

RACISM IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Rucy Rusera offers a powerful, firsthand account of racism within educational institutions, drawing from her lived and professional experiences as a young scholar and advocate who migrated to Australia from Rwanda as a young child. This essay is an edited version of a talk presented at the 2024 Annual Conference of Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils Australia (FECCA)¹.

Through a reflective, narrative-driven approach, Rusera unpacks the persistent challenges faced by students of colour, analysing how systemic bias and inequitable policies shape their educational journeys. Blending personal anecdotes with critical insights, the article highlights the intersecting roles of identity, institutional culture, and policy in reinforcing barriers to inclusion and success. She challenges listeners to critically engage with issues of diversity and justice in education and calls for systemic change, making it a valuable contribution for educators, policymakers, and scholars dedicated to fostering inclusive academic environments

¹ For more information, please see <https://fecca.org.au/updates/fecca-2024-conference/>

At 6, I came to understand I was different because of my race

At 7, I was laughed at and teased for not speaking perfect English. Despite speaking 3 other languages (Kinyarwanda, French and Luganda).

At 8, students made fun of my ethnic school lunches.

At 9, my mother was informed by my primary school to 'maintain' my hair

At 11, I withdraw from circular activities because of racial discrimination and bullying

At 14, after learning to accept my natural hair, I was told by my principal my hairstyles were inappropriate for school

At 15, a teacher questioned the quality of my work, because of 'it did not seem like me'.

At 16, school informed that we could not speak our mother language because it was not inclusive, but at the same time they were using me as their tokenistic black girl

At 17, at my new school, I was called the N word by a random student at camp

At 20, A university counsellor told me my experience of racism was an individual problem

My name is Rucy Rusera. This is not just my story, but the story of many young people in Australia. My family (my parents and three sisters) and I arrived from Uganda in Australia, Sydney in

2006. We first lived in Sydney for 10 years. We currently live in Queensland. I attended primary school in and secondary school in Sydney and completed senior secondary school in Queensland. Today, I work with Services Settlement International (SSI) QLD as the Youth Community Educator and Development Officer. I also, do work with Multicultural Youth Queensland (MyQ) as the Project Support Officer.

Today I'm here to discuss a vital issue that affects many young people: the lived experience of racism in educational institutes. Racism in educational institutes is not just a topic for discussion; it's a reality for many young people across Australia. Racism in schools can manifest in various forms: overt acts of discrimination, microaggressions, and systemic inequalities. It can occur among students, between students and teachers, and within school policies. There has been and is a disconnect between awareness of the issue and what's happening. Just because everyone's aware of racism doesn't make it resolved.

We know from national research that experiencing or witnessing racism during childhood or adolescence can have lasting effects into adulthood (Priest, Chong, Truang et al., 2019). Here are some key findings from the Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR) Project which was the first large-scale population-representative study in experiences and attitudes to racism and racial bullying, and on bystander responses to racism and racial discrimination among Australian students in government schools in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria (Priest, Chong, Truang et al., 2019).

- One in three school children report experiencing racism;
- Students born overseas experience racial discrimination at twice the rate of their Australian-born peers;
- More than one in ten students who responded to the 2017 SOAR survey said they'd experienced racism in some form from their teachers but:
 - among African students it was about three times that number
 - twice that number for indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders

Alarminglly, there is mounting evidence that demonstrates that racism is a daily reality for many students and teachers (MYAN, 2022; Bosco, 2024, QACC, 2024). It's not like it all goes unnoticed. These reports provide concrete evidence of racism in schools, highlighting overt actions like name-calling, bullying, and exclusion. More than half of students have witnessed others facing racial discrimination, whether through exclusion, teasing, or being treated with less respect. The question remains: how many more reports do we need before we take decisive action on this critical issue?

Once we have the data, the next crucial step is to understand how to use it effectively. It's essential to dig deeper underneath the tip of the iceberg and explore the underlying impacts and reasons behind racism in our educational institutes.

Individual student experiences of racism

The impact of racism is profound. Students who experience racism may face academic challenges, mental health issues, and feelings of isolation. I have experienced every single one of these areas during my own schooling. This hostile environment can make students feel unsafe or marginalized in their learning spaces. The pervasive nature of racism can create a divide among peers, fostering an atmosphere of exclusion rather than support. It can change the course of a young person's life.

There are two areas of impact I would like to focus on related to how young people construct belonging and the burden created by positioning racialised young people to speak about racism and discrimination.

Diminished sense of belonging

As part of my work, I do school outreach. For three terms in 2023. I worked with the EALD (Students learning English as an Additional Language or Dialect) department of a local school to improve engagement between students and teachers, school and parents. The students I worked with came to Australia from diverse places including: Congo, Philippines, Ethiopia, Somalia, Soamoa. One of the issues I identified was that students felt like they did not belong in a space that school had especially created for them. There were many reasons for this. The negative connotation of EALD students, the space being set apart from the

school, limited understanding from teachers of the students' experiences, no in-language communication with parents. These EALD students who had been subject to racism were frequently unable to concentrate in class and unwilling to participate or take risks in learning for fear of retribution or ridicule if they made a mistake. Evidence also suggests that students who are disaffected with school are less likely to attend school regularly and are likely to drop out of school earlier than other groups of students (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013). After completing my work with the school, there is improved engagement between all members of the school community. 5 teacher aides who speak the common languages of the students, and the school has created stronger connections with local communities' groups & organisations that assist with the EALD students.

The burden of speaking about racism and discrimination

Many young people, like myself, are tired of being asked to talk about their personal experiences of racism and discrimination, only for government policies and society to diminish the perseverance of racism. On top of that the responsibility for reporting racism often falls unfairly on the young person who is experiencing it. This places an additional burden on students, requiring them to navigate the difficult process of reporting their experiences while enduring further trauma. Instead of feeling supported, these students are tasked with validating their experiences and advocating for themselves in a system that is not receptive. Instead, it is their fellow students and teachers who need

to be taught that racism is wrong. There's a need for our educational institutions to create more accessible and supportive reporting mechanisms. We must work to ensure that students feel empowered and safe to speak out, without having to endure further harm in the process. If you are going to ask young people to speak, it requires a safe space to be heard without the necessity of an agenda.

Systemic issues

Beyond individual experiences, systemic racism exists in school policies and practices. Disparities in disciplinary practices, unequal access to advanced courses, and inadequate funding can perpetuate cycles of inequality.

An experience commonly reported is that racism in schools often goes unacknowledged or unaddressed by teachers and those in positions of authority. "Racism is omnipresent to those of us who experience it and invisible to those of us who do not experience it and deny its existence." It seems that those who do not themselves experience racism either do not recognise it or dismiss it as trivial and do not see its potential for damage (RacismNoWay 2020). This lack of awareness can be particularly damaging, as unchecked racist attitudes and behaviours can create a climate where such actions allow racism to become entrenched.

When we educate on anti-racism, we must understand that racism is a system. Racism is economics. Racism is law. Racism is

housing. It's manifested in these systems. A student who experiences racism is likely to experience lower life expectancy, job prospects, housing stability, and higher mental health challenges (RacismNoWay, 2020). For many students, the concept of multiculturalism loses its meaning when you see more people of colour, a diverse Australia and yet diverse Australians are not afforded the same opportunities or privileges as those who settled here before them. Despite living in a 'multicultural society', if systemic barriers continue to hinder the progress of many from diverse backgrounds, then that is still entrenched disadvantage.

Recommendations

I think we all know the recommendations. There have been so many reports calling for change. Below are some recommendations from our (MYAN) research report titled 'Navigating Youth Settlement in Australia: Challenges and Opportunities' (MYAN, 2023):

- Introduce initiatives to manage racism in schools including anti-racism policies separate to existing anti-bullying policies that encompass various curriculum design, teacher training programs, disciplinary actions, and student engagement activities. Schools should also have clear reporting mechanisms.
- Establish an advisory body of young people and service providers from diverse backgrounds to advise

and co-design anti-racism initiatives and innovative strategies to combat racism.

- Strengthen educational curriculum beginning in early childhood settings, aimed at developing the foundation knowledge and skills needed to counter racism, prejudice and discrimination and including factual and complete history of Australia.

Call to Action

In our consultations with young people we always hear: ““We need to talk about it more and educate each other. We need to identify similarities about our cultures and accept our differences.” (MYAN, 2023).

On an everyday basis we can do more too. Two practical recommendations that I believe each of us can implement are:

1. Speak Up – stop bystanding
2. Parents talk to your children. Racism is taught and it can start with conversations within the home.

So, what can we do? Let’s advocate for policies that address racial inequities, engage in self-reflection about our own biases, and stand in solidarity with those affected by racism. Change begins with us, BUT there is no us, without me and you.

To any politicians or individuals in positions of power, I want to emphasize that we are respectfully keeping an eye on you. As Gen Z say, we are standing on business.

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Author Bio

Rucy Rusera completed her schooling in Australia and has a Bachelors of Business Management and Psychology from The University of Queensland. Her lived experiences and professional perspective provides a unique, insider's view, lending depth and authenticity to the discourse on racial equity in Australian educational institutes.

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