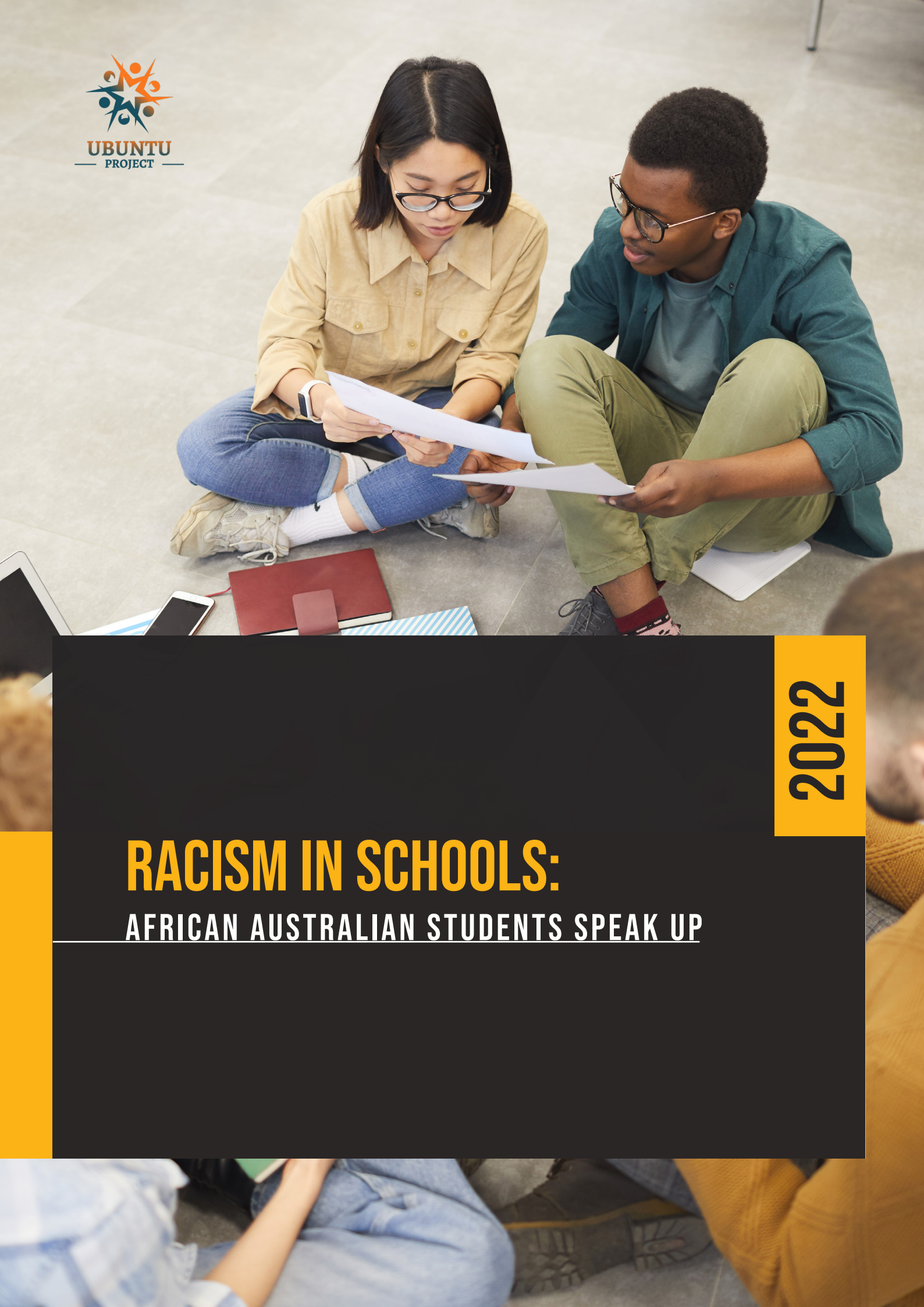


UBUNTU
PROJECT

2022

RACISM IN SCHOOLS:

AFRICAN AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS SPEAK UP



Ubuntu Project wishes to acknowledge the people of the Wurundjeri land that this report was prepared and printed on. We pay respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

> **Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences..**
>
> *(Miranda Fricker, Power and the Ethics of Knowing, Oxford Scholarship Online, 2007, p.2)*

This research report has been prepared by Dr Zuleika Arashiro, Yuimaru Partnerships.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We at the Ubuntu Project believe that education and our schools play a central role in our joint efforts to build genuinely safe communities where we learn and advance. We must acknowledge, however, that currently this is not the reality for many Victorian students from an African background.

Through our work with young people and parents, we regularly hear complaints about discrimination within schools coming from those in authority positions. Unlike racism amongst students, this form of discrimination is much harder to respond to.

This research was developed to provide a more solid basis for a conversation on how to tackle institutional racism in schools.

Done in collaboration with a researcher, and with inputs from experts, we documented real stories we have heard from former and current students who have attended a range of schools across Melbourne, and investigated whether there were similarities amongst them.

In addition to focus groups, we ran an online survey with current high school students and recent graduates. The combined data presented here shows that for many African Australian young people in Melbourne, schools have been a place of anxiety and frustration, where they learn to expect injustice, and lack of accountability, with a different set of rules applied to them as 'African kids'.

We value government programs such as the Department of Education and Training's Bully Stoppers, which includes racist bullying. Still full implementation and change in institutional culture demand more concerted action. Based on the feedback received from the participants in this research, and the Ubuntu Project's experiences working with young people, we recommend that the Victorian Government:



4. Create incentives to increase the hiring of teachers and administrators of diverse ethnic backgrounds, including African Australians, as part of the education system overall.

5. Empower African Liaison Officers to conduct their work with full independence from schools' authorities, including in regard to funding, and implement clear mechanisms to assess racism complaints and communicate outcomes to the victims.

6. Support community groups to conduct information sessions for parents about the school system, including rights of children, and pathways towards university.

7. Support initiatives that raise awareness of human rights, including complaint mechanisms

We would like to emphasise that many teachers and administrators play a positive role in the lives of African Australian students and when genuinely supportive, they can have a transformative impact on many lives. This report is not a generalised criticism of our educators, or of those who denounce injustice and try to make a difference. Still there are many abuses that happen and go hidden in a system that lacks safe mechanisms for reporting. We aspire for the day when good educators will be valued and be the golden standard in our education, with proper systems to hold accountable those who, through action or silence, allow racism to go unchecked in schools.

INTRODUCTION:
WHY THIS REPORT?

An argument starts in class. The boys are teasing two African Muslim girls about the Black Lives Matter movement, repeating 'all lives matter'. The teacher seems to not know about the movement, and just says 'we are all the same'. He tells one of the girls that she shouldn't yell and be distractive. The girls are really upset. One of them begins to cry, and asks the teacher to go to the bathroom 'to breath.' The teacher replies 'breath inside,' and does not allow her to go out to calm down. After class, the girl who cried is kept after hours for disruptive behaviour, but all boys are allowed to leave.



AS THIS STORY IS SHARED IN OUR FOCUS GROUP SESSION, ONE PARTICIPANT ADDS, 'WHY EVERY TIME WE GET INTO AN ARGUMENT, WHY DOES THE PERSON WHO IS MORE VULNERABLE GETS HELD BACK, WHILE THE PERSON WHO STARTED IT [CAUSED THE ARGUMENT] LEAVE?'

We at the Ubuntu Project believe that education and our schools play a central role in our joint effort to build genuinely safe communities where we learn and advance. We aspire for the day when from a very young age, all children can experience what a fair go is and embrace it as a shared value. We must acknowledge, however, that currently this is not the reality for many Victorian students from an African background.

Through our work with young people and parents, we have regularly heard complaints about discrimination in schools coming from those in authority positions (teachers, coordinators, and principals). Unlike racism amongst students, this form of discrimination is much harder to respond to. The power imbalance between students and authorities in schools, and experiences of seeing those who complain being 'over monitored,' create a reasonable fear of speaking up amongst students and parents. Perhaps for this reason, when racism in schools is discussed in Australia, initiatives tend to focus more on student education than on the attitudes of those who hold authority within institutions.

We acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have faced institutional racism for many decades. In this report we focus on African Australians as they reflect our own lived experience, but we hope to work together with all those who cannot afford ignoring racism.

The Ubuntu Project team knows what racism in schools feels like. We have grown up and attended schools in Melbourne, and cannot avoid our disappointment when we see the strong similarities between the discrimination we experienced decades ago, and what African Australian students are living now.

[1] *This report used the term "African Australians" to refer to those who were either born in an African country and made Australia home, or were born in Australia but have ancestors from an African country.*

In previous attempts to bring this issue up to policy makers, we faced attempts to dismiss the cases as an isolated problem or reduced to a few individuals, instead of being recognised as a systemic issue. As it happens in many situations of injustice, in the case of institutional racism too the burden of proving that the testimonies are legitimate has fallen upon the most vulnerable side.

It was the need to provide a more solid basis for a conversation on how to tackle institutional racism in schools that lead us to do this report. Done in collaboration with a researcher, and with inputs from experts, we documented real stories we have heard from former and current students who have attended a range of schools across Melbourne, and investigated whether there were similarities amongst them.

This research shows that racism in schools and from schools deserves policy attention. We hope government and educators will make a commitment to promote a safe learning environment for all our children and young people, regardless of their skin colour, religion, or place of birth.

We would like to emphasise that many teachers and administrators play a positive role in the lives of African Australian students and when genuinely supportive, they can have a transformative impact on many lives. This report is not a generalised criticism of our educators, or of those who denounce injustice and try to make a difference. Still there are many abuses that happen and go hidden in a system that lacks safe mechanisms for reporting. We aspire for the day when good educators will be valued and be the golden standard in our education, with proper systems to hold accountable those who, through action or silence, allow racism to go unchecked in schools.

We would like to suggest to our readers that, as you go through this report, you make pauses and consider the questions, 'If that young person was my son, my daughter, my siblings, what would I think? How would I feel or react?' Sometimes it takes a simple step like that to begin to understand what racism feels like.

WHAT
OTHER STUDIES SAY

Studies in Australia have pointed out the links between racism and the health and social outcomes for those who experience it, showing that racism not only impacts people's mental wellbeing but when persistently endured, can generate social disconnection, decision to leave school before completion, and higher risk of being caught into the justice system, amongst other consequences.[2]

Schools, as a fundamental space of socialisation, are often cited as a place where young people see and experience racism. The 2017 Speak Out Against Racism survey with students and school staff in New South Wales and Victoria, offers many insights into the complexity of looking at racism in schools. The majority of respondents were from an Anglo-Celtic or European background. Those who identified as African background comprised 3% of the respondents, and those who identified as Muslims, 5%. The survey analysis revealed that: [3]

- "More than half (60%) of the participants reported seeing other students being racially discriminated against by their peers. This included being left out, teased or treated with less respect by other students. Students from South Asian background (74%) and African background (68%) reported witnessing the highest levels of racial discrimination being directed towards students by other students.

- Nearly half (43%) of students reported seeing incidents of racial discrimination directed towards other students by teachers. The highest levels of vicarious racism were reported by students from Pacific Islander/Maori backgrounds (71%)."

Different from our findings, the majority of students in the Speak Out Again Racism study (63%) found that teachers were good at dealing with racist incidents. This suggests that with leadership, there might be genuine commitment from educators to transform the situation within schools. In supporting that work, VicHealth's school-based audit tool should be considered, as it is evidence informed and developed specifically to guide internal audits in our schools.[4]

[2] For a good summary and research references, see VicHealth 2014, Racism and its links to the health of children and young people. Research highlights. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne. *https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/~/media/resourcecentre/publicationsandresources/discrimination/vh_racism-and-child-health_factsheet.pdf?la=en*

[3] N Priest, S Chong, M Truong, M Sharif, K Dunn, Y Paradies, J Nelson, O Alam, A Ward and A Kavanagh 2019. Findings from the 2017 Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR) student and staff surveys. Summary. Centre for Social Research and Methods, The Australian National University Canberra, p.2 *https://csrm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2019/8/Summary_of_findings_2017_SOAR_student_and_staff_surveys_0.pdf*

[4] VicHealth 2015, Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD). School-based audit tool, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne. *https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/programs-and-projects/localities-embracing-and-accepting-diversity*



One of the issues that we were aware of was the need to consider gender and race when examining racism. Crenshaw, Ocen and Nanda's work,[5] conducted in the United States, provided strong evidence of how those two dimensions intersect to place African American girls in situations that are often overlooked. We could not identify any Australian study that has applied intersectionality to examine discrimination in schools. However, as we will see below, the findings from this research suggest that such analysis is needed. Racism, sexism, religious prejudice, and the common assumption that girls are more mature and will do better than boys, make invisible the mental pressure that many young Muslim women from African background have to deal with.

[5] K. Crenshaw, P. Ocen, and J. Nanda 2015. Black Girls Matter: Pushed out, overpoliced and underprotected. Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies and African American Policy Forum, New York *https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/BlackGirlsMatter_Report.pdf*

METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

This report relies on data collected through focus groups, and an online survey conducted in Melbourne between 2020 and 2021.

The researcher was responsible for the design of the research, and controlled all data, including the survey. The Ubuntu Project was responsible for recruiting participants for the focus groups, and co-facilitated sessions with the researcher. The sessions were separated by gender, and included online sessions during the lockdown, and face-to-face sessions held in North Melbourne once the lockdown was over.

The Ubuntu Project distributed the survey link through its network, and organised a prize draw for survey participants. Since recruitment for this research relied substantially on the Ubuntu Project's staff and networks, and considering their strong presence in the northern suburbs, we expected a higher participation from that geographical area in the research.

The data analysis and report writing were the researcher's responsibility. The Ubuntu Project team and invited experts provided feedback.

Table 1. Data collection

Qualitative data	**Four focus groups, un-structured, 90 minutes each, divided into:** Online (Zoom platform) **FG 1:** Five young men who have already graduated from high school. **FG 2:** : Four young women who have already graduated from high school. **Face-to-face:** **FG 3:** Four young men, three of them still in high school, and one 2020 graduate). **FG 4:** Four young women (two in high school, two 2020 graduates)
Quantitative data	Online survey targeting African Australian high school students in Melbourne, or recent graduates (last five years), 76 valid responses.

The survey did not identify the names of schools in which students have been enrolled. This decision aimed to avoid unfair targeting of institutions, and to make students feel safe to express their views. In focus groups, participants were informed that they would not be identified in the report or any other public discussion about this research.

An important reflection evolved around how to name participants in a category that would be easily understood by the public more broadly. We have opted for 'African Australians', although we are aware of how problematic the term is. Most participants in the focus groups and in the survey (75%) are Australians, born and raised here. The term 'African' runs the risk of neutralising the fact that it is their skin colour and, at times, their religion, what functions as markers for social discrimination, not their ancestry in Africa. Moreover, that reflection opened the question of why some citizens have the privilege of being identified simply as Australians whist others will always have to introduce themselves with a reference to their ethnicity.

THE SURVEY FINDINGS

Demographic data

The online survey targeted high school students and recent graduates (last five years), living in Melbourne and of African background. Out of the 76 respondents, 42 were still in high school at the time of completion of the survey. There was balanced gender representation (38 female, 37 male, 1 choosing not to identify). Most respondents were from the North and West regions, with men in particular being predominantly from the North. This is likely to be associated with the fact that the Ubuntu Project's programs for young men are stronger in the northern suburbs.

Table 2. Participants' area of residency

LOCATION	West	North	East	South
Female (n=38)	19	16	2	1
Male (n=37)	7	25	2	3
Prefer not to identify (n=1)	1	0	0	0
TOTAL	27	41	4	4

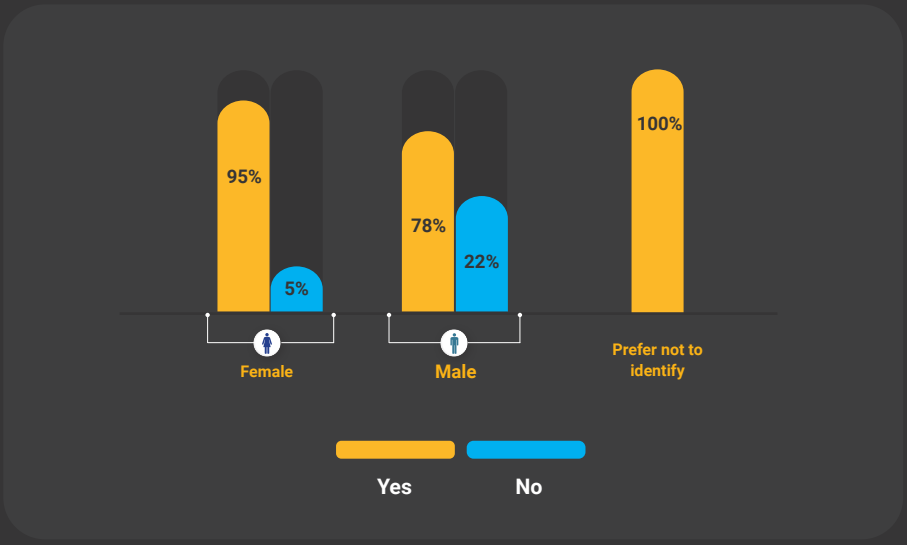
The majority of respondents (75%) were born in Australia. With regard to their parents' country of birth or, for those who were not born in Australia, their own, the most common countries were **Somalia, Eritrea, South Sudan, and Sudan**. Djibouti, Ethiopia, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, were also listed. With regard to faith, **80% of respondents identified as Muslims,** followed by Christians (16%).

We present below the main findings, by gender. Given that only one person chose not to identify, their particular answer will always make up 100% for that category.

EXPERIENCES **OF RACISM**

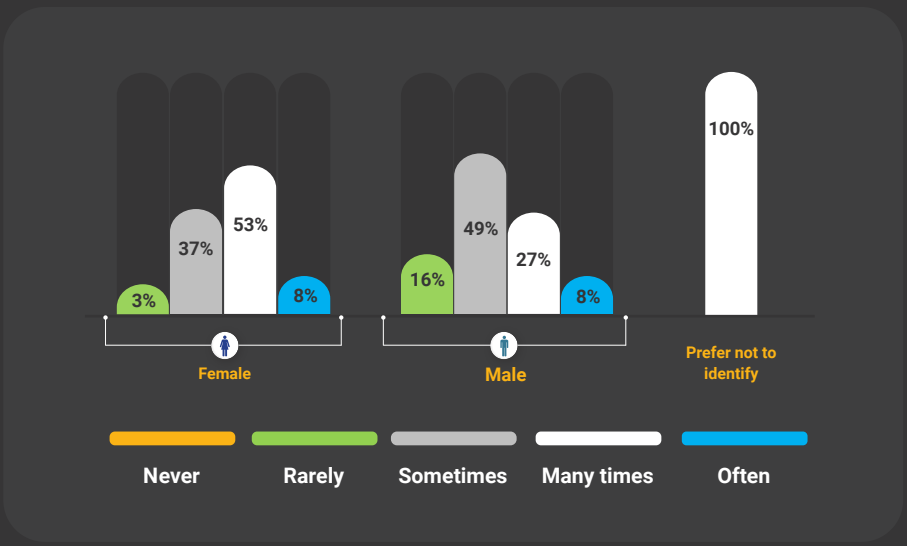
The vast majority of respondents (87%) reported having experienced the feeling of being discriminated in school due to their race, ethnic background, or religion. For young women, that percentage was 95%.

Q. **Have you ever felt discriminated in your school because of your race, ethnic background or religion?**



Around 91% of respondents also said they have seen other students being the target of racism in their school.

Q. **I have seen other students being the target of racism in my school.'**

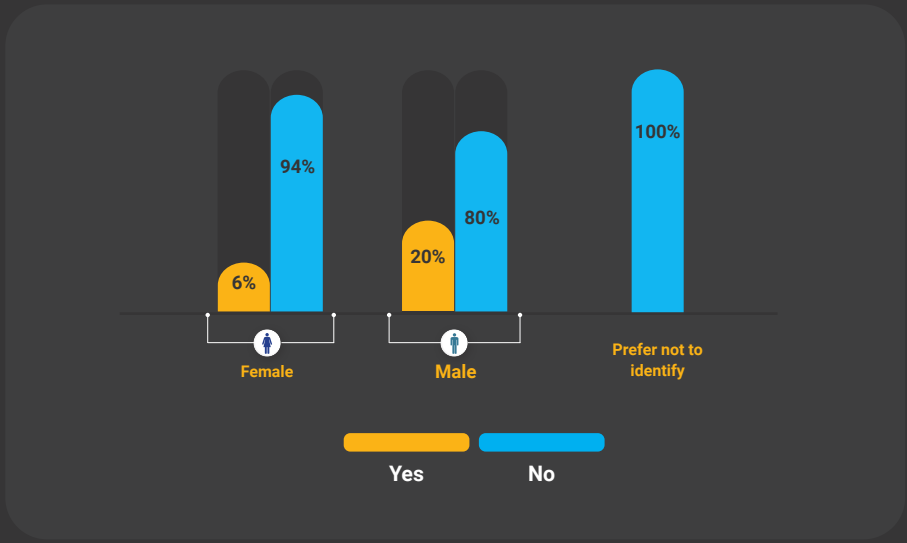


With regard to the agents behind discrimination, participants were allowed to choose more than one option. The most cited were other students (80%), and teachers (67%), followed by course coordinators (31%) and principals (21%).

RESPONSES **TO RACISM**

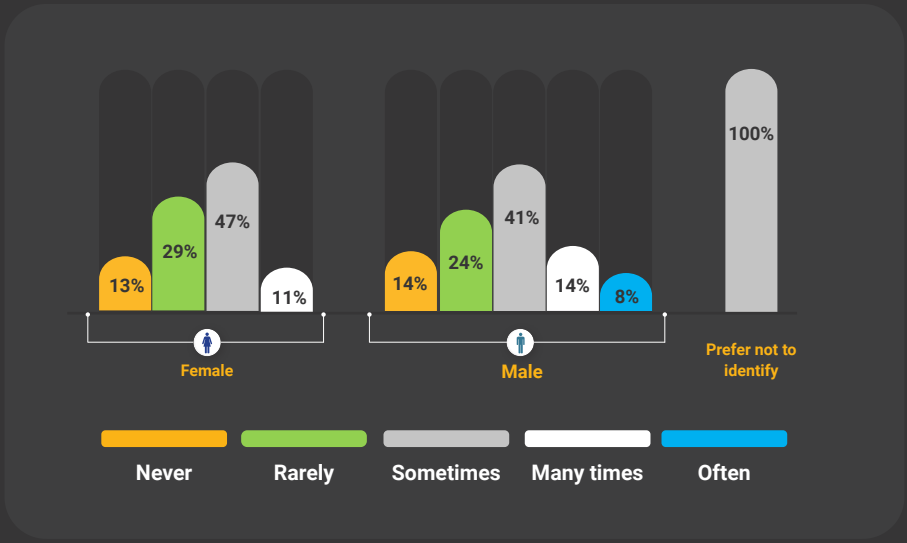
For those who have experienced discrimination, 55% said they spoke up or reported the problem to a staff member. Still, 88% didn't find that teachers took their case seriously. Here too there was a gender difference: women were more likely to report they were not taken seriously (almost 94%), compared to young men (80%).

Q. **Did you find that teachers took your case seriously (took some action)?**



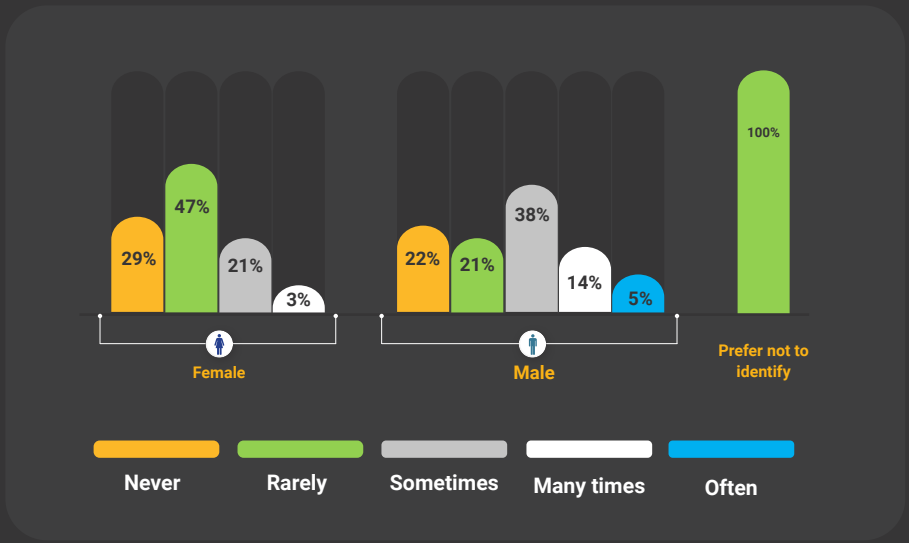
When asked whether students call out racism and defend their peers, a considerable percentage of respondents answered 'never' (13%), or 'rarely' (26%).

Q. **'Students usually call out racism and defend their peers.'**



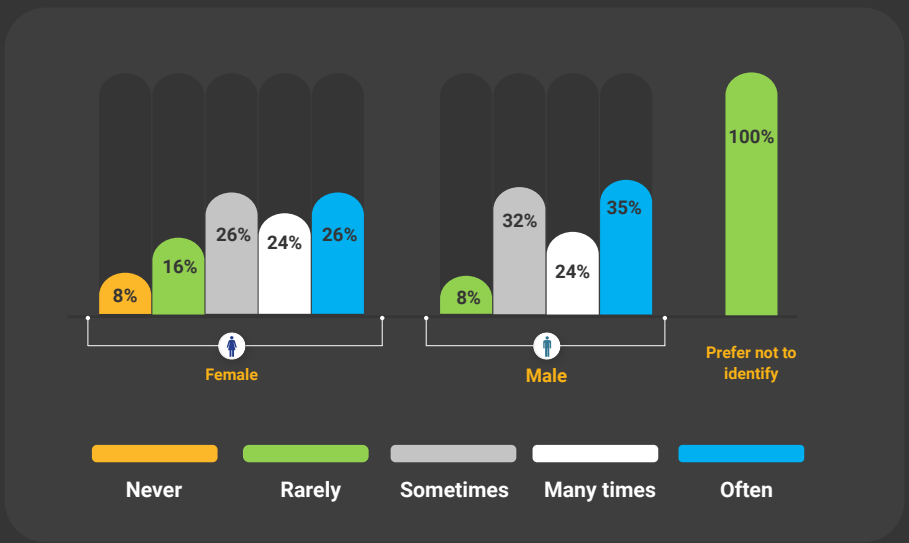
The majority of them, and especially young women, did not feel that they could trust their educators on a regular basis when it comes to addressing racist incidents.

Q. 'I can trust most of my teachers or coordinators will address racist incidents in the school.'



Still, most respondents felt it was worth speaking up against racism in their school ('many times' or 'often').

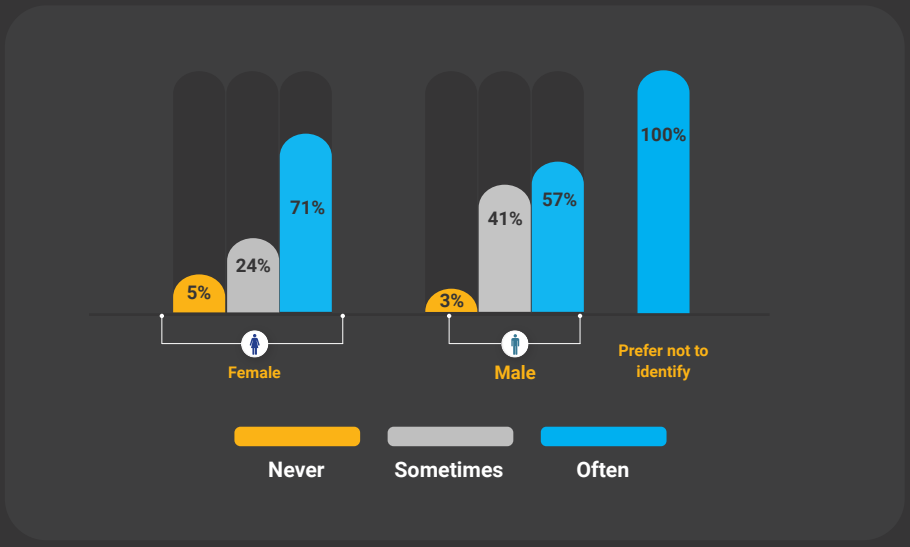
Q. 'I feel it's worth speaking up against racism in my school.'



HOW **RACISM MANIFESTS**

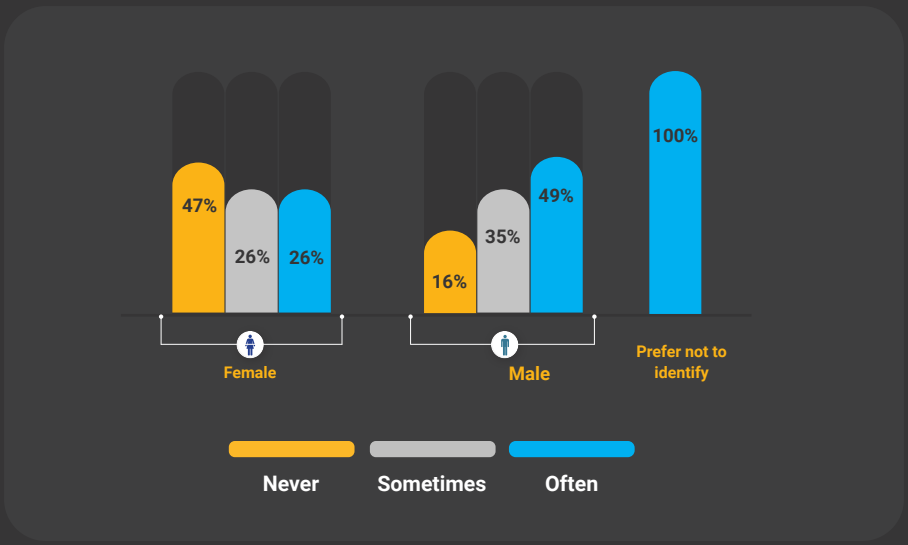
One of the common features of racism is consistent experiences of being singled out as a problem, treated as less than others, and ultimately being measured against standards that do not apply to non-Black individuals. Here the results are really concerning: The vast majority of respondents answered that they felt that Black students were over monitored and inspected, in comparison to White students, either sometimes or often.

Q. **'I feel that Black students are over monitored and inspected, compared to White students'**



Suspicion from teachers when performing well in school, as if they were 'cheating,' was also a common experience, especially for men.

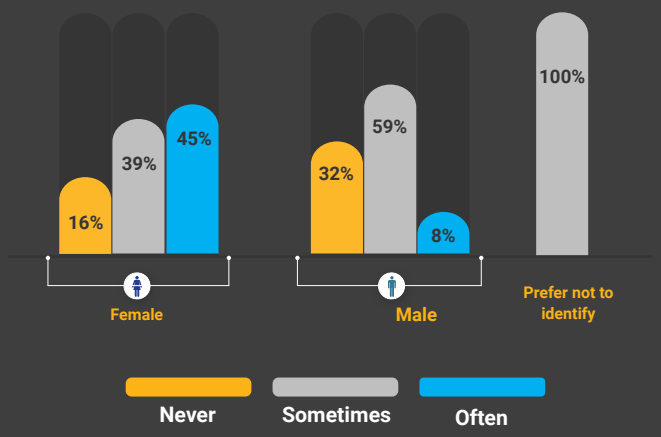
Q. **'Teachers have suspected I was cheating when I performed really well in my exams or my homework'**



Given that the unchecked use of the N-word has been raised as problem in various conversations with young African Australians, the survey included a question on whether teachers have used the N-word when teaching: 64% of respondents confirmed the word has been used, either sometimes (30%) or often (34%).

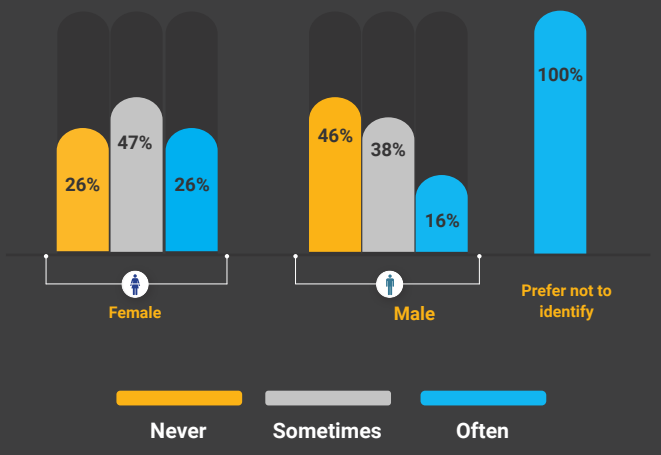
With regard to support to pursue university studies, the responses were more diverse and captured a gender difference that was already expected: young men were more likely to say they never receive support, while young women were more likely to say they often receive support.

Q. 'African background students are supported to go university in my school.'



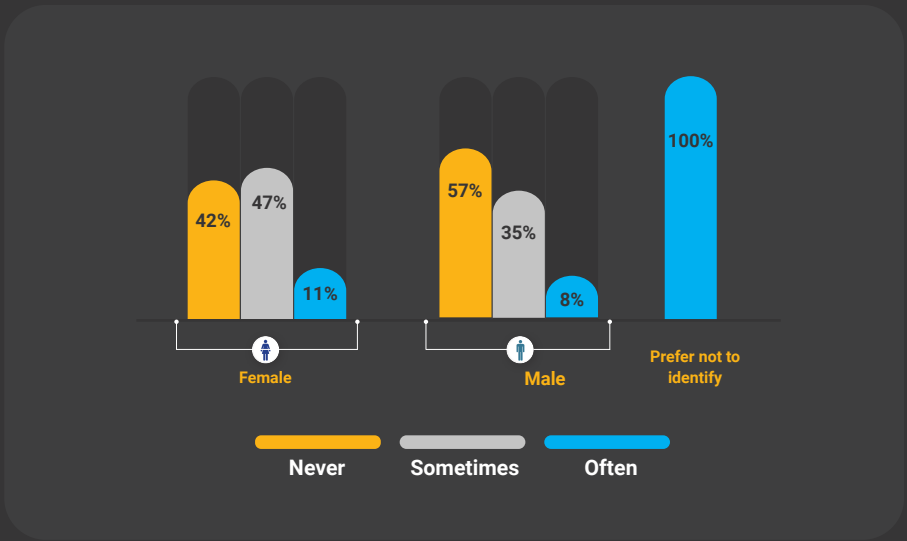
Jokes are a usual form of racist microagression. When asked if staff and students make jokes because they are Africans, young men were more likely to answer 'never '(46%) than young women (26%).

Q. 'Staff and students make jokes about students because they are Africans.'



With regard to experiencing jokes because of their religion, again male respondents were more likely to answer never (57%) than young women (42%).

Q. 'Staff and students make jokes about students because they are Muslim.'





FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

Four focus groups were held, with young women and young men (focus group 'participants') separately, and a mix of current high school students and recent graduates, from different suburbs in Melbourne. Most of them attended schools in the West and North, and apart from two students who attended Islamic schools, all others were in public schools. In order to preserve as much as possible, the language used by the participants, we used 'African girls and boys', 'African kid', 'Black kid'.

Some examples of racism that students chose to share emerged so frequently and consistently that they enabled us to organise them around themes. In addition to the stories highlighted below, there were many instances in which one example would trigger many other similar examples from other participants.

THE CONTINUED USE OF THE N-WORD

Framing comments that are offensive to the receiver as something that the receiver should accept because the aggressor does not have the intention to offend, appeared in many examples, and pointed out the power of authorities and institutions to determine what can be said and by whom, even when that exposes some students to harm. Nowhere was this more explicit than in participants' comments on their altercations with teachers and other students around the use in class of the N-word.

Many young women who participated in the focus groups were quite vocal about the abusive use of the N-word, and reported various attempts to have it banned with no success. From trying to talk to teachers, to moving the issue up to coordinator or principals, they were faced with the same resistance.

Teachers claimed that the word was in the textbooks and curriculum, and therefore they were allowed to say it. Even when students were distressed and tried to explain how offensive the term is nowadays, they were faced with an authority that legitimised its use. On one occasion, a student who complained later had the teacher who had written the text, coming to her to say he was the author and that it was fine, and she should not act like that.

We asked participants whether teachers, when using the N-word, educate all students on why the term is harmful and not used in the current context. Except for one case, there was no change from the teacher's side or effort to educate students about it. One of them said she believes teachers know it is not appropriate and would never say that in public, outside the school, but they do it in class to 'aggravate' them.



A graduate young man who now works as a youth worker highlighted that one of the problems of having educators using the N-word unchecked is that they influence non-Black students from an early age to think it is fine to use the word, and that creates space for more conflict between students. A young woman remembered being involved in a fight at her school when, after being called a terrorist by the boys, she was told that one of the African girls was crying because another boy had called her the N-word. She was angry and went to defend the other girl, but was seen by the school as initiating the fight and was suspended.

BLACK AND WHITE:
TWO MEASURES

Discriminatory treatment and disproportional punishment from educators and school staff were mentioned frequently across the various focus groups. The young men complained that if White and Black boys do exactly the same thing or are involved in the same situation, Black 'boys invariably get a harsher punishment or are blamed straight away.

A. recalled an incident in which her brother and two other Black boys in year 7 were kept after hours to clean a messy classroom, after all students worked on experiments. A. went to look for her brother and saw one of the boys crying. She intervened and asked why only those boys were kept to clean the mess from other students. The teacher got angry and said she was disrespecting her, but did not offer any reasonable explanation. The following day, the principal approached A., criticized her tone with the teacher and asked her to apologise. She refused, and since then, the teacher has been 'targeting' the three boys. As A. explains:

'It is very subtle, if you are not coloured [person], if you are not used to it, you won't see it.'

M. mentioned that when he was in year 10, a White classmate asked to have a look at his assignment before the due date. Without his knowledge, the White student copied his essay and submitted it. The teacher failed him, and gave the White student a reasonable grade. The teacher then called them and immediately accused M. of copying from the White student, despite the fact that M's grades were usually higher than the grades of the White student. He remembers that whenever an altercation happened, his side of story would never receive the same attention than that of a White student:

'My voice didn't have as much impact compared to the voice of White students...I felt that the teachers wouldn't be on my side, the majority of time.'

In another case, a student went to the welfare coordinator because he felt discriminated against by the teacher. When he told his story, the coordinator laughed and said, 'there is no racism in the school.' When he talked to the principal and asked if it was right that a coordinator would laugh at him in that situation, the principal justified by saying that she might have been 'shocked'. The teacher involved in the case said she was sorry he would think that's what she meant, which was different from apologising for saying it. While he accepted the apology, because he still said he felt discriminated, the coordinator called his mother and also threatened to suspend him.

The strongest examples of how schools can use two measures and create situations that could characterise a violation of Victoria's Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, involved the boundaries between freedom of speech and open racism:

'My sister was in Year 12 they [some students] had big posters that they printed around the school. And it was basically saying not all Muslims are terrorists, but all Muslims are [N-word spelled out]. And that was posted everywhere. And then they complained and they tried to take it down, and they spoke to the vice principal, he was just like – I think he said something like freedom of speech or whatever. And it was kept there for a long time, like they didn't take it off.'

At another school, a female student recalls a group of boys who would meet every Thursday in the school premises, using the Nazi flag and making racist comments. When students complained, the school said nothing could be done.

What is wrong with you, **African boys?**



Racism affects all genders, but both the survey and the focus groups indicated differences in how it is manifested, and how young people respond to it. Educators' association of African boys with aggressiveness, 'physical threat', and low performance in education was mentioned by various participants. Sadly, most participants coped with that by accepting it as part of the way things are in Australia, trying to walk away from embarrassing situations. For those who dared contesting, the result was always negative, often leading to over monitoring and pressure from school.

For some African boys, simple things such as dressing according to group fashion were sufficient to trigger teachers' negative reactions. S. recalls a situation when her brother was wearing a 'hoodie' in school. The teacher told him he could not wear it and that it was disrespectful, like he would not wear 'shoes to the mosque'. He walked away, and their parents were called to the school:

'And she [the teacher] was like, "You need to teach him to respect to women. You wouldn't speak like that to a Muslim person. That's disrespectful. You're not allowed to wear hoodies or hats in school." And we were like, "this isn't church. You can wear a hoodie if you want to. And she was like, "Would you wear it? Would you do that in a mosque?" And we're like, "Yeah, he would wear a hoodie in a mosque. There's nothing wrong with it." And she was like, "He's not in the hoods. He's not a part of a gang. Why is he wearing a hoodie?'

The linking of common teenager dress to some kind of danger specific to Black boys, was even more explicit in the case of M. who remembers his teacher commenting, in reaction to his low pants, 'one day you will be walking down the street and someone is going to shoot you.'

In two other cases, teachers panicked by mistakenly seeing 'weapons' where they did not exist. H's brother was playing with a ruler with a pen sharpener attached to it, but the teacher thought it was a weapon. He was sent to the principal and their parents called in. In another school, a Black student picked up from the floor a carved letter opener that his non-Black friend had brought to school, but when the teacher saw it, she threatened to call the police because he had a weapon. Even though the other student explained that it was his letter opener, N's brother was suspended for three days.

N. recalls that when he was in school, it did not matter if there were only a few African boys involved in an incident, or a mixed group with White kids, his teacher would always call them out and say loudly, 'What is wrong with you, African boys?'

Whist this repetitive packaging of African boys as 'a problem group' creates more incentives for them to be together, when that happens, that can raise suspicion. In one school, about ten African boys got together on a Friday, including one who was not from that school, as they were going out together from there. On the following Monday, the coordinator called them all to a room to provide explanations. The student remembers one of the teachers who saw the group on Friday saying, 'I saw them and I was really worried about what they were going to do, because they were walking around in a gang way.' The racist assumptions made by the teacher and coordinator, were never questioned. questioned.

We asked how those young men have dealt with those situations.

'I just accepted it, which is not right but as a young man you learn to just like oh it is what it is. It gives you a bleak idea of what society we live in. So you're just like yeah it is what it is and just move on.'

M. talked about his community as his great support:

'The way I always took is that you play with the cards that you are dealt. They were the cards I was dealt. I am a person with dark skin in a school of 600-500 people, maybe seven Black kids. It was common not to be treated as anybody else. To be fair, it was not extreme. The thing is outside the school my community embraced me and I embraced my community, and I've always had a lot from my community so they could never make me feel I was inferior or inadequate. They could treat me that way but I would never feel like that.'

Don’t be **dramatic!**

All young women who participated in the focus groups wear the hijab and therefore are ‘visibly’ Muslim. Their experiences show the value of addressing racism through an intersectional perspective, given the convergence of gender, religion and race, as overlapping sources of discrimination.

As the survey pointed out, young women seemed more aware of what characterises racism and violate human rights, including those microagressions that are harder to call out, and yet are repetitive and hurtful enough to be recognised by those who suffer it.

Listening to their stories, it appears that they face two main, opposite stereotypes: They are either seen as oppressed girls, controlled by their family or, if they speak up and defy that image, they are seen as angry and ‘dramatic’ in their reactions. Teachers usually address their anger as an emotional (over) reaction, but failed to tackle the actual causes for their reactions: the racist and/or anti-Muslim comments that come from White young men, or from teachers themselves.





H. was in year 7 when a teacher passed a wrong teaching about Islam. When she tried to correct it, the teacher sent her out of the room. In another situation, she was openly challenged and disrespected:

'One time I was in math, and my teacher was like, "Oh, women in Islam, if you even sit in a car with a guy – like you can't catch a taxi because they're going to stone you, basically." And I was like, "That's not true. That doesn't even make sense." And he's like, "What would you know?" And I'm like, "This is my religion. I've learnt my religion the whole time." He's like, "I watched a documentary, so you don't know what you're saying, basically.'

For S, it was a coordinator who had the most negative impact on her. She mentioned how uncomfortable she used to feel with the coordinator's little public remarks, such as doubting she would get sufficient marks in a major exam. The same student remembered a teacher that liked her, but reminded her that her parents had not brought her to Australia to become comfortable: she should later go back to Africa to help her people.

For N., who is at Year 11, the absence of any positive intervention from teachers made her think 'they [didn't] even believe racism exists, they are just so oblivious to it'. N said that when she was younger, 'even if I tried to speak up, I'd just feel small, they would all laugh.' Even though she changed, she had never seen any positive outcome coming out raising the issue. In one situation, a male teacher took N out of the room after an altercation with the boys about racist comments, and said, 'you've got to be a lady, you can't just show aggression, it's not you, you're a lady.'

Participants agreed that the fact they are very good students helps to protect them from being punished harshly, in comparison to the African boys. Discrimination, in their case, made them even more willing to study to prove teachers wrong. Thinking back, some of them realised that they had never asked for support from the school when they had any difficulty in a school subject, but searched for help from siblings and others outside the school. They simply did not want to reinforce the idea that they were not capable.

Moreover, many of those young women understood the complexity of the system they were in and some have developed new approaches to talk to teachers, coordinators and even principals about racism in schools. Moving into leadership roles in sports or other activities, avoid expressing anger, and finding ways of pushing the issue with other students, are some of the strategies, but they require a lot of extra work and emotional investment, with a burden that most young non-Black women do not have to carry.

YOU'RE NOT
GOOD ENOUGH

The focus group participants provided many examples of the low expectation school holds about them, and how that is communicated to them. As this sub-section shows, by the time they reach high school, those differences are not subtle: they manifest in words and practices, and can have particularly harmful effects for young men's education.

One way in which they experience the different measures for White and Black kids in school is through the message that they are not good enough. Both girls and boys had teachers suspecting they were cheating in exams and assignments whenever they obtained good grades.

In year 10, N. was a mix of bad behaviour and good grades, and the coordinator was suspicious of his results. After being made to take an exam in a room with the coordinator only, he was told, 'We would never have believed you if you didn't do it in a room by yourself.'

H. was a top student and, in her class, they were all White except for H. and another African girl. From year 7, H. felt constantly put down, with teachers questioning if she was the one doing her homework and assignments, checking if she was not coping from other people, and even inspecting her dictionary. The two non-White students were visibly over monitored and made to prove they were not in the wrong class.

Two students from different schools remember being sent to an ESL class even though they had excellent English. In the boy's case, he was quickly moved out of that class, but the girl had to attend it for a year with very little learning, reading children's books and coping with jokes.

In another school, a student remembers that three years ago, in a class in which all students were reading a text, the teacher skipped all the three Black students. She said it was so visible that everyone realised what had happened. On yet another occasion the same student and a Black young man were given one paragraph each in a rehearsal, while the White students were giving extensive texts. The teacher then approached them and said she hoped they were comfortable with it. As the student says:

'she didn't even ask, "oh do you want to be given a shorter part? Do you feel comfortable?" I don't know maybe she thought we couldn't read…But you cannot say she's been racist.'

VCE OR VCAL?

NOT REALLY A "CHOICE"

In 2020 the Ubuntu Project heard from parents and students that schools were pressuring student into VCAL, even when they had grades and wanted to pursue VCE. These complaints were the 'tip of an iceberg' that made visible how systemic discrimination could damage young people's future opportunities.

The stories in the previous sessions make easy to understand why some young African Australians, especially young men, consider that school is not for them. When they reach secondary education, the institutional pressure they face increases. As schools attempt to achieve higher scores and they attract the best students, they sometimes 'filter out' Black students by directing them to VCAL without much information, or propose that they change schools. Whilst this practice is known in the education sector, it constitutes discrimination and it must be addressed.

The young women agreed that boys tended to face more school pressure to go to VCAL, but mentioned the lack of support and being put down throughout primary education as impacting on one the boys' results. As a year 11 student says:

'They [the teachers] make hard for them [Black boys], they will literally tell them "this is not for you, you are not organised, you don't have motivation, you can't make it to VCE.'

We've heard of a school where all six African students (two boys and four girls) were not accepted into VCE subjects, even though two of them were A students, and despite the fact that there were non-Black students who had failed subjects but were still accepted into VCE subjects. When the students asked the teacher why all Black kids had been rejected, the answer was that 'it is not like that, we didn't mean it to be like that.' In another case, out of about 7 boys and 10 girls in the same school, only one was accepted into VCE, with all others being told to go to VCAL.

As S. explained:

'I was projected to get in the 90s and I was studying hard and stuff. But she [the career counselor] was just like, "Oh no, you should do this, or you should try and think of doing TAFE." But I'm like, "Why? I just want to get directly into this…I want to get into Melbourne University." And she just laughed. She was like, "Why would you even try to do that?" So, it's kind of, they completely discount any ambitions that you have.'

The choice around education pathways tends to involve parents. However, when parents are migrants and have not been through the Australian high school system, this choice is not based on full information. The participants were keen to emphasise the importance African parents give to education and respect to teachers, which in part explains why they tend to simply trust the advice the schools are giving.

In what we hope was an exceptional case, the school' efforts to remove a student went as far as having the teacher calling the student directly on his mobile phone, to explain that now that he was 16 years old, he could drop out without his parents' permission. As a young woman proposes, we have zero tolerance for bullying, not only from students but from teachers as well.

We finalise the analysis with a case in which many of the issues presented in the report intersect to show how even a pandemic opened new doors for discrimination.

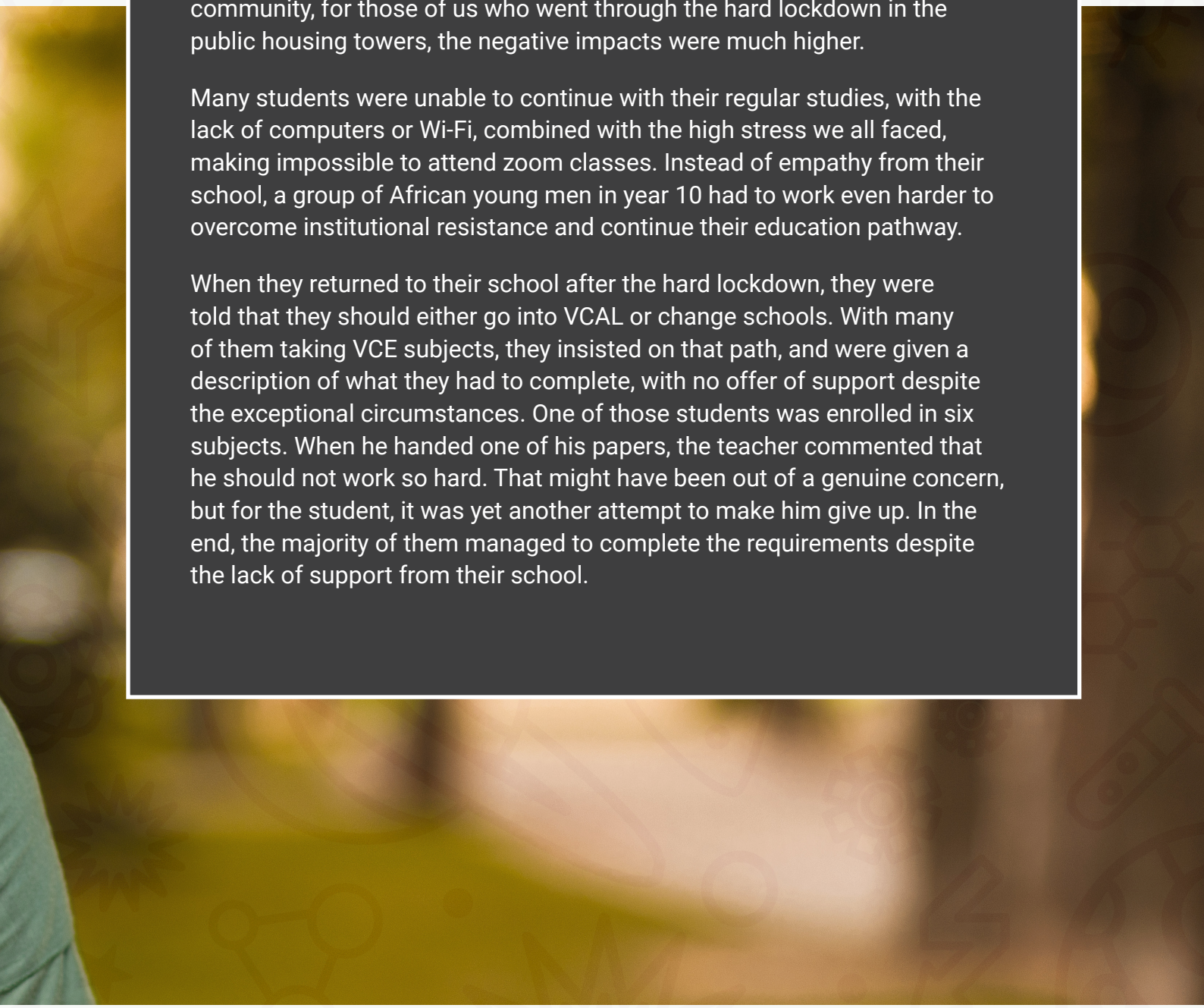


Side effects of the towers' hard lockdown

Whist the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic affected the whole community, for those of us who went through the hard lockdown in the public housing towers, the negative impacts were much higher.

Many students were unable to continue with their regular studies, with the lack of computers or Wi-Fi, combined with the high stress we all faced, making impossible to attend zoom classes. Instead of empathy from their school, a group of African young men in year 10 had to work even harder to overcome institutional resistance and continue their education pathway.

When they returned to their school after the hard lockdown, they were told that they should either go into VCAL or change schools. With many of them taking VCE subjects, they insisted on that path, and were given a description of what they had to complete, with no offer of support despite the exceptional circumstances. One of those students was enrolled in six subjects. When he handed one of his papers, the teacher commented that he should not work so hard. That might have been out of a genuine concern, but for the student, it was yet another attempt to make him give up. In the end, the majority of them managed to complete the requirements despite the lack of support from their school.





CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

‘Students who complained got treated different from that day, in a negative way. That’s why I never really asked questions, asked why. I thought, “maybe if I do go and complain, my time in school will come to an end. Maybe teachers will fail me.’ (Young man, recent graduate)‘

‘So it just gets to a point where you just have to suck it up because there’s no-one for you to complain to. And it’s very tiring as well. Just to speak to them and repeat yourself over and over again, and just trying to just explain to them that you have every right to live like a normal person. So frustrating, because we’re all Australians. I don’t understand.’ (Young woman, recent graduate)‘

Outside the formal curriculum, the school system gives children and young people the first introduction to our broader society, and the rules, values and behaviours that it promotes. Ideally, they are places where everyone can experience fair, safe treatment.

However, as this report shows, for many African Australian young people in Melbourne, schools have been a place of anxiety and frustration, where they not only experience racism, but learn to expect injustice, and lack of accountability from those in power, with a different set of rules applied to them as 'African kids'. Many of these Australians successfully move ahead, either by accepting that 'it is what it is' or by becoming over-achievers to gain opportunities. Still, too many of them are left behind, without support or understanding of how much their sense of social disconnection is related to their experience with institutional racism in their formative years.

The report also indicates the importance of looking at race, gender, ethnicity and religion, when examining how racism manifests, and naming it as such. Both our focus groups and survey data suggest that young Muslim women are more vocal in naming specific behaviours as racist, and speaking up in schools. Young men, on the other hand, tend to avoid embarrassment and open confrontation by accepting it and just 'moving on.'

Despite the complexity of the issues presented here, we consider that any anti-racism initiative must start by addressing the power imbalance, and responsibilities. Currently the burden of reporting and pursuing justice falls on the victims, what contributes to the gap between what happens on the ground, and what is 'visible' through official channels.

Recommendations

Based on the feedback received from the focus group participants, and the Ubuntu Project's experiences working with young African Australians, we recommend that the Victorian Government:

1. Co-develop with young African Australians, and deliver anti racism training in all schools, including separated training for teachers and administrators, and students at different stages of education, including the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, and other anti-discrimination protections in Victoria

2. Create an independent channel within the Department of Education for students to anonymously report racial incidents in the schools.

3. Using a strength-based approach, support peer-led mentorship and leadership programs for young African Australian students outside schools, addressing career opportunities and pathways, and curricular support.

4. Create incentives to increase the hiring of teachers and administrators of diverse ethnic backgrounds, including African Australians, as part of the education system overall.

5. Empower African Liaison Officers to conduct their work with full independence from schools' authorities, including in regard to funding, and implement clear mechanisms to assess racism complaints and communicate outcomes to the victims.

6. Support community groups to conduct information sessions for parents about the school system, including rights of children, and pathways towards university.

7. Support initiatives that raise awareness of human rights, including complaint mechanisms.



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