages, the lack of anti-racism policy at the departmental level led to the staff team coming up with ideas for how to develop their own policies and practices within the school. Initially, some professional learning was conducted around racism and anti-racism and cultural inclusion, which led to surveys of students and staff, and the formation of a committee.

Each student free day we planned something with staff and that's kind of how it started. And then it built some momentum as it went ...and then we did the survey and then we went 'oh my God this is awful, what are we going to do?' And then that was when staff started to get involved and there was some buy in and that was when the committee started, when we decided to do a policy. (Staff)

The Cultural Inclusion Committee continued to grow as more staff became aware of the work being done by this group. Some staff who had experienced racism felt particularly motivated to contribute.

I became somewhat interested in that because I have experienced racism and I know the different forms that racism can take and we need that, we need to create a harmonious kind of culture within our school. And so I became part of the committee. (Staff)

The Committee surveyed students and staff around experiences of racism, with an aim to better understand how racism was manifesting in the school. Further information about the surveys is in Appendix 1. These surveys showed high rates of racism as noted above. The Committee drew on these early reports to identify key issues and plan around responding to racism and reducing it over time. Later surveys with staff and students further informed subsequent iterations of the policy.



Leadership support and resourcing for a specialised role

The successful development and enactment of anti-racism policy in the school was due to a committed group of key leaders, teachers and ancillary school staff, and provision of some resourcing for staff time to specifically address this across the school.

One of the reasons we've been able to do all the things we've been able to do is because our principal... was 100 per cent behind it...when we started ...we said, can we do this or can we do this or I think we need to do this...every time it was a yes... she came to all of our committee meetings and made it a real priority... there's been support in terms of resourcing... in terms of time...that was a decision from the top. (Staff)

Thus, support from leadership was critical for the work in terms of prioritisation and encouragement for a whole-school approach. This support also enabled some funding to be directed towards staffing specifically around anti-racism and cultural inclusion. In the early stages of this work, two staff were given half a line of teaching each (i.e. one whole line shared between them) to address reports of racism that were made through the reporting system. Later, the school received a small funding allocation that they chose to dedicate to this work, and in 2025 a dedicated role for this work was funded by the school, with more time allocated to the person in this role. At the time of writing, there has been a decision within the school to extend funding for one staff member to have some dedicated time to respond to reports of racism in 2026.

Policy development and feedback from across the school

One of the first steps in the process of policy development and enactment was surveying students and staff, and community consultations through meeting with student and parent groups to discuss these issues. These processes helped the Committee to gain insights into experiences and perspectives across the school community.

A lot of the planning early on was how are we presenting this to staff... developing the draft policy, how are we going to take this to staff, get their feedback, edit it based on feedback...As well as...community consultation organised with the parent groups and student groups. (Staff)

Following on from this process, the Committee thought about how a new anti-racism policy might fit with policies and practices already in place across the school, for example in relation to behaviour management. The Committee thought about how reporting might occur and how staff might be able to get involved in the reporting process. The Committee also began to think about how a tiered approach might work in terms of identifying what kinds of racist incidents might get particular responses. They also planned professional learning opportunities with all staff. As the policy was drafted and put into practice, shared documents were added to or adapted to clearly identify reporting and response mechanisms.

We had existing behaviour policies and then...a draft version of an anti-racism/ cultural inclusion specific behaviour response across our entire site. So, any time there was any incident of racism, we would consult this policy that we as a committee had started creating...The document evolved throughout the year and that evolution included coming back to staff every single term and being like... What do you think? (Staff)

The Committee noted challenges around consensus on what kinds of responses would be most important or effective. In the early stages, some staff members and students suggested a zero tolerance, punitive approach towards any racism.

We just collected everyone's responses and a lot of that was very punitive... that we should not tolerate it...they have to understand it's not okay. They should be suspended. It was really strong and that was tricky because ...we know that just suspending kids doesn't actually change behaviour. And we had some really difficult conversations around that...it was working with that and also...how can we get to a point where the kids change? Because that's what we actually really want... where we got to in the end was zero tolerance means we will not ignore it. We will not walk past it... whenever racism happens there will be a response and that response will be the most educative one we can come up with. (Staff)

As time went on, the Committee discussed definitions of racism, and how to balance recognition of the seriousness of all incidents with the reality that some incidents were repeated and/or escalated, and caused more harm. Over time, the tiered system that was developed provided a useful scaffold for understanding racism and responses within the school.

I think that everyone was like, oh my god, what is racism? Because ...everyone's perspective is different. So, now that the whole school perspective is like, we understand what the level of racism is, I think it's easier to educate staff and students. (Staff)

Addressing interpersonal as well as systemic and structural racism was also a key focus for the Committee. Although many of the issues raised in surveys and discussions related to interpersonal racism, members of the Committee emphasised that it was critical to also attend to structural and systemic racism as part of the broader cultural inclusion and anti-racism work in the school.

Dual policy focus: responding to racism and anti-racism education

As the Committee developed policies to address racism and cultural inclusion, they agreed that there were two distinct approaches to the work that were needed. Not only was it critical to develop an effective reporting and response process within the school that responded to reports of racism, but it was also necessary to implement a whole-school approach to understanding racism, anti-racism and cultural inclusion. These two foci also intersected, as responses to racism involved a restorative and educative approach.

It's not just about how we respond to racism, it's also about how we talk about our differences and the opportunities we have to explore our cultural identity and how that interplays with who we are and what that means for us as learners in a classroom. (Staff)

The Committee discussed how best to find a balance between actively acknowledging that racism is never acceptable, working in a way that is restorative and educative, and responding in a way that ensures students negatively impacted by racism feel that the perpetrator has faced some consequences, and the racist incident has been addressed. The key focus for the school was on maintaining a positive educative approach to facilitate ongoing learning through educative, restorative processes that reduce racism over time for individual students and the whole school community.

The focus of the whole system is not the consequences or the punishment. The focus is education, so we really want to educate our young people about the comments they have made and it has some kind of impact on others but how would you put yourself in their shoes and what would you feel? (Staff)

As one student noted, having a clear process for learning about racism and understanding the research that informed the development of the policy and associated responses is important, but other approaches to building a sense of identity and belonging across the school for people from all cultural backgrounds can help to make the process fun and engaging.

Obviously, education is very important, learning from proper research is something that gets you understanding, and this is why we've got the policy, and it's also just a good education, like a school instruction to have, but if people are just seeing from the side of research... they're going to get tired of it...So if we do stuff like [the cultural gala]...not only are we bringing people joy...we're showing them that it's actually quite exciting and it is really beautiful and we are very diverse school. (Student)

The importance of specialised reporting and responding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

A crucial element of this work was connecting in with systems already in place particularly for the support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and staff. This involved the Cultural Inclusion leader to prioritise working together with the Aboriginal Education team and the processes already in place in the Aboriginal Education room. The Aboriginal Education room was frequently used by students as a 'safe space' where they could go and be heard and supported by staff, so it was important to retain and utilise this existing system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

We've always told students that if something happens, just come straight down [to the Aboriginal Education room]... because we want them to this to be that absolute, 100% comfortable space. You're not going to get told off. We're

going to listen and then we'll support.... At times, yeah, can get emotional for some ... even though it is safe space for them, is it's still ... not easy for them to express that either. They know that they can. But like, it still does take a toll, so it can be quite emotional. (Staff)

The new policy and processes were developed iteratively, with an aim to build on the effective and trusting relationships that enable effective pastoral care for Aboriginal students.

it's good to have someone who is specifically in charge of that area [responding to reports of racism] that you can go to like, you know, when you need to. And obviously, the students are becoming more aware of her [the cultural inclusion staff member] role... more comfortable talking with her...there's times where those students are comfortable with her just to follow up with them ... I guess that's a good indication of the relationship that she's built within our students. (Staff)

Aboriginal student and staff experiences around racism were a specific focus of the whole school initiative. In the early stages of the policy development, the Committee noted that the experiences of Aboriginal students were particularly difficult with regards to racism, and this was a strong motivator to create positive change in the school.

I feel like nothing was happening ... it was just not being addressed, and the kids were just having to deal with it on their own. And even though we had a strong [Aboriginal Education] team, it didn't matter what we said, I felt like it wasn't being heard by people around ... First Nations students just didn't feel safe and didn't feel like they could tell anyone about what they were going through so then in the end they'd just tell us but we felt like it wasn't being addressed, to be honest. (Staff)

The Committee and the key leaders involved in this work emphasised that it was crucial that practices affecting Aboriginal students would need to be tailored to reflect the particular experiences of racism that Aboriginal people have experienced in Australia historically and the ongoing harm of racism for Aboriginal people in all aspects of life. Thus, when incidents of racism involving Aboriginal students were reported, the response process involved communication with the Aboriginal Education team, to build on the trusted relationships already in place between students and staff. The school has a dedicated room for Aboriginal students to use and a dedicated team of staff who work with them in relation to academic work and overall wellbeing.

Not only was a specific process developed for working with the Aboriginal Education staff when responding to reports of racism, but the tiered approach and records made on the spreadsheet were also responsive to the nature of the incident and the people involved. It was important that staff involved in responses to racism understood that sometimes the Aboriginal students may prefer to engage with trusted staff in the Aboriginal Education team rather than other staff from across the school, depending on the individual student and the particular situation.

Sometimes we also aren't the people that those kids need to be to checking in on them. So that particular student had a very close relationship with the Aboriginal Education team. I think if I went to her or if you went to her, we'd, we wouldn't have gotten anywhere but anyone in that team, she would have confided. (Staff)

Reporting and response mechanisms

Staff across the school noted that it was important that there was a role dedicated to attending to reports of racism. This work was time consuming and required specialist knowledge and skills. Learning about how to 'do' anti-racism work was an ongoing process for all staff in the school, in the Committee, and for the key staff leading this work. Adapting the policy and procedures in an iterative way was helpful, as members of the school community learned about the reporting and response mechanisms. The key staff attending to the reporting and responding noted key learnings about how best to work together with students and staff, to find a balance of creating new procedures that matched well with practices already in place across the school, and particularly, how to work effectively to change behaviour and improve cultural inclusion for everyone.

Reporting through the school systems was made possible using structures already in place, through emails as well as the school's management software for staff and students (Daymap). Records of reports of racism were collated in a spreadsheet to help ensure responses were coordinated and followed up on. Having a central record of these incidents, responses and outcomes enabled the core staff team to assess reporting mechanisms and effectiveness of responses over time, and to take note of the particular students involved.

We kept a massive spreadsheet of everything, even it could have just been the smallest thing ... we still recorded it to keep track of student names, outcomes... (Staff)

Process of responding to reports of racism identified with three tiers of behaviours (according to severity), noting first reports for particular students, repeated reports, and/or different types of incidents that occurred. This tiered system was refined over time through an iterative process of policy development. The tiers included differing forms of behaviours from low level, isolated incidents at one level, through to repeated or high level or physical altercations. If a student had been reported for racism, and was reported again, this was moved up to the next tier of required response. These specific tiers and types of behaviour are not shared in this report as it was identified by the Cultural Inclusion and research teams that it would be important to identify the types of behaviour and tiers based on individual school sites and contexts.

The record keeping and dedicated responses to reports of racism led to increased trust in the system over time for staff and students. Staff noted that students were increasingly aware that racist incidents would have a follow up, and staff themselves also noted increased trust in the system over time as each report was recorded and a response enacted.

We want to make a conscious effort on...cultural safety and the behaviours that affect that...clear education on the follow up...students are starting to understand actually there's a process for these things if I'm a victim or a perpetrator...And most staff across the school...have a pretty good understanding now ...certain things need to come to certain people and be dealt with in certain ways...the prominence and specific focus on something is probably the biggest change I've seen there and...the conversations with students probably highlight the impact its having. (Staff)

Staff shared a range of examples of how situations had unfolded around racism. One such example involved a student using racist language to speak to another student. This was not heard by the teacher, but other students did tell the teacher at the end of the school day. The timing of this report meant that it was not attended to before things escalated the next morning, which led to more significant actions from the students involved and more serious consequences for students according to the tiered approach.

On the other hand, in most instances, reports of racism were followed up in a timely manner and this was perceived as critical in the overall reduction of racism. Staff also noted that as the reporting and response mechanisms became embedded in practice, students were more open to having discussions around racism in the moment. Several staff further noted that they themselves felt better equipped to have conversations around racism with students after engaging with professional learning that was a part of the whole-school initiative and knowing that the reporting and response procedures were in place helped these conversations as well.

Definitely the immediate follow up and how the staff make it look like so important...Telling them it's not okay...And the consequences-Even in a fun way it's not okay, that's what ...And the consequences are immediate, like you have to stay for learning hub after school or there's a family meeting happening, so phone call definitely; so it's definitely helping. (Staff)

Staff and students noted how important it was that racist incidents were followed up every time, in a timely fashion. Many participants compared this to how things were prior to the anti-racism policy and cultural inclusion initiative, where often racism went unreported, or if reported, things were not often adequately followed up.

If you know that once you report it then nothing happens and then you need a couple of times, you know if nothing happened then why are you wasting your time? (Staff)

Students reflected on the reporting and response processes prior to the start of the anti-racism initiative, noting that reports were not always followed up.

There's been so many instances from [previous years] and my friends were getting harassed for their race and I'd report it and just nothing would come of it. (Student)

However, many students spoke of the changes they had noticed since the implementation of the anti-racism initiative, and most described a range of ways to report incidents as well as some of the typical responses they had experienced or witnessed.

The school has done a lot of efforts to stop racism, like wellbeing websites and they've had, what do you call it, assemblies about racism....[and] a system where if you're feeling like someone's like hurting you... you can report them or you can go straight to the office and report it to ... like an upper higher leader. And you can report it to them, they will talk to you about it, they'll sort out the problem, and then they will like, if you reported it online then they will come talk to you and then get like both sides of like the story from each person. And then they will take action from there, depending on the situation... So it'll be like the guy who's actual, like the victim, and the guy who's saying it, and then maybe some bystanders... they'll be talked to individually, yeah. (Student)

Restorative and educative responses

When incidents were reported, the key staff whose role it was to respond allocated it a tier and recorded the incident and responses on the spreadsheet. Staff participants discussed the challenges of shaping positive processes for reporting and responding to racist incidents, working to find a balance between developing positive, educative and restorative approaches. Students noted that if they had experienced racism, they wanted to know that the perpetrator/s received appropriate consequences. Ensuring all people involved had the support (and consequences) required, as reflected in the developing policy, took time and careful conversations.

I would like to know how they dealt with it, because then you could know for – like coming from us we would actually know if it would help us or not just on being racist. (Student)

Most students also noted that conversations around racism were important; if a student has been racist, it is helpful for teachers to talk with them about this in follow up from reports.

Student 1: *They should follow it up.*

Student 2: *They should take further action, and talk to the person that caused that....*

Student 1: *Talk to them about it then, ask questions....*

Student 2: *Yeah have a discussion between both you guys. And then you talk to each other, say how it made you feel, and yeah....*

Student 1: *They should first check with the person will still talk to them. And also they could have a conversation with the teacher, the racist person, and the parent. And if they continue doing it, someone reports them again that they could get suspended, or something.*

Both students and staff involved in the focus groups noted that the responses enacted in the school as a result of the anti-racism and cultural inclusion initiative were effective.

The conversations that they're having with the kids, the change in behaviour that you see afterwards is really powerful.... I don't know how they're doing it.... I don't know how you would even start but I have definitely seen kids go that was awful and it wasn't what, the impact wasn't what I meant.... the education stuff that they're doing initially is having a big impact...I have seen a few of my kids make a big turnaround. (Staff)

It was really good, we got to have some really serious and also valuable conversations with students and it was also so valuable just to see some students actually learning, like genuinely learning and saying back to us, I understand why when I did this, it wasn't okay. (Staff)

When asked what responses to racism would be most impactful, students emphasised the importance of knowing that incidents were taken seriously and followed up. Those who had been targets of racism, or who had seen friends harmed, wanted assurance that the perpetrator faced some form of response. While students frequently noted that suspensions were commonly used following reports of racism, most were clear that external suspensions were ineffective. Across focus groups, students described suspension as “like a holiday,” explaining that students often returned to school and repeated the same harmful behaviours. In contrast, many students pointed to the positive impact of more recent educative and

restorative responses introduced over the past one to two years through the new policy, reporting, and response mechanisms. These approaches were widely seen as more effective, both by students who had participated in educative sessions after perpetrating racism and by those who had been targeted and knew that the perpetrator had engaged in these processes. For students who shared stories of being the target of racism, they noted that the responses helped them feel that the perpetrator had faced up to their actions, and several students noted changes in behaviour. Students who had themselves been racist and then engaged with educative processes noted that it helped them to gain insights into how their behaviour hurt others.

So imagine you did do something racist...the teacher will give you a document, okay, on your laptop...do you know if this is racist? You know how it could impact them? Do you know how this works and like how they could hurt someone? And they just guide you through that and they help you with it... like write how, if I knew this was racist, did I know it was going to impact them?... it helped me realise there's much more to like racism than just words, like it can really impact someone. (Student)

This student's emphasis on understanding how racism can hurt people was a major theme in the student group discussions. Many students noted how useful it was to talk about how racism can cause harm, and to help those perpetrating racism understand this pain to help them change their behaviour. The key cultural inclusion staff members developed a range of resources, such as the document referred to by the student in the quote above, to use with students in educative sessions. These resources supported educative conversations with students.

Overall, staff and students mentioned that it was crucial that respectful conversations addressed difficult topics, including talking directly and specifically about racism.

What I've noticed is the communication ... they realise how damaging it might have been, not only just for the person that they're attacking but for anyone who might've heard it... The communication that they have between each other I think has been vital. Also, the consequences and the procedures that are involved... highly dependent upon how the individuals actually feel about the situation... incredible that they've been able to put down such a dynamic approach when it comes to procedure over something that can be so individualised... the way that they've done that has made it so that both parties equally can feel heard... feel like something's going to be done. (Staff)

Education for cultural inclusion: curriculum and pedagogy that explicitly teaches about racism and anti-racism

The anti-racism and cultural inclusion work across the school had a major focus on educational work with individual students, in classrooms, and across the whole school. The whole-school approach enabled conversations around racism and racism related harm as well as around cultural inclusion, with overall improvements in feelings of belonging. Educative approaches were undertaken through classroom-based curriculum and planning, whole school approaches and staff professional learning. These are explored in further detail in the subsections below.

Developing understandings of racism and its impacts

Students and staff described noticeable shifts in how racism was understood across the school as a result of the anti-racism and cultural inclusion initiative, alongside a growing willingness to engage in respectful conversations about racism. In focus groups, both groups discussed the different ways racism manifests in the school context and the varied attitudes of students and staff toward it. Participants noted that some behaviours were not recognised as racism by everyone, and that certain forms of racism were often perceived as more serious or harmful than others. These differing understandings shaped whether incidents were seen as worthy of being reported.

Some students and staff spoke of how the views and perspectives of family played a role in behaviour and perspectives, as well as the impact of broader attitudes in society and in the media. Participants talked about how much they appreciated being in a multicultural school and noted that they wanted to be a part of a process of cultural change for inclusion. They noted that even if young people are affected by their family's values, or by the wider media, they are also in a position to decide to contribute to anti-racism or cultural inclusion work.

A lot of the older generations I think it's very expected of them to have racist views because in that time that was okay. I don't think that it's okay now, but you can't force somebody to change the way they've had that belief their whole life...I think what now needs to change is the kids now... I think our generations are the ones that need to change... you can have and listen to the beliefs of your parents, but it doesn't mean you need to...take those beliefs. (Student)

Students and staff emphasised that often racism was said in a 'joking' way, but that all forms of racism can cause harm. The most common type of racism talked about in focus groups was around use of racial slurs and racist 'jokes', and often these two concepts intersected.

Slur words I think it would be more the N word but like everything else, it's racial. I understand friendly banter but at the end of the day, it's still hurtful, it's still racist and it's still, if said too much or in the wrong connotation, it can hurt the person you're being friendly with. (Student)

Students described how racism and discrimination shaped school experiences in different ways depending on students' backgrounds and heritage. They also noted that experiences of racism varied across age groups and genders, and that some groups of students were racialised in particular ways by both peers and staff. These differences influenced how racism was experienced, understood, and responded to within the school.

When you're younger you experience a joke that's – that makes you feel bad. You don't really talk about it, when you get older you kind of like express yourself a little bit more. (Student)

For students, understanding the harm caused by racism was described as critically important. Those who had experienced racism directly, as well as those who had witnessed it, emphasised the need for students who engage in racist behaviour to recognise that their words and actions cause real harm to others. Students spoke about racist incidents and the emotional and social impacts these experiences can have, highlighting the importance of directly addressing this harm in conversations with those responsible. Several students noted that talking explicitly with students who enact racism about the impact of their behaviour can support meaningful behaviour change. As outlined in the previous section, students who had been reported for racism and subsequently participated in educative response sessions described these experiences as helpful in deepening their understanding of racism and its harms. Students also reflected on how their understanding of racism had evolved as they grew older, and noted that having opportunities to talk openly about racism and raise concerns was both valuable and supportive.

Staff reflected that, at the beginning of the initiative, there was a widespread lack of understanding across the school about what racism is and the harm it causes. As one staff member explained, “You would tell them off and then they’d be like, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t realise, I won’t do it again’... they don’t realise how much it’s affecting other people.” Staff highlighted the importance of student learning in this area, particularly through classroom conversations, yard-based interventions, and the formal reporting and response processes introduced as part of the initiative. They also noted that gaps in understanding were not limited to students; many staff acknowledged that, prior to the development and enactment of the anti-racism policy, they themselves had limited knowledge of racism and its impacts.

I think it’s just good that this committee [Cultural Inclusion Committee] actually came together ...because everyone didn’t know – even teachers didn’t know ... what racism was and what racism meant... we just came together and be like, okay, this is what racism is, when you say this, this is what happens. If you say this, then this is how it affects other people. (Staff)

Staff noted that the conversations in professional development sessions were helpful for their own learning around racism and its impact, as well as how to manage conversations around racism with students. They talked about how these sessions helped them to reflect on their own experiences at the school and in the wider community around racism.

Talking about racism

Staff emphasised that engaging in conversations—often difficult and uncomfortable ones—was a critical component of the school’s anti-racism work. Many described a growing culture of openness around talking about culture, racism, and anti-racism, which contributed to increased feelings of belonging. This shift was particularly significant for staff who had experienced racism from students or colleagues, as well as for others who noted positive personal and professional changes as a result of the work. Staff also highlighted changes among students, including greater confidence in talking about racism and increased ability to reflect on what racism looks and sounds like, and how it causes harm. In addition, participants observed changes within the staff cohort, with increased willingness to engage in challenging conversations about racism and to reflect critically on their own experiences and responses to witnessing racist behaviour.

I’ve learnt that what I thought was funny is not. What I thought was a joke for both, is not. What I thought was nation pride or what I thought was pride itself, is not, it’s blatant racism.... So yeah, this school – this workplace has opened my eyes up completely and I’m proud of it. (Staff)

Conversations with students often focused on identifying what kinds of words or language are racist, why they are harmful, and how acts of racism affect others. For students who had not experienced racism themselves, these discussions provided insight into the impact and harm of racism. For students who had experienced racism, including those who had also engaged in racist behaviour, the conversations supported them to reflect on how these experiences affected both themselves and others. Collectively, these discussions contributed to changes in understanding and behaviour over time.

One student... had been picking on another kid... racism based, and then I had almost a whole day ... we really unpacked a lot of his thoughts and everything and what he could actually say and admit that he’d experienced in his own life and why he was doing what he was doing. Really then we saw a change in his behaviour after that...there was such positive outcome of students being able to actually learn. (Staff)

Racial slurs and ‘jokes’

Both staff and students identified the use of racial slurs as a significant issue within the school, highlighting the importance of explicitly addressing the language and terminology of racism as part of learning across the school community. Discussions in all focus groups raised the issue of racist “jokes” and the challenges of recognising and responding to this form of racism. For staff who identified as, or were racialised as, white, conversations about racial slurs—particularly the use of the N word—were described as especially complex and challenging. Several staff noted that some Black students viewed the term as a reclaimed word, used among peers within the African diaspora as a form of solidarity. At the same time, staff emphasised the historical violence associated with the term and the potential for its use in school settings to cause racial harm, regardless of intent. As a result, having careful, respectful conversations with Black students about the use of this word was considered a crucial part of the school’s anti-racism work, requiring a thoughtful framework that acknowledged lived experience while prioritising safety and inclusion for all students.



A lot of conversations with our African students about their use of the N word ...the conversation I think, because of the work that we're doing, is different to what might be happening in other sites or other contexts, just in society broadly. Because our conversations our like, okay, so what is your relationship with the word?...the conversation is, it's not a punitive one. It's not that. It's actually like... I'm a white [person] sitting across from you. I'm not going to tell you whether or not you can use the N word...[but we will talk about] how we treat each other at school and the space that we create for other people...we need to come up with a solution together. (Staff)

Racial slurs were the most commonly reported form of racism talked about in focus groups, with a range of words used for the many different cultures represented in the school community. Some students mentioned that they felt any use of slurs was not ok, but others talked about how the context around use of particular words was important. For example, some students noted that using these words in private settings, where the racist talk would not be overheard by others, was ok, or alternatively that racism between friends could be ok as a form of friendly 'banter'.

Student 1: *Okay, it was a joke, but there was other people in the class that heard it. So it wasn't the right time to say it. But let's say I'm at my friend's house, that - that's different.*

Student 2: *And let's say if you're [from a particular background], and you make fun of your other [same background] friend, it's not really that racist.*

Several students disagreed with this notion, for example in the conversation quoted here, other students in the group went on to say:

Student 1: *... say your friend is racist-*

Student 2: *Yeah but you're joking around.*

Student 1: *It's still racism-*

Student 2: *That's still racist.*



Some students also talked about how the use of certain terms with friends was considered by many people to be ok, for example if Black friends gave them ‘permission’ to use the N word. However, many students also noted that they didn’t agree with the use of racial slur and it was frustrating when teachers did not respond to this kind of language if they heard it or it was reported.

Student 1: *About slurs, people become too comfortable with saying them, knowing about them, teaching them...I’m seeing people...that are from that background, that let their friends...from their background say that slur and tell it to themselves...and you will call them on it, right, ‘oh no my friend lets me say it, it’s fine’, ‘oh no I’ve got a pass’. But that doesn’t change the fact that behind that word is years and years of violence and hatred and terrible things that happened to people...*

Student 2: *And this morning in the morning home group, this group that is clearly not from, it’s clearly not Black, they were saying N word quite confidently and a teacher had no comment towards it.*

Most students felt that the use of slurs and racist ‘jokes’ around the school were significant ongoing problems that were not being adequately or uniformly addressed by teachers. Students also highlighted that racism was often expressed in ways that were designed to go unobserved by teachers.

The people who, who tend to do it, they do it around their friends specifically because they know if someone of that race was to hear what they are saying, then it would be like a whole conflict and probably fight...they tend to observe around on when, when to say it. So then nothing really happens, all people just walk past or couldn’t care less. So, and also telling the teacher, honestly depends if the teacher wants to do anything or not. So, if the teacher doesn’t do anything then it’s oh well. (Student)

Students expressed frustration about the difficulty of reporting peers for racism, particularly when racist slurs or “jokes” were made in group settings. Several noted that when they attempted to respond to racism themselves, they sometimes became the ones reprimanded by teachers. Students also described uneven responses from staff: while some teachers were seen as approachable and trustworthy when it came to reporting racism, others were perceived as dismissive, failing to respond, laughing along with racist “jokes,” or minimising the racism and related harm experienced by students.

Staff also identified challenges related to the ways racism could be hidden from staff view, as well as the difficulties faced by students who witnessed racism but did not feel confident reporting it. Over time, however, staff observed growing confidence among both students and staff to report incidents, alongside increased trust that reports would be followed up. While participants acknowledged that further work was still needed, they noted that the broader educational focus of the initiative was strengthening racial literacy and awareness across the school community. At the same time, the reporting and response processes were contributing to increased trust, and to greater feelings of safety in talking about racism and seeking support.

I would say it's perhaps less...outward or less obvious, perhaps. But I certainly still think there are a lot of times when things are far more subtle. From students, they might still be feeling the same way, or quietly saying the same things, but maybe not as outwardly as they might once because they know that there is going to be follow up. Yeah, still too many friends saying...'it's just jokes'...which I wholeheartedly disagree with. But obviously students are able to do that when there's no teachers around as well, at recess and lunch. (Staff)

Behaviour change, racial literacy, and trust in the system

Over the course of the anti-racism initiative, both staff and students reported noticing a change in behaviour around the school in relation to racism, including the use of slurs and 'jokes', feelings of safety to talk about racism and increased trust in the system around reporting and responses. Opening explicit conversations around racism was a critical element of this work, with an emphasis on encouraging curiosity and respectful language to ensure cultural safety for everyone.

... racism is so actually embedded in who we actually are and we don't even realise it. So, having it called out and having those open discussions is actually really powerful in starting to shift the culture... calling it as a separate thing, like 'that comment was racist' or 'that joke isn't actually okay'...Having those discussions openly and specifically in a targeted way and talking about the impact it has on other people is really a start of building more empathetic and understanding young people. (Staff)

The school's anti-racism and cultural inclusion work focused on strengthening racial literacy so that members of the school community could better recognise and identify racism, and had a shared framework for talking about racism when it occurred. Education was central to this approach and was reinforced by clear reporting and response mechanisms, which over time helped to build trust in the system.

It's actually some of the First Nation students...they're finding they have a bit of a voice...originally I think they would have kind of sat back if someone said something that was racist...maybe just pulled a face or something. But now...maybe they feel a bit more confident that they can actually say, 'you shouldn't say that'. And then they trust that the teacher will back them up and go, 'you're right, they can't say that'. I think that's a nice positive shift that's happened. (Staff)

Staff also emphasised that conversations didn't always have to be around responding to racist incidents but could also be through a positive approach to cultural inclusion and proactive conversations around culture and heritage, with opportunities for mutual sharing and learning.

Probably one of the best things that I did was we talked to the kids about a backpack and what they bring with them and especially their cultural backgrounds. So they told me about their families' cultural backgrounds or where they had come from and just gave a bit of a history lesson. And kids that were a bit shy about talking in front of the class were really proud about talking about their countries and where they came from and their favourite things about their culture and stuff. (Staff)

Whole-class or whole-school learning

Classroom-based learning and curriculum-oriented approaches were a central component of the school's anti-racism and cultural inclusion initiative. While reporting and response mechanisms were critical for addressing specific incidents of racism, participants consistently emphasised that sustained learning within classrooms was essential for supporting deeper understanding, preventing recurrence, and addressing the cumulative harms of racism for students' wellbeing and sense of belonging.

Work in the classroom

Conversations with students as individuals were part of the overall educative response in the school, but there were further sessions that involved whole classrooms that enabled learning for the wider student cohort.

... And then we would run home group sessions ... it wasn't just the kid being racist that got the education. Every other kid obviously got to hear something about what we were doing....all the conversations were pretty respectful and everything... it was really good for those students to realise how the other students were reacting and going, oh, maybe there's more to this that I'm not realising. (Staff)

Classroom work included some sessions that were extensions of the reporting and response mechanisms, with a critical focus on improving racial literacy and supporting student learning around racism in a classroom setting. At times, if there had been repeated reports from one cohort of students – for example, from one classroom – the Cultural Inclusion leader worked with colleagues in classrooms to facilitate conversations around racism and cultural inclusion.

We created that lesson together, I think the thing that worked the best...was that [the classroom teacher] was vulnerable with them...and [that teacher and the students] have such strong relationships...they were able to see their teacher share their experiences, then other kids in the class were starting to share how they actually felt about what they were experiencing rather than, ha-ha, it's funny. They were like, I feel really alone, it really sucks. (Staff)

Classroom teachers also noted that they tried to respond to racism in the moment, when incidents occurred during class or in the yard. They spoke about having conversations with students about their language or behaviour in relation to racism, noting that it was important to report incidents but also to respond immediately if they were able. An additional learning opportunity for students was facilitated in a new subject focused on intercultural understanding with Year 7 students. This subject provided scope to expand students' knowledge around culture and facilitated respectful dialogue, with a diverse focus on cultures around the world and in Australia. The subject was important for building a sense of appreciation

of students' own personal cultural backgrounds as well as their peers, and to encourage students to approach conversations around culture and heritage in a respectful way to improve cultural safety for all students in the school.

Teaching them just the different parameters of intercultural study, how they should pose respectful questions and determining the difference between being curious and being judgemental. (Staff)

Whole school approach

In addition to targeted work with classes identified through reporting mechanisms and curriculum-based teaching in specific subjects, the Committee developed opportunities for all staff to deliver short lessons on racism and anti-racism in home group classes. These sessions were supported by brief slide presentations that home group teachers were asked to use to prompt discussion in their classes. The intention was to ensure that all students and staff had opportunities to engage with issues of racism and anti-racism, and to contribute collectively to strengthening racial literacy and cultural inclusion across the school. However, both students and staff noted challenges in implementation, with some home groups engaging only minimally—or not at all—with this work.

Both staff and students noted that the idea of holding sessions with all classes could be a good opportunity, but that there was work to be done around improving the ways that the ideas were presented, to enable a more in-depth and meaningful discussion rather than it being rushed or with limited engagement.

I hear feedback from students, yeah not actually taking in the information, but I also hear from teachers how they kind of struggle with having to do it or wanting it because it takes into class time...there are definitely teachers that are more a part of it than others. (Student)

Many students indicated that they thought the home group sessions were not effective, as one student said, *'they do it a lot, but it doesn't help in any way'*. However, some students recalled participating in the sessions and noted that they appreciated learning about some issues. A key event at the school was a cultural gala, highlighted by staff and students as a focal point of the whole-school approach to cultural inclusion. Many participants noted that this day was an opportunity for students to feel proud of their own heritage and cultural identities, and for everyone to learn about one another in a festive atmosphere.

I remember when I first come to this school...events for cultural backgrounds and everything weren't really happening, but recently throughout the years, you can tell there's been a huge difference. And the people...are actually doing something to include more cultures...more events and stuff. (Student)

Staff learning

Staff professional learning was a central component of the initiative and played a key role in the development and implementation of the anti-racism and cultural inclusion policy. Whole-staff professional learning sessions were held on several student-free days throughout the school year. These sessions focused on building shared understanding of racism and anti-racism, as well as creating space for conversations about the diverse cultures represented within the school community. They also challenged staff assumptions and practices related to racism and cultural inclusion, prompting reflective work that participants described as difficult at times, but ultimately valuable and rewarding.

One of the things that really stood out to me was...talking about the unconscious racist mind which draws on how I was raised and how my parents might've been...But then ... I don't want to be that way, I don't want to feel that awful feeling of segregating someone because of something, whether it's skin colour or language or country or whatever. (Staff)

Talking through challenging topics during professional development sessions enabled further conversations throughout the school year, and staff noted that there was an increased openness to talk about racism, and a greater sense of openness amongst the staff around learning about culture, racism, and success stories as well as challenges in relation to this work. Staff talked about the challenges for staff who were trying to address racism with students, how important staff-staff conversations were, and the importance of all staff feeling safe and supported to be vulnerable themselves whilst supporting students.

Staff 1: *to see the power of modelling vulnerability for teachers who face some crazy [stuff] all day. Our staff need to talk about it in a way that is supportive ...*

Staff 2: *Lots of people have...been this thing happened, I messed up, help, I should have done this...I made a mistake today and I think I did something racist, or I thought something racist or something racist happened, I didn't respond to it in the way that I know I should. ...*

Staff 1: *And that is everything ... You have such a moment of vulnerability, and your response is everything in that moment.*

Staff 2: *... This is part of learning, you are a human, we're teachers but we're humans.*

Staff talked at length about the impact of ongoing professional development around cultural inclusion and racism. Many staff highlighted the positive impact of these sessions on the overall attitudes and approaches to this work across the staff body, in most instances mentioning that staff were open to learning. As one staff member said:

I would like to learn a bit more about some of the cultures here at the school just so I know if it's – obviously if the student reacts to it, I'll know it's something that's not good.... (Staff)

These processes of specific learning through professional development sessions, in combination with ongoing conversations amongst staff, facilitated ongoing change aimed at facilitating a unified approach across the school.

Positive impacts of the anti-racism and cultural inclusion initiative

Behaviour change

Staff and students all noted that they had seen a change in the levels and severity of racism related incidents over the period since the anti-racism and cultural inclusion initiative began.

Now, it's not really common for me to just see racism, but then when I first came to the school, racism was very common. (Student)

Drastic change, that's what I've taken...and there used to be a lot of fights and it used to be very – what do I say, not good... but now it doesn't happen because you're from here, you're from there, that sort of thing, they don't hate each other for where they come from, that used to happen before. (Staff)

Behaviour change was noted not only as a reduction in overall levels of racism, but also in the ways that responses to racism were enacted and the impact of respectful conversations around racism and racism related harm. Staff noted that many students were more open to thinking through racist behaviour or language and to engage in discussions around racism or racism related harm.

For me the work with the students is quite helpful... largely because I feel that most of the students will listen to you when you're talking to them about racism...And in actual fact they will go on to ask questions and in most cases they will apologise. (Staff)

Students also reflected on changes they had observed in behaviour across the school, particularly among individuals who had engaged with the reporting and response processes, either as those targeted by racism or those who had enacted it. As noted earlier, some students observed that peers who had previously behaved in racist ways changed their behaviour over time. Others described changes in their own thinking and behaviour, reporting greater awareness of racism and its impacts.

I was racist...I got suspended internally and externally, and after then, after I [went through the educative process]...I realised how much it can hurt someone, like how much it can impact them, cos the person who I said it to was my friend...I realised I pushed the boundaries, like I kept pressing the button...like jokingly, but I thought it was like still a joke. But then [my friend] took it seriously to heart and that...helped me realise like not everything is joking and some things actual hurt...You realise it's not a joke... it's actually hurting them, so that's where you've got to stop. (Student)

Staff talked about their personal experiences of change as well, such as the increased sense of openness and safety to talk about racism even when those conversations might be difficult or challenging. Staff also reflected on the changes they had made in their own thinking around racism and cultural inclusion, or changes in their willingness or confidence to report racism.

Honestly, it's actually changed my perspective of racism too because I've changed the way I speak to people too. (Staff)

Staff also reported increased awareness of how to address racism, particularly the importance of responding in the moment when incidents occur. As a result, they described changes in their own practice, as well as in the behaviour of colleagues. Staff valued having greater confidence, skills, and practical tools to address racism directly, alongside increased trust that colleagues would respond actively to racist behaviour in classrooms and shared spaces. This collective confidence contributed to a stronger willingness across staff to engage in anti-racism work.

[In the past] it's just been like an email ... from a teacher saying...'your problem, you deal with it', kind of thing which shouldn't always be the case... you are that person that's in that situation at the moment, like, you need to also be aware of how to deal with that situation, so...that child's just not feeling like it's being brushed off...you still need to have a sense of, 'I know what to do in this situation'... So from the policy now, like it's some of those teachers have gone, you know, straight to dealing with that situation as best as they can, and then reporting it straight away. (Staff)

Increased trust in teachers and in reporting processes

Students and staff talked about how the reporting and response mechanisms were affecting change, and as time went on there was increased trust in this system and a willingness to report incidents.

I've heard less students say, 'What's the point in reporting it? Nothing gets done about it.' Yeah, I used to hear that a lot...kids will say, What's the point in reporting, and nothing gets done about it. And I think there's less incidence of that being said. (Staff)

Trust in the reporting and response systems was critical to the overall changes noted in the school, as well as increased trust from students that teachers would listen to their experiences and provide active support.

I think if teachers do just take action after something's been reported, that student will trust that teacher again. And if everyone can just do it, just it's such a small thing to be like, I heard what you said, I'm going to follow up on that. The student will trust that teacher so much more to report every time. (Staff)

Students described feeling supported by the reporting and response processes and emphasised that the educative and restorative approaches were more effective than external suspensions. They spoke about engaging in these processes in different roles, including as those who had been harmed by racism and as those who had enacted racist behaviour. Students highlighted the value of flexible responses that prioritised the needs of those harmed, while also supporting meaningful behaviour change among students who had used racism.

It wasn't going to change the fact that he said what he said, and he felt comfortable enough to say it. But... I felt like a bit better that the teachers actually did something and that I was able to have a whole conversation on how it affected me and everything. So it actually helped...Hearing stories about him [after that process happened], I didn't really hear any racial stories of him being discriminating someone else. So, I would say he changed. (Student)

Improved racial literacy and frameworks for talking about racism

While racism continued to occur within the school, participants noted clear changes in how both students and staff were able to talk about racism, including greater willingness to question what behaviours and language are acceptable and what are not. Ongoing conversations and learning opportunities about racism and its impacts were seen as important not only for students directly involved in racist incidents, but also for supporting broader discussions about racism, cultural inclusion, and respect across the school community.

The education that's happening as part of the policy is really valuable, and I think that's made quite a difference to students who were either instigating the racism or victim to it. So that education, yeah, I've seen that it's benefit benefited those people who were perpetrating racism, but I can also see the students who were a victim of it, they can see also the benefit in it, and they understand that it's really important for those people to learn about their value here and that as well. So I think that's been good to see those two sides of it. (Staff)

As educative work was undertaken with individual students, whole classes, and across the school, staff observed changes in students' understanding of racism and in their confidence to talk about it.

since they have started, you know with students they've started this program, I used to hear a lot from students...they did not even know...what was racism and...just used to say, 'this is racism'. But now I haven't even heard this term at all. (Staff)

All of [those students] have experienced racism at some point. Some of them have perpetrated it, some of them have responded really in really helpful ways. Some of them have responded in violent ways. Some of them have been on the verge of external suspension, some of them had internal suspensions...they've grown up... seeing them be able to respond to each other in the way that they did, in front of you, I was so proud of them and I'm like I just don't think they would have been able to do that if we hadn't been doing this work. (Staff)

These conversations were also important among staff, as they created opportunities to discuss racism and cultural inclusion, reflect on individual attitudes and behaviours, and consider broader patterns of practice across the school.

The one thing that I've noticed which I really like, is that people are a lot more open. You can have these conversations now whereas before you probably wouldn't have them...People are still navigating their way around them a little bit because it's new, it's different. But the more that people are told it's okay to talk about this sort of stuff, the easier it gets...if there's anything that the project has taught us, it's that we can say something. You don't have to put up with it, you don't have to overhear something and let it slide...You can say something no matter who it is. (Staff)

Whole-school support for anti-racism and cultural inclusion

In the early stages of the anti-racism and cultural inclusion initiative, a small group of motivated staff began to develop ideas and to implement practices to address issues around racism in the school. As time went on, support for this program of work grew and this growing support across the school community was an indication of the need for this work, and a reflection of the success of the policy.

Once a member of our community, whether it's a staff, a student, a parent, a whoever, comes into contact with this work, more often than not that results in them supporting our work moving forward...whether they've experienced some educational intervention...[or] their teacher has called out the racism and tried to educate them differently...[or] a parent that's come in because their kid has been racist...[or] a staff member that comes to our PDs...those interactions are what then garners that further support....driving it forward and advocating for it. (Staff)

Leadership support and resourcing to build staff capacity were critical to the success of the policy. Beyond broad support in principle from staff, students, and families, the active involvement of school leadership—alongside practical resourcing—enabled the effective implementation of the policy and supported its ongoing, iterative development.

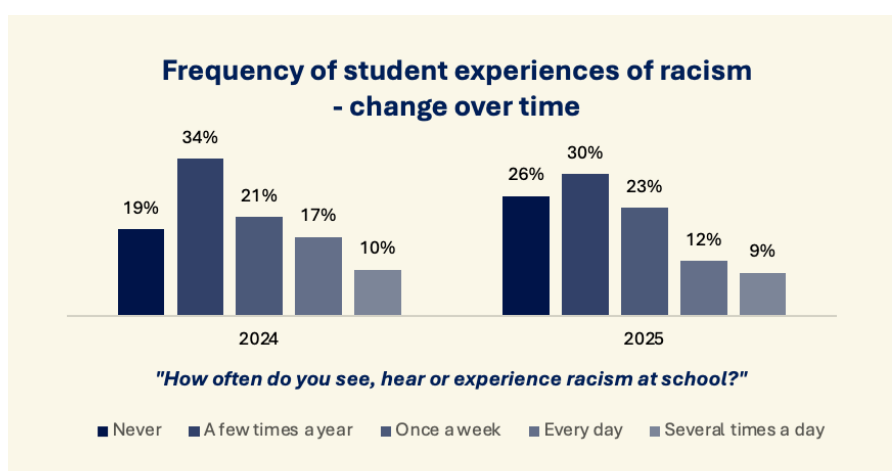
Principal support, allocated staff, PD time that is consistent and frequent, resourcing labelled specifically for this work. Existing structures that can be adapted to suit this work. Staff themselves recognising that this is something we need to change. Students recognising this is something we need to change. They're all I think important ingredients. (Staff)

Although the work around anti-racism and cultural inclusion was not always easy for staff, most came to recognise the benefits of the policy and its implementation over time. Focus group participants described noticeable changes in behaviour across the school, along with a growing sense of trust in the system among both students and staff.

Already schools do so much and have so many things that they have to cover and struggle to do all of those things but on top of that there was enough passion from staff - it was 100% staff driven...to recognise that this is enough of an issue that they actually really want to formalise doing something about it and making it an open conversation ...That racism isn't okay. So, yeah, it's pretty powerful and pretty inspiring. (Staff)

Feelings of belonging and safety in the school

After one year of implementation at the Adelaide school, survey data indicated measurable improvements in students' experiences and perceptions of racism and school climate. Approximately two thirds of students reported noticing positive changes, including improved school responses to incidents involving racism, increased visibility and impact of actions led by the cultural safety team, and greater confidence and skills to speak out about racism. Over the same period, there was a moderate reduction of approximately 7% in the proportion of students who reported regularly experiencing racism.



These shifts were accompanied by broader wellbeing gains. Data from the statewide Wellbeing and Engagement Collection showed a 6% increase in positive perceptions of overall school climate, an 11% increase in students reporting a high sense of school belonging, and a 6% increase in students reporting a high sense of peer belonging. These findings suggest that the anti-racism and cultural inclusion initiative contributed to both reductions in reported racism and improvements in students' wellbeing and sense of belonging.

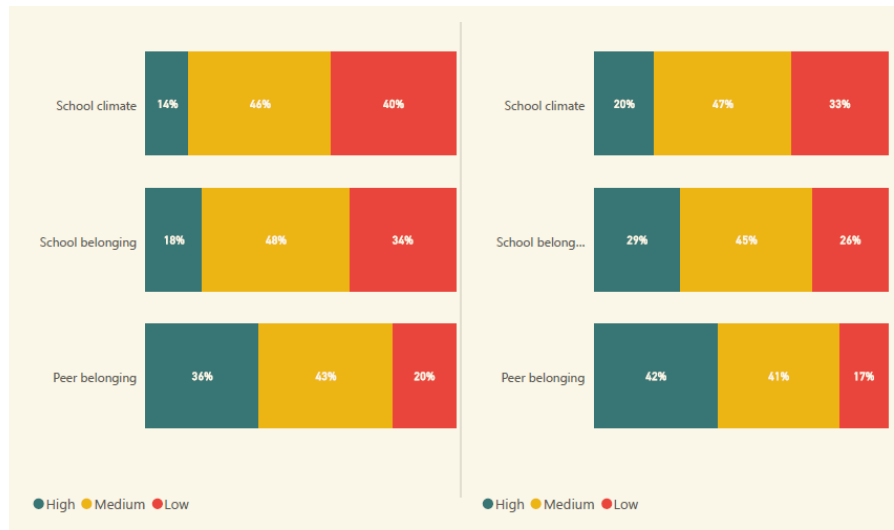


Figure 5 Changes in School Wellbeing reports from 2023-2025 (over the period of the initiative)

Remaining challenges and opportunities for growth

Enduring structures of power

Resistance to change

While there was strong support for this work across the school community, some resistance was also evident among a small number of staff, students, and families. For staff in particular, teaching in this context was already described as demanding and complex, especially given the range of personal, social, and socioeconomic challenges faced by students and families. Staff spoke about the competing demands of supporting student wellbeing, addressing academic needs, managing significant behavioural issues, and developing differentiated teaching and learning programs for a highly diverse student cohort, alongside extensive curriculum and administrative requirements. Within this context, some staff did not view racism as a priority compared to other pressing concerns, such as behaviour management or learning support. As a result, a small number of staff were resistant to engaging in anti-racism work, perceiving it as an additional burden within an already challenging role.

Among families, many were supportive of the school's anti-racism work; however, some expressed concerns about fairness within the reporting and response processes. In particular, these families perceived that responses to incidents were applied inconsistently, or that their children were treated unfairly compared to others for similar behaviours.

Student resistance to the initiative was shaped in part by feelings of fatigue and scepticism. Some students viewed racism as an entrenched issue that was unlikely to change and reported long-standing distrust in school systems based on previous experiences where racism was not effectively addressed. As a result, these students questioned whether engaging with reporting or anti-racism processes would lead to meaningful outcomes, or whether doing so would simply create additional stress without benefit.

[Students] come to me...and talk to me about it...I keep telling them report it, report it. Some students will be no, I don't want to be in trouble or I'm not comfortable to report it...I did report it before, but nothing happened, so I stopped reporting it. (Staff)

However, student participants noted that over time there was a growing sense of trust that the reporting and response mechanisms would be followed through, and that they could seek help around racism related issues from trusted staff members.

Challenges speaking up about racism

Students spoke about the ongoing prevalence of racist “jokes” and the difficulty of asking others to stop. One student explained that this was particularly challenging when the behaviour came from friends. While it could feel easier to speak up when racial slurs were used or when comments were clearly rude or intentionally harmful, it was much harder to challenge racism when it was framed as a “joke” within friendship groups.

Student 1: *Yeah when they're taking it too far... When you feel like you're being insulted and attacked. And when it's like – it's not even a joke, it's just – just pure racism.*

Student 2: *Even – even when ...especially when it's a joke actually, that's when it's hard to do that.... especially when it's a joke, but it was... the wrong type of jokes.*

Staff also identified barriers to reporting and responding to racism enacted by colleagues. For those who had experienced racism themselves, as well as for those who had witnessed it, reporting a colleague was described as particularly difficult, with significant concern about potential repercussions. Participants also highlighted the role of social and organisational power dynamics in shaping these challenges. Differences in role, seniority, or perceived authority affected staff confidence to raise concerns, making it difficult to address racist behaviour among colleagues, especially when the person involved was seen to hold greater power within the school.

The cultural inclusion committee is doing a good job as far as educating the students about the impact of racism...And I think in the long term it will change. But we still have to resuscitate the idea that the staff also needs to be educated around that line... because openly some people flout the rules, can I call them the rules, because they know that at the end of the day there are no consequences. (Staff)

Fear of repercussions when reporting racism

In addition, both students and staff described ongoing reluctance to report racism due to concerns about potential negative consequences. Staff, in particular, reflected on significant barriers to reporting and responding to racism involving colleagues, shaped by the inherent power structures within schools. Those who experienced racism from other staff reported feeling unable to raise concerns for fear of repercussions for their day-to-day working relationships and longer-term career opportunities.

I feel like not much would probably get done to them [other staff] compared to a student. So I guess I'd just be scared of any consequences, like, maybe they might treat me differently. (Staff)

Staff who wished to speak up about racism enacted by colleagues described fears of negative repercussions and noted the difficulty of initiating conversations with those in senior or leadership positions. As one staff member reflected, “I feel like I have no power.” While student reporting and response processes were able to draw on the inherent power differential between staff and students—using this authority to support accountability while also enabling respectful, two-way dialogue—the power dynamics among staff created significant barriers to reporting. In practice, concerns about colleagues needed to be escalated to leadership, yet participants noted a lack of anonymous reporting options or protections for staff raising personal concerns, further discouraging reporting.

Sometimes those staff also want to remain anonymous, they don't want to report directly and maybe that is also one...reason that it goes unreported. They don't want to come into the limelight....It ruins the relationship...the other person would be asked questions or would be confronted and, 'who would say that?' – yes, we did it, right. So that's also the reason that some of the staff racism has not gone down. (Staff)

Staff highlighted that these issues around power were also a significant barrier for students who feared repercussions if peers knew they had been ‘a snitch’.

In that moment I understood why a lot of our students don't report what they hear and that's why, sure the data probably looks not too bad about how many reports we get, but I believe there's probably at least 50% of the school who just will not report it because of the fear. (Staff)

Authenticity and embeddedness of anti-racism work

Across focus groups, participants identified both progress and ongoing challenges in the school's anti-racism and cultural inclusion work. While many aspects of the policy and related practices were seen as effective, inconsistent implementation remained a key barrier. Students described some classroom and whole-school initiatives as performative or unevenly applied and expressed mixed levels of trust in staff responses to racism. Staff similarly noted the complexities of enacting the policy and, despite increasing motivation over time, emphasised the need to more fully embed anti-racism and cultural inclusion across all school processes, classrooms, and year levels to ensure sustained impact.

Need for this work to be embedded in all classrooms, year levels, and school systems

Staff and students noted that anti-racism education delivered in home room classes was often implemented inconsistently, and in some cases not delivered at all. Staff identified limited capacity to undertake this work without sufficient training and support to create safe and effective classroom spaces for these conversations. They also highlighted the high workload pressures faced by teachers, which meant that, for some, this work was experienced as an additional source of stress rather than as an integrated part of teaching practice.

I know that sometimes that's an issue we had where our staff won't do the things [in home room] ...for whatever reason, not comfortable, they need to do something else with their class. There's a bunch of different reasons that come up. (Staff)

Students talked about their experiences across multiple year levels and home groups in relation to the anti-racism sessions, with some noting that it was done well in their experiences and others highlighting that it was done poorly and without enough depth or wrap around support.

It's like last year in for the antiracism thing from last year. We were just in home group on a Friday morning, we don't know anything and then there's just some information about, we should learn about antiracism right. Literally it's just me and another person looking at the slides and that's it. (Student)

PowerPoints are setup with an...intent for each lesson...it's a bit hard to remember because the kids in my class were just completely ignoring it. (Student)

Staff also emphasised that while home group sessions and whole-school initiatives to promote anti-racism and cultural inclusion were important, this work needed to be embedded across all teaching and learning, rather than treated as a separate or occasional activity.

The explicit teaching around racial and cultural sensitivity is happening outside of core curriculum time. So it's the extended home group and so it's not seen as part of the internal engine of the curriculum, it's an offshoot-worry about that later, we don't have time for that because I've got to teach these lessons... I would love to see that cultural celebration and what racism is, what it looks like and all of that, embedded where possible within the curriculum from 7 to 12. (Staff)

Staff highlighted the success of the Year 7 intercultural learning subject, noting that early exposure in secondary school built strong foundations for racial literacy and respectful, curiosity-based dialogue. They also emphasised the need to extend this work into primary schooling to support progressive learning about racism and cultural inclusion.

I think that education around all of this really needs to start in middle primary... if the racism policy that we have, or, you know, something similar, gets rolled out to... all schools...and that work is being done with those students from when they're 8-10 years old, by the time they get to us in high school ... they've got a far better understanding about the impacts of racism, and standing up against racism, and I think that ... needs to be the next major change. (Staff)



Need for uniformity of responses or attitudes to racism from school staff

Although students and staff described growing willingness to report racism and increased trust in the system, this trust was often limited to the reporting and response mechanisms and the core staff responsible for that work. For students who did not feel safe reporting concerns to their classroom or home group teachers, significant barriers remained to accessing support at the moment racism occurred or to reporting incidents more generally. Students also raised concerns about racist behaviour by some teachers, describing differential treatment based on students' cultural background or heritage. Across multiple focus groups, students spoke about experiences of stereotyping by staff, where support was shaped by assumptions rather than provided equitably to all students.

Student 1: *There are teachers who said they are supportive and they do this and that but sometimes...they only support...the group of people they are thinking of supporting...they could argue and say "Well [this group is] smarter", this is a stereotyping, that's why helping these people...potentially saying they're dumber and can't do their work well...*

Student 2: *I guess what she said, - teacher might be...calling more attention to this group, they're ... they're not seeing this other group of people that actually do need their help.*

Students also reported instances where staff laughed at racist "jokes" or failed to intervene when students used racial slurs or engaged in other racist behaviour.

Honestly, it's been so, it's so common around school nobody really cares at this point. The teachers are like, okay I'm not even going to do anything unless they straight up see it, witness it, they're not really going to do that much. (Student)

Although students spoke about feeling comfortable to report racism to certain staff, they highlighted that they did not feel safe to report racism to all staff. One remaining challenge in the school is therefore to expand this trust to include all school staff, and to ensure that all staff are avoiding racial stereotyping of any kind.

Need for systemic support and structural change

Staff capacity and resourcing for this work

Time pressures meant that responses to incidents of racism were not always immediate. As a result, some students felt their concerns were not taken seriously or addressed, leaving them without adequate support. In these situations, students described either remaining silent and attempting to cope on their own, or trying to resolve issues themselves, which at times led to escalation. When students felt unsupported by staff or school processes, they reported feeling let down by the system and losing trust that the school could keep them safe or support their sense of belonging. In other cases, attempts to manage situations independently contributed to further conflict and increased harm for those targeted by racism.

That's when the teachers they had to really get involved because it was a really emergent...intense situation....There was a suspension.... And I was there in the reconnection meeting of that student and that student...was so mad about being suspended, she said I'm a victim of the racism, 'why am I being suspended?' (Staff)

Staff noted the complexity of anti-racism and cultural inclusion work, and highlighted the stress and worry that many colleagues felt around trying to support students who had, in many cases, faced significant racism over their lifetime. It was also challenging to address racism in isolation when it was often not a simple case, but a set of complex behaviours from individual students as well as in groups of students.

It's still really messy because – the racism is never the behaviour in isolation. There's always something else going on. I'm still yet to have something that's literally only racist. Even the act of racism, there are other behavioural things going on. (Staff)

Staff emphasised that learning how to undertake anti-racism and cultural inclusion work was an ongoing process for both staff and students. Opening and sustaining uncomfortable conversations, and confronting personal biases and privilege, were described as challenging at times. Staff spoke about the difficulty of navigating their own reflective learning while simultaneously supporting students to talk about racism and racism-related harm in educative and restorative ways. Although there was strong support for this work across the school community, participants noted that it was complex, time-consuming, and often emotionally demanding. As a result, staff highlighted the need for sustained and increased resourcing, including dedicated leadership roles, to support responses to racism and to build capacity across the broader staff cohort.

We feel the lack of support...we then have to make up for that through our own systems and structures, which do not have the capacity to satisfy that need, because that's not what they're designed for. And so it's really cool to be, oh we're the only school doing this work to this extent at this point in time and cool, go us, even though it's really messy and hard work. But actually to create that change within a public education system, that across the board is struggling, the I think that the added just load of that is, has been a lot and still is. (Staff)

Lack of policy at the system level

Staff emphasised the importance of system-wide change supported by clear, statewide policy. As noted earlier, the absence of such policy was a key factor that prompted staff at this school to collaboratively develop and enact their own anti-racism and cultural inclusion policy. However, participants recognised that this was only possible because of a highly motivated core team and strong leadership support, particularly in the early stages of the work.

For the policy and associated practices to be sustainable, staff highlighted the need for greater support from departmental systems to expand and embed the processes already in place. They also noted that not all schools will have the leadership backing, time, or staff expertise required to develop anti-racism policy from scratch. As a result, participants argued that a sector-wide policy on anti-racism and cultural inclusion would benefit all schools by providing a clear framework to support students' safety, wellbeing, and sense of belonging, while also reducing racism. Such a policy could establish consistent expectations across the system, while allowing individual schools to adapt practices to their specific contexts.

I think as a department and as a state we need to be on the same page at some point...the context is so important with this work...I worry about that. When schools ask us to send them our policy...We're happy to talk through where we're at and where you're at, but actually if we give you the policy, that's not helpful...We made this for our context but you need to think about yours and you need to think about the life worlds of the young people who walk inside your gates. (Staff)

Participants also emphasised the need for system-wide policy addressing staff experiences of racism, including clear reporting and response mechanisms. Many staff in this study described ongoing experiences of racism directed at themselves or colleagues, alongside a lack of safe and appropriate avenues for seeking support or redress. Reporting racist behaviour by colleagues was described as particularly difficult due to fears of repercussions for day-to-day working relationships, career progression, or job security. In addition, staff in leadership or senior roles who were responsible for responding to reports of racism noted the emotional and professional risks involved in addressing the behaviour of colleagues. Participants argued that clear departmental policy and processes for responding to staff racism would help mitigate these risks and provide greater protection, consistency, and safety for all involved.



Need for systemic change across schools and society

Participants also spoke about experiences of racism in public spaces and the influence of media and social media on attitudes toward racism. While these issues extend beyond the scope of this school-based study, they highlight the need for anti-racism and cultural inclusion efforts to be supported across all systems and institutions, including government, and the public and private sectors. Ongoing racism in Australia remains a significant societal issue that affects the broader population and continues to shape the experiences of students within schools.

To be honest, if, trying to battle racism and stuff right, it's not just the school that needs to battle racism, it's workplace or in society or something. Because yes we get and we get it, school's a place where to learn to stuff but when we give them this information and – you should stop doing this, you should stop... When they walk out of school ...they're going to be influenced by society and videos and influencers. (Student)

You know, with social media stuff that all, yeah, and out of school hours, weekend stuff, that all has an impact on it as well. So there's only so much we can control, when it happens at school, but outside of school it's very out of our control. But then situations will then get brought into school. (Staff)

Expanding anti-racism education actions

Beyond the specific initiative developed at the case study school, the broader research project aimed to build and support a wider network of South Australian schools working to prevent and respond to racism within their own contexts. Through this funded project, this work was advanced by establishing a cross-school network (The CARE Network) and convening a full-day symposium to support shared learning, collaboration, and the exchange of practice.

The CARE Network: Coalition for Anti-Racism in Education

The *Coalition for Anti-Racism Education (CARE) Network* meets once per school term to discuss issues around racism and anti-racism and cultural inclusion in their individual school contexts, to share information and grow capacity for this work on a larger scale. At the time of writing there were ten schools involved in the CARE Network, with several others indicating interest in joining.

The Anti-Racism in Schools Symposium

In November 2025, the research team and members of the CARE Network shared key findings from the project and amplified student voices at the Anti-Racism in Education Symposium. The symposium demonstrated strong student motivation for this work to be expanded across all schools. Held on 10 November 2025 at the University of South Australia, the symposium brought together key stakeholders connected to the research through the CARE Network, alongside education leaders from across the state. Attendees included the Minister for Education, Training and Skills, Hon. Blair Boyer; representatives from UniSA Education Futures and the Vice-Chancellery; the Montebello Foundation, which funded the research; and senior policymakers from the Department for Education and Catholic Education SA. Central to the symposium was a strong focus on student voice and participation, with approximately 70 students and teachers from six schools in attendance. As part of a collaborative activity, participants responded to questions exploring experiences of racism and school-based approaches to preventing and responding to racism. An analysis of these responses is presented in Appendix 2.

Recommendations

1. Establish system-wide anti-racism policy frameworks

Education systems should develop and implement clear, sector-wide anti-racism and cultural inclusion policies. The absence of departmental-level policy placed a significant burden on the case study school to design processes from scratch, relying on a highly motivated core team and supportive leadership. A system-wide framework would reduce this inequity by providing all schools with a consistent foundation for preventing, reporting, and responding to racism, while still allowing flexibility for schools to adapt policies to their local contexts.

2. Develop clear, consistent reporting and response mechanisms for racism

Education authorities should mandate and support transparent reporting pathways for racism that are accessible to students and staff. Reporting systems should ensure timely follow-up, clear communication, and coordinated record-keeping. The findings demonstrate that trust in reporting increases when incidents are consistently recorded, followed up, and addressed through educative and restorative processes rather than ignored or minimised.

3. Introduce dedicated policy and processes for staff experiences of racism

System-level policy is required to address racism experienced by staff, including clear reporting and response mechanisms that protect staff from retaliation or career repercussions. Staff in this study reported fear of reporting colleagues due to power hierarchies, job security concerns, and professional risk. A departmental framework for addressing staff racism would support safer disclosure, clearer accountability, and reduced emotional burden on individual leaders tasked with responding to colleagues.

4. Resource dedicated leadership roles for anti-racism and cultural inclusion

Schools should be resourced to fund dedicated leadership positions or time allocations for anti-racism and cultural inclusion work. This initiative was most effective when specific staff had responsibility for coordinating responses, supporting students, liaising with specialist teams, and maintaining records. Without dedicated time and expertise, anti-racism work risks becoming fragmented, inconsistent, or unsustainable.

5. Embed anti-racism education across curriculum and pedagogy

Anti-racism education should be embedded across all learning areas rather than confined to home group, pastoral care, or one-off sessions. While targeted programs were valuable, staff and students emphasised the need for racism and cultural inclusion to be addressed consistently through teaching and learning. Explicit curriculum-based approaches support the development of racial literacy, critical reflection, and respectful dialogue across the school community.

6. Introduce anti-racism education early and across schooling stages

Anti-racism and intercultural learning should begin in primary schooling and continue across year levels. Staff highlighted the success of the Year 7 intercultural learning subject in building early foundations for racial literacy, curiosity, and respectful conversation. Extending this learning earlier would better support students' developmental understanding of racism and inclusion over time.

7. Prioritise culturally responsive and differentiated approaches

Anti-racism policies and practices must be responsive to the distinct experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other racially minoritised groups. The case study demonstrates the importance of working through trusted relationships, specialist teams, and culturally safe spaces. System-level guidance should explicitly support differentiated approaches rather than one-size-fits-all responses.

8. Strengthen professional learning and reflective practice for staff

Ongoing, well-resourced professional learning is essential to build staff confidence and capability to engage in anti-racism work. Staff described this work as complex, confronting, and emotionally demanding, particularly when examining personal biases and privilege while supporting students experiencing harm. Professional learning should focus on racial literacy, restorative practice, facilitation of difficult conversations, and staff wellbeing.

9. Support restorative and educative responses alongside accountability

Education systems should explicitly endorse restorative and educative responses to racism, alongside appropriate consequences. Findings indicate that punitive responses alone do not lead to sustained behaviour change, whereas educative processes that address harm, accountability, and learning contribute to improved understanding and reduced racism over time.

10. Expand and sustain cross-school networks and knowledge sharing

The expansion of networks such as the Coalition for Anti-Racism in Education (CARE) should be supported to enable collaboration, shared learning, and collective capacity building across schools. The Anti-Racism in Education Symposium demonstrated strong student and educator demand for this work to expand system-wide. Ongoing funding and coordination would support scaling effective practice beyond individual sites.

11. Align school-based initiatives with broader societal anti-racism efforts

While schools cannot address racism alone, education systems should recognise the influence of public discourse, media, and social media on student attitudes. Anti-racism in schools should be aligned with broader government and cross-sector strategies to reduce racism across public institutions, recognising the cumulative impact of societal racism on student wellbeing and belonging.

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that school-based anti-racism initiatives can make a meaningful contribution to student wellbeing, belonging, and safety when they are implemented as sustained, whole-school efforts rather than as isolated or reactive interventions. The case study school showed that clear policy, dedicated leadership, consistent reporting and response mechanisms, and a strong emphasis on education and restorative practice can shift school culture over time. Quantitative and qualitative data indicate improvements in students' confidence to speak about racism, reductions in the frequency of reported racism, and increased feelings of belonging and positive school climate. Central to these outcomes was the deliberate focus on building racial literacy across the school community. Students and staff developed greater shared understanding of what racism is, how it operates, and the harm it causes—particularly when racism is minimised as “joking” or treated as an individual rather than structural issue. Creating space for difficult conversations, supported by clear frameworks and trusted staff, enabled both accountability and learning. Importantly, educative and restorative responses were viewed by students as more effective than purely punitive approaches, supporting behaviour change while prioritising the wellbeing of those harmed.

At the same time, the findings highlight the ongoing complexity of anti-racism work in schools. Racism did not disappear, and challenges remained around consistency, staff capacity, workload pressures, power dynamics, and hesitancy to report—particularly where racism involved colleagues or where students did not feel safe approaching classroom teachers. These challenges underscore that anti-racism is not a one-off initiative, but long-term, relational, and emotionally demanding work that requires sustained commitment, resourcing, and leadership. Critically, the case study also reveals the limitations of relying on individual schools to develop anti-racism policy and practice in the absence of system-level guidance. While this school was able to enact change due to strong leadership and a highly motivated core team, participants recognised that this level of capacity and support is not available in all contexts. For anti-racism work to be equitable, effective, and sustainable across schools, it must be underpinned by clear statewide policy, departmental processes for both student and staff racism, and resourcing that enables schools to embed this work into everyday practice.

Beyond the case study school, the broader research project—including the CARE Network and the Anti-Racism in Education Symposium—demonstrated strong appetite among students, educators, and system leaders for this work to be expanded. Students, in particular, articulated a clear desire for schools to take racism seriously, respond consistently, and create environments where conversations about race, culture, and belonging are normalised rather than avoided.

Overall, this report affirms that schools are a critical site for addressing racism and promoting wellbeing, but they cannot do this work alone. Sustainable change requires alignment between school-based practice and system-wide policy, alongside a broader societal commitment to challenging racism across institutions. When anti-racism is embedded, resourced, and enacted with care, it has the potential not only to reduce harm, but to transform school cultures in ways that support dignity, belonging, and safety for all students and staff.

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Appendix 1: Quantitative data collected by the school

Staff Surveys

May 2023: Preliminary Staff Survey (77 responses)

The first survey captured early baseline perceptions prior to the development of the anti-racism initiative. It collected information on:

- general staff perceptions of school climate
- early indications of experiences or observations of racism
- staff confidence and preparedness to respond to racism

November 2024: Staff Cultural Safety Survey (74 responses)

A more targeted cultural safety survey was conducted after the initiative had been underway for a year. This survey explored:

- Staff perceptions of cultural safety at the school
- Rates of staff reporting racism during 2024
- Reasons staff chose not to report racism
- Staff confidence in reporting racism

This dataset provides insight into both staff experience and organisational readiness to address racism.

Student Surveys

Term 1, 2024: Initial Student Survey (670 responses)

The first large-scale student survey collected baseline data on belonging, experiences of racism, and knowledge of reporting mechanisms. Items included:

- Rating of school belonging
- Year level
- Frequency of hearing, seeing, or experiencing racism
- Confidence in explaining what racism is
- Student definitions of racism
- Knowledge of how to report racism (rating scale)
- Satisfaction with school responses to racism

This dataset established a benchmark for student wellbeing and racialised experiences early in the project.

Term 4, 2024: “Show Up No Matter What” Survey (443 responses)

The second major student dataset captured end-of-year changes and student perceptions following implementation of anti-racism initiatives. Measures included:

- Belonging at the school
- Frequency of seeing, hearing, or experiencing racism
- Confidence in explaining racism
- Knowledge of how to report racism
- Whether students had reported racism and their satisfaction with the response
- Perceptions of improvement in school responses to racism over the past year

This survey allows comparison with the Term 1, 2024 dataset to identify perceived shifts in school climate.

Term 1, 2025: Student Effective Learner Survey (598 responses)

The third wave expanded the scope of data collection to include demographic information and more detailed questions around racism and fairness. Items included:

- Year level and gender
- Self-described cultural identity
- Rating of school belonging
- Frequency of hearing, seeing, or experiencing racism
- Confidence in explaining racism (rating)
- Student definitions of racism
- Knowledge of how to report racism (rating)
- Whether the student had reported racism (yes/no)
- Reasons why students do not report racism (rating scale)
- Perception of improvements in school responses to racism
- Who is engaging in racist behaviour (student-reported)
- Fairness of treatment across cultural groups—how fairly students treat staff and students from other cultural backgrounds

This dataset provides rich insight into patterns of racism, barriers to reporting, and emerging changes in school culture.

Appendix 2: Responses to questions from participants at the Anti-Racism in Schools Symposium

Here we summarise the responses to the seven questions posed to students at the Anti-Racism in Schools symposium:

1. What does racism look like, sound like, feel like, at your school?
2. Why do you think it is important for schools to address racism?
3. What can parents and community do to address racism and support children?
4. What can principals and teachers do to address racism and support children?
5. What things at school help you to feel like you belong or feel like you don't belong?
6. How can schools raise awareness and understanding about racism in lessons?
7. What do students want schools to do if you experience or report racism?

1. What does racism look like, sound like, feel like, at your school?

What Racism Looks Like

Students described racism in schools as visible exclusion, stereotyping, and disrespectful behaviour:

- **Exclusion and segregation:** Being left out of groups, games, or sports based on race or culture.
- **Mocking and mimicking:** Copying accents, gestures, or cultural expressions in a demeaning way.
- **Bullying and targeting:** Individuals or groups being singled out for how they look or where they come from.
- **Stereotyping:** Making assumptions about people based on their country or appearance.
- **Digital racism:** Sharing racist content (e.g. memes, TikToks, Instagram reels).
- **Casual racism as “jokes”:** Pushing boundaries or making racial ‘jokes’ and expecting others to laugh.
- **Explicit acts:** Use of racial slurs, Nazi salutes, and forcing Black students to say the “N-word” in songs.

What Racism Sounds Like

Students said racism sounds disrespectful, hurtful, and normalised through ‘jokes’:

- **Racial slurs and derogatory language:** Frequent use of racist or homophobic insults.
- **Mocking accents or speech:** Mimicking voices to make fun of others.
- **Degrading comments:** “Do you shower?” and other dehumanising or

humiliating remarks.

- **Casual racism disguised as humour:** “Just joking” used to excuse racist comments.
- **Tone and aggression:** Angry, violent, or patronising ways of speaking.
- **Institutional bias:** Teachers or peers critiquing or disciplining some students more harshly than others.

What Racism Feels Like

Students expressed that racism feels isolating, painful, and disempowering:

- **Emotional harm:** Feelings of sadness, anger, loneliness, and fear.
- **Discomfort and pressure:** Feeling awkward, targeted, or under pressure to join in racist ‘jokes’.
- **Betrayal and failure of trust:** A sense that the school has failed to uphold respect and safety.
- **Ongoing impact:** Constant and exhausting experiences that undermine confidence and belonging.
- **Powerlessness:** Feeling embarrassed, voiceless, and unsupported when racism goes unaddressed.

2. Why do you think it is important for schools to address racism?

Promoting Safety, Belonging, and Inclusion

- Many students emphasised that addressing racism helps everyone feel safe, supported, valued, and that they belong at school.
- They linked anti-racism to creating inclusive learning environments where all students can participate and feel accepted.

Preventing and Stopping Racism

- Students viewed addressing racism as necessary to stop it, prevent escalation, and ensure it does not become normalised.
- Several mentioned the need to break the cycle of ignorance and prejudice before it becomes entrenched.

Education and Awareness

- Many students highlighted the role of education in helping people understand what racism is, its seriousness, and how to respond.
- They described this as a way to “bridge gaps,” “remove stereotypes,” and “educate future members of society.”

Emotional and Psychological Impacts

- Several students spoke about the long-term harm racism causes to a person’s sense of identity, confidence, and mental health.

Building Respectful and Just Communities

- Students linked anti-racism in schools to building a better community and society, one based on equality and mutual respect.
- They saw school as a foundation for educating future generations to reject racism and promote inclusion.

Accountability and Empowerment

- A few responses pointed to the importance of consequences for racist behaviour and empowering students to speak out.

3. What can parents and community do to address racism and support children?

Educate and Talk Openly About Racism

Students strongly emphasised the need for education and open conversations at home and in the community:

- Parents should teach children what racism is, why it is wrong, and how to challenge it.
- Encourage honest, non-judgemental discussions about race, culture, and diversity.
- Help children understand their feelings and know what to do if they witness or experience racism.
- Model calm, respectful communication and explain the effects of racism on others.

Celebrate Culture and Identity

Students wanted parents and communities to affirm cultural pride and diversity:

- Teach children about their cultural backgrounds and help them feel proud of who they are.
- Organise cultural events and activities that celebrate diversity and foster connection.
- Support cultural clubs and community groups where children can express identity safely.

Take Action and Report Racism

Students stressed that communities should not stay silent when racism occurs:

- Parents and community members should report racism to schools or authorities and keep raising it until action is taken.
- Follow school anti-racism policies and hold schools accountable for responding appropriately.
- Encourage children to speak up and know their rights.

Work Together as a Community

Students saw racism as a shared problem requiring collective effort:

- Parents, schools, and communities should collaborate on anti-racism initiatives.
- Hold community meetings, support groups, and clubs to build understanding and action.
- Create safe spaces—in and outside school—for students to talk about experiences of racism.

Support, Listen, and Care

Students highlighted the importance of emotional support and genuine listening:

- Parents should listen carefully when children share experiences of racism.
- Check in regularly about wellbeing and validate their feelings.
- Offer reassurance, advocate for them, and help them feel seen and protected.

4. What can principals and teachers do to address racism and support children?

Take Action and Don't Ignore Racism

Students repeatedly emphasised the need for immediate, visible, and serious action when racism occurs:

- Teachers and principals should act quickly and decisively, not delay or dismiss incidents.
- “Never walk past it” — address racism directly every time it happens.
- Show through actions that racism will not be tolerated in the school community.

Educate, Don't Just Punish

Many students wanted schools to focus on teaching and understanding, rather than only punishing those who behave in racist ways:

- Use racist incidents as opportunities to educate about the effects of racism and empathy.
- Encourage reflection and learning to change attitudes and behaviour.
- Provide programs, skits, or workshops to help all students understand the impact of racism.

Create Safe, Supportive, and Caring Environments

Students highlighted the importance of teachers and leaders who are approachable, caring, and consistent:

- Regular check-ins so students know someone is there for them.
- Ensure that every student feels supported, listened to, and safe.
- Demonstrate care and empathy, not just authority.

Strengthen School Policies and Systems

Students recognised the importance of clear anti-racism policies and procedures:

- Implement a “no racism” policy with clear consequences and follow-up.
- Develop systematic approaches that include all stakeholders — staff, students, and families.
- Ensure students trust the process and know incidents will be taken seriously.
- Some students suggested appointing a Cultural Inclusion (CI) staff member or similar trusted person.

Raise Awareness Across the Whole School

Students wanted racism to be discussed openly and regularly, not just in reaction to incidents:

- Include racism education in assemblies, classroom discussions, and annual programs.
- Use the school website and public platforms to show awareness and commitment.
- Create ongoing learning opportunities for both students and staff to build understanding.

Involve Students' Voices and Experiences

Students valued when principals and teachers listen to them and include them in anti-racism efforts:

- Give students space to share experiences and ideas for change.
- Involve them in designing programs and policies that reflect their lived realities.

5. What things at school help you to feel like you belong/ don't belong?

What Helps Students Feel They Belong

Friendships and Positive Relationships

- Having friends who are welcoming, accepting, and inclusive was the most common factor linked to belonging.
- Students felt they belonged when they were included in social spaces (lunch, recess) and when teachers showed care and respect.
- Knowing there were teachers or wellbeing staff they could talk to provided emotional safety and connection.

Cultural Representation and Celebration

- Students valued visible representation of diverse cultures through events and spaces such as: Harmony Day, cultural galas, cultural clothes days, multicultural rooms, and cultural committees.
- These activities made students feel seen, respected, and proud of their cultural identities.
- Celebrating diversity reinforced the message that difference is a strength.

Inclusive School Environment

- Programs and spaces that promote inclusion and wellbeing (e.g., wellbeing areas, multicultural programs, inclusive sports) made students feel supported.
- Invitations to join programs or committees made students feel valued and part of the community.

What Makes Students Feel They Don't Belong

Racism and Disrespect

- Racial comments, slurs, and 'jokes'—from both peers and teachers—were major sources of exclusion.
- Students felt especially alienated when racist behaviour went unpunished or was brushed off.
- Even “small” or “casual” comments, like being compared to refugees, had lasting impact.

Teacher Bias and Unequal Treatment

- Students described teacher favouritism or bias as making them feel unseen or devalued.
- They noticed when teachers assumed things about them or didn't understand racism or cultural difference.

Lack of Inclusion and Connection

- Feeling isolated or without friends, or when cultural events and activities were missing, contributed to unbelonging.
- Students said that when multicultural or inclusive events stopped, the sense of belonging diminished.

6. How can schools raise awareness and understanding about racism in lessons?

Teach About Racism Openly and Often

Students emphasised that racism should be a regular and visible topic in the curriculum — not just addressed once or during special events.

- Include explicit lessons explaining what racism is, how it looks, and how it affects people.
- Encourage open conversations where students can share ideas, ask questions, and reflect.
- Teachers should define racism clearly and ensure every student understands its seriousness.

Embed Anti-Racism Across Subjects

Students suggested integrating lessons on racism and cultural understanding into multiple learning areas, not just one subject:

- In HASS, research migration, cultural histories, and the experiences of different groups in Australia.
- In English, analyse texts, films, and stories that explore race and discrimination.
- In PE or Health, discuss racism in sport and its impact on mental health and belonging.

Use Creative and Interactive Approaches

Students wanted engaging and experiential learning to build empathy and understanding:

- Drama or role plays to show how racism feels and why it's harmful.
- Films, activities, and assemblies to make learning meaningful and relatable.
- Group discussions or scenario-based activities where students can explore real examples and solutions.

Highlight Cultural Diversity and Representation

Students valued lessons that celebrate all cultures and perspectives, helping everyone see themselves represented:

- Incorporate diverse voices, histories, and achievements into classroom materials.
- Use lessons to promote cultural awareness and appreciation of difference.
- Ensure all cultural groups are visible and respected across the curriculum.

Start Early and Continue Throughout School

Many students said anti-racism education should begin from early childhood and continue across year levels:

- Start teaching about respect, diversity, and fairness from Kindy onwards.
- Revisit these lessons regularly so awareness and understanding grow over time.

Create Safe Spaces for Discussion

Students wanted schools to foster safe, respectful environments for talking about race:

- Encourage “uncomfortable conversations” rather than avoiding them.
- Provide opportunities for students to speak to trusted teachers about racism.
- Use homegroup or wellbeing sessions for guided discussions that normalise talking about race.

7. What do students want schools to do if you experience or report racism?

Listen, Believe, and Care for the Student

Students' top priority was to be heard, supported, and taken seriously when they report racism.

- They want teachers and leaders to listen carefully, believe their experiences, and show genuine care.
- Immediate emotional support (time to themselves, check-ins, counselling, or a trusted adult nearby) helps them feel safe.
- Students emphasised that schools should look after the person affected first, before deciding on next steps.

Take Action — Promptly and Decisively

Students wanted schools to act quickly and visibly when racism occurs — not ignore it or delay responses.

- Take immediate steps to stop the behaviour and make it clear it's unacceptable.
- Have clear procedures or policies that guide what happens after a report.
- Ensure responses are consistent and fair, so students know racism won't be tolerated.

Educate Those Involved

Many students wanted schools to use incidents as opportunities for learning — not just punishment.

- Teach the student responsible why their actions were wrong and the impact of racism on others.
- Facilitate restorative conversations so both sides can understand harm and rebuild respect.
- Integrate education about racism into lessons and assemblies to prevent future incidents.

Apply Fair but Firm Consequences

Students agreed that racist behaviour must have real consequences, alongside education.

- Suggested responses ranged from apologies and detentions to suspensions or formal reporting.
- Some called for visible accountability, such as public apologies or assemblies addressing racism.
- Importantly, they wanted teachers held accountable too if they engage in or excuse racist behaviour.

Establish Clear School Structures and Policies

Students wanted systematic, transparent approaches to responding to racism:

- Have a school policy specifically for racism, with clear steps and accountability.
- Ensure students know who to report to — e.g., wellbeing staff or a Cultural Inclusion (CI) teacher.
- Build a culture where reporting racism is safe and not seen as “snitching”

Raise Awareness and Keep the Conversation Going

Students wanted schools to use assemblies, discussions, and education to reinforce anti-racism messages and empathy after incidents.

- Hold assemblies or class discussions to raise awareness and prevent recurrence.
- Keep racism visible as a topic rather than treating incidents as isolated problems.

Appendix 3: Resources for anti-racism in schools

School that tried to end racism

iview.abc.net.au/show/school-that-tried-to-end-racism

Useful for thinking about racial bias rather than overt racism

Marc Fennell explores a ground-breaking school program designed to provide a class of primary school students with the tools to identify racial bias and make positive change. 3 episode series. .

Teens talk....racism

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xf6vvrAlfaE

Useful for teachers/educators who want to think about enacting anti-racist practice.

This online seminar will feature the creators of the Australian High School Anti-Racism Kit, a collection of strategies, resources, and guides that offer tangible strategies to reduce racism in the self, schools and society. These recently-graduated high school students will discuss how they developed the kit, how schools and educators can best utilise it in the classroom and beyond, and their hopes for a world where it's no longer necessary.

Smile More

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ut4ESLP3sqq

UK 10 minute film about a young Black high school male who experiences racism within school. 'Smile More' follows the story of secondary school student & boxer Noah, who constantly is on the receiving end of racist bullying, especially from Martin. Noah feels like no one is in his corner.

'Smile More' is an educational resource for students and teachers that encourages conversation around racism within schools.

Good Hair: Perceptions of Racism (Award winning short film)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkmnkbVc7iM

UK 22 minute film about Black hair and racism

Let's Talk About Racism

www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyXVdit9cDc

4 min video from Australian Human Rights Commission. Describes how racism and discrimination intersect and different forms of racism in an accessible way for young people.

Many people in our community speak different languages, were born overseas, or have different cultural backgrounds – and this cultural diversity is one of our greatest strengths. This video explains why discrimination and racism are unfair, describing laws and individual responsibilities around racial discrimination.

Why are people racist? | What's Behind Prejudice? Episode 1 | BBC Ideas

www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zHr9OKfJds

5 min UK video introduced overt and covert forms of racism including discussion about use of 'n' word

Beyond Blue invisible discriminator video

emergingminds.com.au/resources/beyond-blue-invisible-discriminator-video/

Subtle or casual racism can be just as harmful as more obvious forms. Imagine not getting a job because of the way you look. How would you feel if you were watched in a shop or someone didn't want to sit next to you on the bus? Beyond Blue's Invisible Discriminator campaign highlights the impact of racism on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Race, Racism, Prejudice and Discrimination - What are they?

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jt0f5WyoAGU

5 minute US video distinguishing between racism, prejudice and discrimination

Who is Allowed to Say the N Word? - VICE Voices

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jd3TxZZvNUk

Very short US clip that problematises the history of the n word and who can use it - does not use the full n word in any part

White and wondering why you can't use the N word?

www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwMU2GOI7X0

Another interrogation of the use of the 'n' word

The N-word through history

www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Yv2BnfbUFs

A 7 minute history of the 'n' word in the US - some graphic content

The Final Quarter

thefinalquarterfilm.com.au/

Great suite of resources for schools to go with the film about Adam Goodes

Adam Goodes was a champion AFL footballer and Indigenous leader. In the final three years of his playing career he became a lightning rod for a heated public debate and widespread media commentary that divided the nation. He publicly called out racism, was named Australian of the Year, was accused of staging for free kicks, and performed an on-field war dance celebration. The cheers became boos as football crowds turned on him. Using only archival footage aired at the time, the film holds a mirror to Australia and is an opportunity to reconsider what happened on and off the football field.

Schools Standing Up To Racism

www.cmy.net.au/schools-standing-up-to-racism/

Suite of resources for schools created by the Centre for Multicultural Youth

Includes videos from students about their experiences of racism

www.cmy.net.au/schools-standing-up-to-racism/shared-understanding/

This common challenges document is quite useful too cmy.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Facilitating-Conversations-about-Racism-Navigating-Common-Challenges.pdf

Racism No Way

racismnoway.com.au/teaching-resources/

Extensive resources for teachers

The resources contained in this section have been developed to support the delivery of anti-racism and anti-prejudice education in the classroom and to assist students to engage positively with other peoples and cultures and to better understand Australia's cultural diversity.

Includes definitions of racism and distinct from racial discrimination

racismnoway.com.au/about-racism/

Zero tolerance and tackling racism restoratively

restorativejustice.org.uk/blog/zero-tolerance-and-tackling-racism-restoratively-uk-education

May be a useful resource for staff in thinking about how to respond to racism using restorative approaches

The anti-racism race

www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/education/reducing-racism-hub/anti-racism-race/

Short film from the Victoria Equal Opportunity Commission. Set in a satirical Anti-Racism game show, characters from different walks of life compete in a series of rounds on their knowledge of racism to be the most Anti-Racist person. Light-hearted with tongue-firmly-in-cheek, the film is a blend of the game show-meets-reality TV show format, where the characters are invited to share their dismay and feelings in interviews throughout the progress of the game.

Resources from the African diaspora youth belonging project

youtu.be/ksuOkI3xqak?si=8yvMPuXnxWh0frsp

This video uses a tiktok inspired format to challenge stereotypes of African diaspora students in Australia that were experienced by participants in our study.

static1.squarespace.com/static/634e3d30d0d08e2318f53412/t/65fcf31658f93526330158dd/1711076119216/The+n+word.pdf

This poem reflects African diaspora young people's experiences being exposed to uses of the 'N' word in Australian schools and issues a challenge to teachers to interrogate their use of that word.

www.africandiasporayouthbelonging.com/projectoutputs

Access to the suite of 6 video resources produced from the African diaspora youth belonging project

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