Schools as Sites of Race Relations and Intercultural Tension

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Abstract: Australia's education system endeavours to provide an environment in which students can learn in a safe and comfortable manner, free of fear of verbal or physical abuse. However, for many schools, the ability to create this safe environment has been undermined by a recent rise in society-wide intercultural tensions that inevitably permeate the school boundary. Empirical data from a national project about racism among Australian youth provides evidence that these intercultural tensions are generating an unsettling level of verbal, and in some cases, physical abuse in Australian secondary schools. These project findings inform the discussion presented in this paper that schools, as sites of intercultural relations, reflect wider societal attitudes. Nevertheless, this paper also contends that schools as microcosms of social realities have the potential to change social attitudes gradually, including those about diversity, culture and race. To do so, schools need to be supported by teacher education programs which explore the ways in which issues of race, culture and diversity can be incorporated in the content choice in school curriculum. This will influence positively the way in which graduating teachers approach diversity and inter-cultural tensions within their own classrooms and the wider school.

Introduction

Australia's education system endeavours to provide an environment in which students can learn in a safe and comfortable manner, free of fear of verbal or physical abuse.[1] However, for many schools, the ability to create this safe environment has been undermined recently by a rise in society-wide intercultural tensions that inevitably permeate the school boundary. These in-school racial tensions can lead to negative consequences for students who, either as a victim or perpetrator, experience racism at school. Given that schools establish significant conditions under which students construct and develop their identities (Giroux, 1988:88), these tensions may have an adverse impact on secondary students who are in a crucial stage of identity development and formation. Identity incorporates a complex number of components including gender, social class, aspirations and racial identity (Davis,

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[1] Evidenced at a state level by state education department policies and programs which address bullying, inclusion, safety, multiculturalism and other aspects of school life related to student wellbeing (Vic DEECD, ACT DET, NSW DET, QLD DET, NT DET, SA DECS, WA DET, Tas. DET). Practical implementation is supported through the provision of welfare, ESL and pastoral care teachers and student counselors. At a national level there are a plethora of DEEWR school programs and initiatives related to cyber bullying, disadvantaged and special needs students, student wellbeing, Indigenous students and ESL and literacy initiatives.

2007:209). The cultural and racial diversity of many Australian schools means that they are well positioned to facilitate an exploration of cultural identity while challenging racial stereotyping. However, the presence of racial tensions within the school system may serve to undermine the development of a healthy racial identity, and thereby exacerbate negative racial attitudes.

In Australia, as a result of the Federal Government's commitment to the migration program, there has been an increase in multicultural school populations and classes (den Brok & Levy, 2005:73). Many teachers now work within a multicultural context, challenging their abilities to teach students from diverse backgrounds. Simultaneously they are required to deal with associated issues pertaining to these changing educational communities. This changing school environment and educational approach has been fuelled by a 'resurgent interest in values and intercultural education' (Hiferty, 2008:61) which has taken place in Australia, New Zealand, UK and USA over the last ten years. It is argued that multiculturalism and values education are interlinked because liberal western democratic governments have responded to a sense of insecurity resulting from global immigration (Hiferty, 2008:61). As part of this response governments have returned to values education as a vehicle to aid social cohesion and contribute to a sense of community, thereby ameliorating social tensions. Teachers are now required to have even higher levels of competency in communication than were expected previously, placing extra demands on their time and energy. As teachers incorporate increasingly values-laden education into an often multicultural student community their competency levels, and the types of competencies required, are changing. These are factors which challenge teachers on an individual level, and the education system and pre-service teacher training as a whole.

Despite the quite rapid change in the diversity of student populations and the extra demands this has placed upon teachers and the curriculum, it is a reasonable expectation for students to be taught by teachers who are educated about racial and cultural issues (Mansouri, Jenkins, Morgan & Taouk, 2009). The education system, and teachers themselves, have a professional duty to respond appropriately to social change, and to develop an above average level of intercultural communication, cultural understanding and general competency in inclusive teaching.

Teachers are very influential (Villegas & Lucas, 2002:xix) not only in their role as classroom educators but as role-models for appropriate and positive inter-personal behaviour. Students' academic achievements, and their attitudes towards particular subjects, are inter-connected with how they perceive their teachers' interpersonal behaviour (Brekelmans, Wubbels & den Brok, 2002; den Brok, Brekelmans & Wubbels, 2004; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2006). Teachers' interpersonal behaviour includes their response to issues of diversity and their approach to students with diverse cultural backgrounds. The starting place for institutional and social change is the individual and while it could not be argued that 'teachers are solely responsible for transforming the educational systems' (Villegas & Lucas, 2002:xix) they do have a crucial role to play in the modification of attitudes regarding race and culture within the Australian school system. Teacher education institutions have an important role to play in this, ensuring that pre-service teachers are taught about cultural diversity, cultural sensitivities, multiculturalism and equity. In many Australian universities this type of pre-service education has been undertaken as a compulsory part of teacher education courses for many years. School principals and school management also 'have an important role to play in the battle against racism' (Ryan, 2002:158) supporting teachers in their work and themselves exhibiting culturally inclusive behaviour.

As one of the most multicultural countries in the world, Australia has committed itself to the development of an inclusive multicultural society. A considerable effort has been made to cater for minority groups and to embrace the interesting and sometimes challenging

cultural contrasts with which Australia has been presented. As a result of its unique situation as a country with 'no sizeable ethnic minorities' (Inglis, 2004:187) Australia has to cater further for a small number of students from one or more minority groups within a larger Anglo-Saxon context (Mansouri, Jenkins and Leach, 2009:106). Consequently, many Australian schools as microcosms of society, present challenging but exciting possibilities for influencing social change regarding attitudes towards diversity, culture and race.

Discourses in racism and race relations are an imperative part of the discussion of schools as settings for race relations and intercultural tensions. The intercultural tensions present in the school system are underpinned by racist attitudes which have been shaped by the changing face of globalisation. In particular, for migrants who come to Australia and enter the school system, the experience of racism is underpinned by a multiplicity of factors, all of which affect in various manners the outcome for these students. These discourses will be discussed in order to contextualise the current intercultural relations within Australian schools with particular reference to the migrant and refugee experience.

Theoretical application-discourses in racism and race relations

Racism has a multiplicity of shifting forms (Castles, 1996:20) and is intertwined with the realities of globalisation. As globalisation has changed the cultural make-up of many world communities, this in turn has changed the face of racism. Therefore, while certain ethnic and racial targets remain the same, new categories of ethnic groups have emerged to challenge the traditional white/black schema of racism. This has particular relevance to the Australian context where the traditional schema of black/white has been challenged by the influx of people from a multiplicity of countries. The large number of ethnic minorities within the Australian community creates an educational system which is a complex social site for intercultural relations requiring a unique educational approach.

Racism is a complex issue as it can be an accumulated and often contradictory set of assumptions by which people understand and cope with the social worlds in which they live (Castles). However, these assumptions can be deleterious and can consequently 'adversely affect … individuals and communities of colour by impeding their optimal growth and functioning' (Constantine & Sue, 2006:3). In the cultural mix of the school environment intercultural tensions may lead to adverse consequences for students, via verbal and physical racial abuse. Australian schools, presided over by predominantly white administration and with a predominantly white, middle-class teaching staff, have the potential to replicate social expressions of 'institutionalised patterns of white power and social control' (Bowser & Hunt, 1996). This white power and social control, intertwined with the potential for an uneven distribution of resources and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) may create an environment which is detrimental for the development of students from minority groups.

Racism in Western émigré societies is often linked to the societal experiences of migrants and their ethnic communities. Discourses concerning the social experiences of migrant groups show how migrants 'mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place' (Clifford, 1997:255). Migrant and refugee students with traumatic backgrounds may find upon entering the Australian educational system, that their prior experiences of racism and subjugation are replicated on a minor scale within this new system. Their desire to return to the place of their birth may be challenged by the memories of the trauma they suffered there. This phenomenon of 'double consciousness' (Gilroy, 1993:10) is exacerbated if the individual or group of displaced people is subject to violence or other forms of social exclusion.

An overarching theory that informs the migrant and refugee perspective is the notion of 'imagined communities'. This constructs belonging as an imagined value that determines how a community coheres (Anderson, 1983:15). Further, racism 'plays a crucial role in consolidating nation-states, by providing an instrument for defining belonging or exclusion' (Castles, 1996:31). In the Australian context this sense of belonging or exclusion may emerge as a disavowal of migrant, refugee and Indigenous presence by white Australians and may be the basis for an underlying racism. In effect, 'white multiculturalism cannot admit to itself that migrants and Aboriginal people are actually eroding the centrality of white people in Australia' (Hage, 1998:22).

For white Australians who have experienced such loss, it is argued that they have no mainstream political language with which to express themselves, hence they project and displace their fears and anxieties onto a particular social group. As a consequence, Indigenous people, migrants and refugees become scapegoats and are thereby subject to racism and resentment by mainstream Australia. This 'scapegoating' may be replicated in the school system, manifesting in school yard and classroom racial vilification. This thereby denies the migrant and refugee students a sense of belonging and exacerbates the sense of exclusion.

Language practice provides a means by which to further migrants' sense of exclusion as it is 'through language practices, both in formal and informal talk, that relations of power, dominance and exploitation become reproduced and legitimated' (Augoustinos & Reynolds, 2001:10). In the school system language is an important tool for intercultural relations, providing a means by which students from a diverse range of backgrounds communicate. Unfortunately it can also be a means by which students assert their power, dominance or superiority over students from varying backgrounds from their own. On an informal level this may be via verbal assault such as racial name-calling, taunts and put-downs. On a formal level it may be via teachers and administrators, who demonstrate racially and culturally insensitive teaching practices. Curriculum is also a form of language which can perpetuate power, dominance and superiority through the inclusion and exclusion of particular topics and activities.

How formal and informal talk reveals the hegemonic power of a dominant group is a key element of 'Critical Race Theory', which can also be used as a lens through which to analyse the discourse of whiteness. It is argued that a normalisation of race and racism has taken place because these attitudes and behaviours have become an ingrained part of social interaction (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001:7). Within the Australian school system, where the majority of teachers, administrators and students are 'white', whiteness can be seen as the 'norm' and non-white skin colour as the 'other'. This positioning of white as 'normal' can encourage intercultural relations in which race and racism are 'normalised' and viewed as an inevitable part of the daily existence for students. The effect of these social changes on the Australian educational system, and their impact upon inter-cultural relations within schools, has far wider reaching effects than just within the school grounds. If racism becomes 'normalised' and racist behaviour and attitudes become an ingrained part of the school system, Australia's ability to move forward as a harmonious, inclusive and advanced society is jeopardised. This poses the question as to whether Australian schools have become institutions where racism is 'normalised', and if so, what are schools doing to bring about whole-school change.

Empirical data

Against this background of society-wide inter-cultural tensions, a national project which investigated the impact of racism on the health and wellbeing of young Australians was conducted. The key objectives of the project were:

- to examine the experiences of racism for young people in Australia of mainstream (English-speaking background), Indigenous, migrant and refugee backgrounds;
- to investigate how young people in Australia report and respond to racism; and
- to explore the attitudes of mainstream youth in relation to key issues in contemporary race relations, such as cultural diversity, tolerance and privilege

Eighteen Australian secondary schools were involved in the study with a total of 823 student participants. Of these eighteen schools, fifteen were involved in survey and interview tasks, whilst three schools were involved in the interview component only. A total of 823 secondary students took part, 125 were interviewed on an individual basis and 698 students participated in the survey component. Survey participants were recruited from Australian secondary schools as follows:

- Victoria (41.1%)
- New South Wales (39.4%)
- Queensland (14.3%)
- Northern Territory (5.2%)

The breakdown of survey participants was:

- 39.3% (274) males and 55.2% (385) females
- age range: 12–19 years
- average age: 15.37 years

The majority of survey participants were classified as being in the middle years, levels 9 and 10 (48.9%), while those in the senior years, levels 11 and 12, represented 41.1% of the overall sample. Only 5.4% were from the junior years (year levels 7 and 8). In line with the study's approach and objectives, participants indicated a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, with 60 different countries being listed as a place of birth. However the majority of the survey participants were born in Australia (69.9%).

The ethnic and cultural breakdown is set out in Figure 1. By far the majority of participants were Anglo-Saxon Australian born with migrants being the second largest group and refugees and Indigenous Australians respectively making up a small percentage of overall participants.

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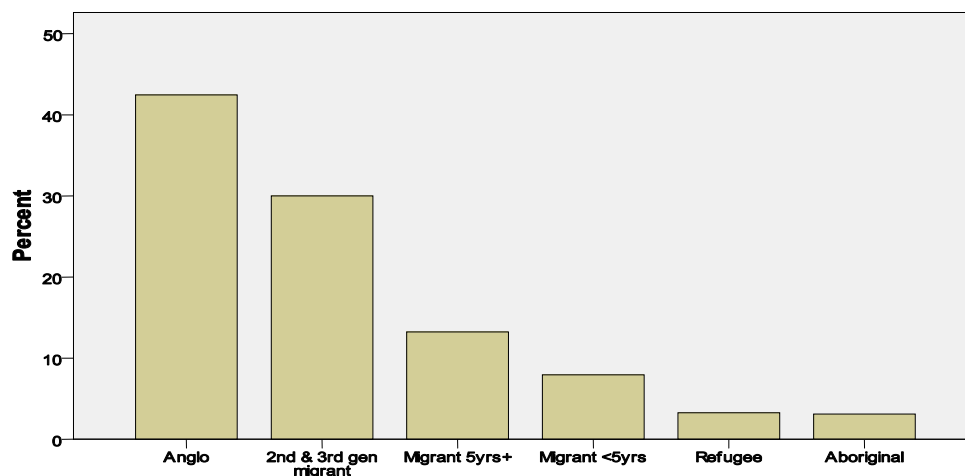
Figure 1: Participants' background

- The data relating to religious background indicated that:
- 43.8% were Christian
- 25.6% did not identify with a religion
- 10.9% were affiliated with a religion which was not specified in the survey choices
- 8.3% were Muslim
- 5.9% were Buddhist

The project implemented a mixed methodology approach that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods. Although the project originally aimed to use a random sampling methodology, the most realistic strategy was that of a purposeful approach. This approach ensured that the data was representative of the wider population, as much as possible, with the following key variables taken into consideration when finalising the selection and recruitment of participating schools and students:

- population distribution and density per state/territory
- population distribution per local government area (LGA)
- level of diversity per state
- level of diversity per LGA
- proportional representation of urban and non-urban LGAs
- weighting of the data pool in terms of the state population

Despite these methodological considerations, the reality of the project implementation meant that factors such as the level of diversity per state or LGA became less important than the preparedness of a school to participate in this study. School-teachers and school administration staff are often under a great deal of time-pressure, and consequently many schools declined to take part in the study. Hence, the full consideration of the variables was at times impractical as some schools that met the selection criteria were not able to overcome practical and logistical difficulties.

The survey was constructed to enable cross-tabulation of results in order to facilitate an analysis of data across various sections (occurrence; settings; response; reporting). A summary of the project design is shown in Table 1.

Method	Surveys	Interviews
Data sources	15 government and Catholic secondary schools	18 government and Catholic secondary schools
Total number of participants	698	125

Table 1: Summary of project design

The participation of government and Catholic schools across states is shown in Table 2. By far the majority of participants were in Victoria (41.1%) and New South Wales (39.4%), with a smaller percentage (14.3%) participating in Queensland and only 5.2 % in the Northern Territory.

		Number	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	VIC	287	41.1	41.1	41.1
	NSW	275	39.4	39.4	80.5
	QLD	100	14.3	14.3	94.8
	NT	36	5.2	5.2	100.0
	Total	698	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Number of participants by state

Table 3 indicates the type of school, government or Catholic, which participated in each state. In all, 3 Catholic schools participated, one each in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. The highest number of participating government schools was in Victoria (6) with 4 in New South Wales, 3 in Queensland and 2 in the Northern Territory.

School Type	VIC	NSW	QLD	NT
Catholic	1	1	1	-
Government – inner urban	3	1	1	3
Government – outer urban	2	2	-	-
Number of schools within State	6	4	2	3
GRAND TOTAL for the study	15 schools (for the survey component)			

Table 3: Distribution and type of school by state

Survey

The survey was designed to elicit quantitative responses in relation to the frequency of racism, the settings, the victim's response, to whom the victims reported the incident and the impact upon their health and wellbeing. The survey also provided the opportunity for open-ended responses, which could yield some useful qualitative insights. The first part of the survey was in chart form and required the participant to respond to eleven questions regarding various racist experiences. The participant had to identify whether or not they had experienced the particular racist incident. If the response was 'no' they moved to the next question. If their answer was 'yes', they had experienced that particular racist incident, they then responded to a series of questions regarding:

- the frequency of the racist experience
- where the racist experience occurred
- to whom the racist incident was reported, if at all

- how they responded personally and what were the impacts of this racist experience

The second part of the survey consisted of a six-level Likert scale that elicited responses about the participants' level of agreement with several statements regarding cultural diversity, racism and white privilege. Students were also asked to describe how their school responded to racist behaviour. In addition they were asked to specify their racial background and country of birth. A series of open-ended questions followed, which provided opportunities for more extended responses on particular racist incidents or related attitudes and personal accounts.

The final section included a five-level Likert scale regarding the participant's sense of calm, level of energy and feelings of sadness. This was extended by a question regarding the sense of their general health and level of anxiety.

Interviews

The interview process required approximately ten student participants from each participating school. The interview questions had two aims: the first was to elicit information about the participant's experience of racism, their responses and feelings regarding the incident, the impact on their health and wellbeing and the implications of this for schoolwork and social relationships. The second section aimed to investigate the school experience itself, the participant's perceptions about racism within the school, the manner in which the school responded to the racist experiences, and the participant's own suggestions about ways in which they could contribute, on a personal basis, to a harmonious multicultural school environment.

Findings
Frequency of racism

The project findings relate specifically to the settings for racism, the frequency of the racism and to whom the participants reported the racism. These factors are particularly important in the discussion of schools as sites for intercultural relations and their potential as vehicles of change regarding attitudes about diversity, culture and race.

Settings

Participants were asked to identify the settings for the racist behaviour. The majority of participants reported that the bulk of their racist experiences occurred in the school classroom, grounds, oval or sporting areas. The quantitative data found this overwhelmingly so, with 66.7% reporting that racist experiences take place in school, 20.9% in the media 5.9% at work and 0.3% in government agencies. Whilst the qualitative data supported this finding generally, Indigenous interviewees indicated that they experience racist equally both at school and out in the wider community. These variations between the quantitative and the qualitative sets of data may be accounted for by the small number of Indigenous participants, both in the survey (20) and interview (9) process.

Frequency

In the survey the students were asked to respond to eleven racist scenarios indicating whether they had:

- Been called an offensive slang name for your cultural group?
- Been the target of racist jokes, songs, or teasing?
- Heard or read comments stereotyping your cultural group?
- Seen pictures that portray your cultural group in a poor light?
- Been verbally abused (including offensive gestures) because of your cultural background?
- Felt excluded or left out because of your cultural background?
- Felt that people avoid you because of your cultural background?
- Felt that people treated you as less intelligent, or inferior because of your cultural background?
- Been refused entry or use of a service because of your cultural background?
- Been refused employment because of your cultural background?
∞ Been treated with suspicion because of your cultural background?

Table 4 details the number of participants who indicated that they had experienced, witnessed or been involved in an act of racism. It is important to note that this question also encompasses those participants who were perpetrators of racism, as well as participants who have been victims of racism. Therefore this measure is looking at the overall exposure of the sample to any type of racist knowledge, behaviour or attitude.

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Yes	399	57.2	75.1	75.1
	No	132	18.9	24.9	100.0
	Total	531	76.1	100.0	
Missing	System	167	23.9		
Total		698	100.0		

Table 4: Number of participants who have witnessed or been involved in racism

A key finding of the study indicated that 70.1% of participants had experienced at least one of these 11 racist behaviours, whilst only 29.2% indicated they had not been subjected to any such incidents. Further to this, the majority of the racist incidents were experienced on an occasional basis. Also, for all eleven forms of racism, it was found that the majority of participants decided to take no action rather than choosing confrontation or seeking help.

Figure 2 presents the frequencies and percentages of participants who have, or have not, experienced racism. In this graph participants are grouped according to their background. The results show that there is a strong similarity for the experience of racism for all migrant groups. That is, 80% of all participants from all groups of migrants reported that they had experienced racism. This level was lower for Indigenous Australians, 63.2% of whom reported that they had experienced racism. Once again it should be noted that only twenty Indigenous participants completed the survey, so this finding should be interpreted with caution. Anglo-Saxon Australians reported the lowest frequency of racist experience, 54.6%.
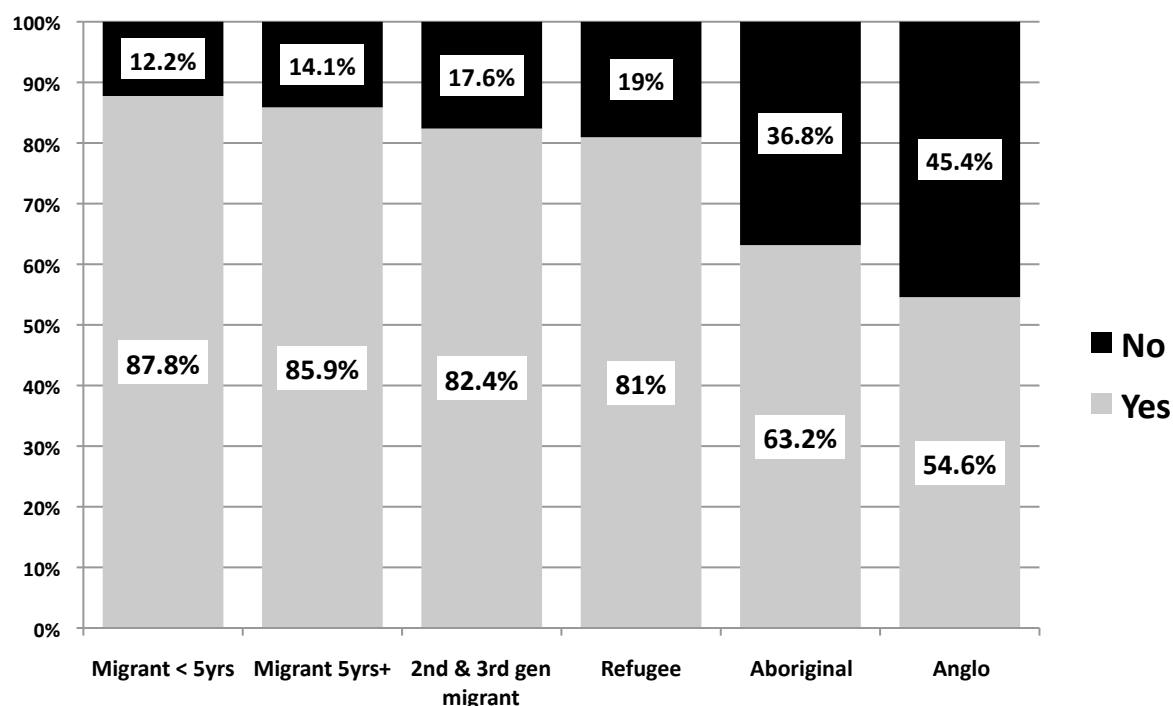
Figure 2: Participants, according to background, who have experienced racism

Reporting of racism

Survey participants were asked to identify to whom they reported the racist experience. In the survey they were given the option of a teacher, counsellor, health professional or police. By far the majority of participants who reported the incident, reported it to a teacher, 52%, followed by 31.7% to a school counsellor, 12% to the police and 4.2% to a health professional. A troubling aspect of this data was that for all eleven forms of racism, the majority of participants reported that they took 'no action' in relation to the racist experience far more so than they chose to confront the perpetrator or to seek help.

The alignment of the quantitative data with the qualitative data, indicated that the most common person to whom interviewees reported racist behaviour, if they did so, was a teacher. Teachers were chosen for consultation and reporting even when the racist experience had not occurred in school. However, both the quantitative and qualitative data also indicated that many students do not officially report the racism, they merely confide the incident to friends from whom they seek solace and comfort. This was a troubling result as whilst friends can be an excellent source of comfort, young students are not mature, experienced or educated enough to deal appropriately with a friend who is temporarily distressed or suffering ongoing trauma from racism. This is particularly so if the racism is regular and is causing issues for the student victim in relation to school attendance, family communication and the development of identity and sense of self.

School response

The findings relating to the response of schools to racism were sourced from the qualitative data. The interview participants were asked to respond to the following two questions:

- how does your school deal with racist incidents?
- who would you talk to at school about racist incidents?

The interview situation provided time and a comfortable space in which the participants could give details about their perception of the school's response to the racism.

On a general level schools took either a positive preventative approach or had ongoing policies in place to deal with issues with intercultural relations as they arose. Some schools incorporated both approaches. The third approach was to 'turn a blind eye' and do nothing. This latter approach was troubling, although whether or not the school was 'turning a blind' eye seemed to be dependent upon who was being interviewed. Some students within the same schools had starkly different opinions about the success or not, of the school's approach to dealing with racism, however, it was generally conveyed by interviewees that 'people should know where the boundaries are' (Akoch, a Sudanese boy). This indicated a desire for schools to be clear about expectations for both behaviour and consequences, and to not 'turn a blind eye'.

Positive, preventative measures included 'welcoming' programs in which parents of new migrant and refugee students were given a tour of the school, provided with a translator if required and made to feel very welcome. The sense of being 'welcome' was extended to the student by the provision of ongoing assistance and support by teaching staff. One student described the ongoing support 'the school's been nice with our parents and the school helps the family with their EA [Education Allowance] and stuff like that' (Akoch). Zemar, an Afghani boy, explained the influence of teachers upon the welcoming process 'the teachers are very good, they welcome us all'. The teacher's response has a two-fold effect; their behaviour created a sense of belonging for the students whilst at the same time role-modelling appropriate modes of behaviour for other students within the school. This thereby helped to engender a positive attitude towards migrant and refugee students in the school.

Part of the preventative approach adopted by some schools was to implement units of work which deal with diversity, race and culture. This was generally done at years nine and ten as part of social science programs. Programs may include discussions relating to identity, race, culture, multiculturalism and religion. Several schools had taken this proactive and positive approach, and the students who were interviewed at these schools demonstrated attitudes which were comparatively more culturally and racially aware and sensitive.

If the preventative measures were not fully successful, and there were issues with racism, some schools with preventative programs also incorporated ongoing policies which usually included punitive procedures. These schools made it a policy that racism was unacceptable and developed a series of consequences for students who chose to ignore this policy. Via this anti-racist approach, students were made aware of the punishments, which ranged from being 'reprimanded' to ongoing consultation to suspension and then expulsion. Several students spoke about the manner in which teachers would talk the incident through with students and endeavour to get both sides of the story. At one school the students had to write down their version of events as a means to ensure that their version was recorded accurately. Also, it was no doubt a means by which to allow the student to feel they had been heard. Akoch explained the initial process for racism at his school 'they take it really seriously. I got into trouble for being racist to someone and they told me if you be racist again we're gonna call your parents and we're going to call you up after school…they gave me a warning…' Further inappropriate behaviour led to a series of punishments such as those outlined above.

Ready availability of teachers, student welfare coordinators, ESL teachers and school counsellors provided a sense of support and comfort for students who had been racially abused or assaulted. These trained professionals were able to discuss the situation with both the victim and the perpetrator, ensuring that everyone had a voice and the event recorded in

written form. These staff also took action to alert administration as appropriate, ensuring that a proper process of communication was completed. Further work usually involved communication with parents of both victim and perpetrator, the provision of ongoing counselling as required and if appropriate, ongoing support for both the victim and the perpetrator.

Peer mediation was a standard element of some participating schools. Particular students were chosen to undertake training in mediation skills, which they then applied to the school yard. Issues which arose within the student body at recess and lunchtime could be taken to these peer mediators for discussion, with the hope that the peer mediators would be able to suggest action which would solve the situation. If the situation could not be solved in a successful manner through this process the peer mediators would then take the issue to a teacher. This enabled inappropriate behaviour, such as racism, to be dealt with efficiently. This process engendered a greater sense of independence for the students and a defined sense of ownership of the problems. A by-product of the training was that some students were given a greater understanding about diversity, race and culture which was then passed on to other students *via* the peer mediation program. Peer mediation has a particular rationale in which the agenda is youth-based rather than adult-based (Meade, Barry & Rowel, 2006). In this way the students are more likely to engage with the program. The school-based peer mediation programs at schools which participated in the project empowered the students and gave them a sense of ownership over the issues, which sometimes included racism. Finally, some schools were very proactive in positive approaches such as:

- harmony day
- international day
- creating social opportunities for students to come together following racially motivated disputes 'Like two years ago Arabs fought islanders…it became a racist thing… After punishment they had a barbeque together'
- encouraging particular racial groups to have their own parent or student social groups within the school
- allocating a particular room or space for the use of ESL students only-this gave these students a sense of being special and valued

Discussion

As sites of intercultural relations, and as microcosms of society, the schools which participated in the project provided a first- hand account of the frequency of racist behaviour among youth, the setting for the racism, how the racism is reported and how schools are responding to these incidents. Evidence has been provided that there are negative inter-cultural relations in schools that are generating an unsettling level of verbal, and in some cases, physical abuse. These inter-cultural tensions are a reflection of society wide inter-cultural tensions that inevitably have permeated school boundaries.

The levels of experience of racism reported in the project were of concern, with 70% of participants indicating that they had experienced racism as either a victim or perpetrator. This, coupled with the significant difference between the two major racial/cultural groups, indicated that a large percentage of migrant youth (over 80%) had experienced racism compared to 54.6 per cent of Anglo-Saxon Australian born youth. This further indicates that schools, as microcosms of society, have challenges to overcome in regard to intercultural relations.

A majority of participants (66.7%) reported that their racist experience/s took place in school, a finding which has significant implications for schools as compulsory education

environments. This compulsory education system endeavours to provide an environment in which students can learn in a safe and comfortable manner, free of fear of verbal or physical attack. Schools are critical places for student development, maturation, identity development, socialisation and formal education:

> Schools are places of great influence, both on individuals and the community in general. As a partial reflection of society, schools contribute to an overall understanding of social structure, attitudes and changes (Mansouri, Jenkins & Leach, 2009: 109).

This particular finding indicates that many schools are still working towards the provision of an environment free from the fear of verbal and physical attack. Further, there appears to be some way to go before schools are able to claim they are providing an environment in which the establishment of identity for students from all backgrounds is supported by a harmonious multicultural community. This should be an aim for all Australian secondary schools.

The importance of schools as potential drivers of change regarding intercultural relations is further supported by the data about the reporting of racist experiences. A majority of participants who reported the racism reported it to a teacher (52%), and this was irrespective of whether or not the racism occurred in the school or elsewhere. Further, another 31.7% of participants reported the racism to a school counsellor, often a teacher with further counselling training. The influence and importance of teachers is apparent in these results, particularly as participants spoke to teachers about their racist experience even when the setting for these experiences was not the school. Teachers played a supportive role and a counselling role to facilitate change in the behaviour of the perpetrators of racism. If schools are to lead positive change in attitudes about diversity, culture and race, teachers must be involved at the ground level. The research indicated teachers are a vital and significant part of students' lives and that they play an important role as counsellors, thereby providing a crucial support system for many students.

The data concerning the responses of schools to racist behaviour indicated that there are essentially three approaches; a whole-school preventative approach, an ongoing policy and practice approach and a 'turn a blind eye' approach. Whilst the project did not seek to gather comparative data about the responses of schools and the level of success of their programs and policies, the qualitative data suggested that those schools which took a whole-school preventative approach with a positive outlook were the most successful in dealing with racism. Having a policy is not enough as policies can 'sink without a trace' (Aveling, 2007: 81), remain unread , become unlocatable or 'rarely make it into the everyday routines of schools' (Leeman, 2003:37). Producing the policy is the easy part of the process (Blair, 2002:184), but a directed and focussed effort is required to implement the policy, as well as a multifaceted approach. Schools which were the most successful in reducing and addressing racist behaviour had all, or some, of the following elements:

- a well-facilitated initiation program in place to welcome new students from migrant and refugee backgrounds which included the access to a translator and an ongoing process by which the new student's progress both academically and socially was regularly monitored
- the implementation of curriculum which explored race, culture and diversity, usually at the year nine and ten level
- peer mediation which sought to assist with school-yard bullying and issues pertaining to racist behaviour
- a well understood and disseminated policy and practice regarding the consequences of racist behaviour for students-this usually included a punitive process for perpetrators of racism

- a well-supported team of teachers and other staff who were not only prepared to talk to students about their experiences but who followed up by implementing school policies regarding action against perpetrators, and support for the victims
- a positive ongoing approach to diversity which incorporated the celebration of harmony day, international days, barbeques which brought people of the same or different cultures together, sporting programs which encouraged team work among students of different cultures, the implementation of support programs for parents from specific racial groups

Conclusion

As stated previously, Australia's education system endeavours to provide an environment in which students can learn in a safe and comfortable manner, free of fear of verbal or physical abuse. The empirical data indicates that for many secondary schools, the ability to create this safe environment has been undermined by a rise in society-wide intercultural tensions that inevitably permeate the school boundary. Of the 823 participants in the project, 70% stated that they had experienced racism, whilst of the students from non-Anglo-Saxon backgrounds, 80% indicated that they had experienced racism. Anglo-Saxon students indicated that they suffered from racism, though not to the same extent as students from non-Anglo-Saxon backgrounds. Overwhelmingly racism appears to be prevalent in Australian secondary schools and affects students from all cultural backgrounds. However, the qualitative data supported the proposition that whilst schools do have issues with racist behaviour and attitudes, they also have the potential to change gradually student behaviour and attitudes regarding diversity, culture and race.

Schools which were dealing successfully with their diverse student populations were able to do so through positive preventative measures which incorporated ongoing policy regarding racist behaviour. This incorporated a 'whole-school' approach and often included classroom materials which discussed and explored diversity, race and culture. Part of the push for values education in Australia (National Framework for Values Education) has paved the way for the introduction of across-the-board curriculum which addresses cultural diversity, intercultural relations, multiculturalism and identity. The Australian climate is conducive to whole-school approaches to racism, culture and inclusivity, underpinned by the belief that diversity is a positive element of the school system. This transition would reflect an international trend to values education, whereby there is a huge effort to incorporate matters such as civics, citizenship, character education, ethics and values education as a means by which societies attempt to cope with, among other matters, racism and terrorism (Lovat & Toomey, 2007:2).

A successful transition to schools which embrace diversity will necessitate the commitment of school administration, teaching staff and students as 'successfully teaching students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds...involves more than just applying specialized teaching techniques. It demands a new way of looking at teaching that is grounded in an understanding of the role of culture and language in learning' (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). This new way of looking at teaching needs to be driven by teacher training courses which are well positioned to influence and broaden teachers' attitudes towards race, culture and diversity. These courses can also influence the future content choices that pre-service teachers make about classroom materials which will nurture an inclusive school environment and assist in the prevention of inappropriate behaviours and intercultural tensions. Australian schools need to undertake these types of preventative and inclusive measures to enable a broader change in behaviours and attitudes across society. The attitudes

and behaviours which young students learn at school will carry over into their adulthood; some of these young people will become leaders and influential people within Australian society, thereby increasing their potential to nurture positive cultural and racial attitudes. Schools are well-positioned to engender positive attitudes towards diversity, culture and race, thereby encouraging and facilitating social change which embraces our multicultural Australian way of life.

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