

Countering racism in schools

Racism is an ideology that gives expression to myths about other racial and ethnic groups that devalues and renders inferior those groups, that reflects and is perpetuated by deeply rooted historical, social, cultural and power inequalities in society.

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1998)

All members of the school community — staff, students and parents — have the right to a safe and productive teaching, learning and working environment free of racism. A range of materials has been developed to support school communities in providing an inclusive working and learning environment.

Schools are encouraged to develop whole-of-school community programs that meet the needs of students, staff and community from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and to educate for a socially just and harmonious Australia.

One initiative is the “Racism No Way!” project developed by the Conference of Education Systems Chief Executive Officers (CESCEO) through its sub-group on racism in schools. Their resource, *Racism No Way! A guide for Australian schools*, was distributed to all Australian schools in 2000 to help overcome contemporary challenges related to racism. It documents the various ways that school communities around Australia have dealt with racism. A website, <www.racismnoway.com.au>, continues to provide resources and enables school communities across Australia to exchange ideas easily.

Knowledge of both the history of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, and the impacts of racism, are essential for understanding and promoting positive change. Education is a key to that process.

Since racism thrives on ignorance, the most effective way to counter this is through education. Teachers can be in the vanguard of countering racism. Because of wider community pressures on students, the positive results of education may take considerable time — generations even — to show substantial effects, but sometimes there are small short-term “miracles” that reward the effort.

No matter what school or community you are in, it is likely that there will be some form of racism. This might include the slander of a person or persons with apparent membership of a group that is stereotyped based on physical, cultural, social, sexual, religious or behavioural characteristics.

Small, isolated, long-established “European” communities can exhibit confrontational racism that challenges any effort made by teachers. However, urban communities with concentrations of long-term socioeconomic problems can also focus the brutal side of racism. After centuries of oppression, stereotypical and racist attitudes are likely to be equally strong in the oppressed and oppressor groups. These focuses of racism are just as common in Australia as in other post-colonial societies of the “new” world.



It is important to encourage collegial support and group strategies to prevent isolated efforts to counter racism from becoming energy draining and demoralising.

Broad suggestions Turning the suggestions into strategies

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| 1 | Make racism a school issue. | <p>Talk in your staffroom, staff meetings, to the principal and deputies; take it to the P&C, school council — find out where they stand.</p> <p>Promote anti-racism projects and curriculum initiatives in your school.</p> |
| 2 | Seek out allies in the wider community. | <p>Discuss the issues with colleagues inside and outside school and other community members.</p> <p>Meet with your Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) committee.</p> |
| 3 | Collaborate with school personnel to develop whole-of-school strategies. | <p>Find others in the school who will work with you: teachers, teacher-aides; senior students; guidance officers, chaplain; someone from Department of Education, Training and the Arts; a Department of Communities representative; or your local district office or education diocese.</p> |
| 4 | Collaborate with colleagues to develop classroom activities. | <p>Study racism with your class.</p> <p>Work with teachers in your own school to develop suitable activities.</p> <p>Network with teachers in other schools.</p> <p>Publicise what you are doing in department/systemic newspapers and industrial organisations' magazines.</p> |
| 5 | Increase your own knowledge, and counter racist arguments. | <p>Read widely, including the works of historians and writers such as Henry Reynolds, Jackie Huggins, Marcia Langton, Martin Nakata and others.</p> <p>QSA provides readings and resources that may be a useful starting point. Visit the QSA website <www.qsa.qld.edu.au> and select P–12 syllabuses & support > Indigenous perspectives > Support materials.</p> |
| 6 | Avoid racist language and concepts yourself. | <p>Notice when you might think racist thoughts or find racism making a social situation more comfortable, such as sharing racist jokes. Awareness of your own behaviour will help you to change it. When in situations where racist jokes and statements occur, voice your feelings about these and discuss why it is unacceptable.</p> |

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| 7 | Never publicly berate a young person who uses racist language. | <p>Aim to encourage different values.</p> <p>Avoid publicly denouncing students and their role models (e.g. parents, siblings, media-generated “heroes”). However, where possible question and challenge views based on stereotypes, ignorance and prejudices. Promote active debate.</p> |
| 8 | Take breaks from issues of intensity. | <p>If you start to feel depressed about your efforts, do something to “recharge your batteries”, such as going to the cinema, going away for the weekend, writing to or visiting an empathic friend, meditating or exercising.</p> <p>Also, regularly include activities that counter racism and generate positive feelings, such as organising a barbecue for your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community or hiring some videos (such as those suggested in the section “Developing classroom activities” below).</p> |
| 9 | Seek help from “experts”. | <p>All educational system providers within Queensland have Indigenous support staff and experts in the area of Indigenous education to assist you.</p> |
| 10 | Create a racism-free school environment | <p>Make your school a product of inclusivity methodologies. Create public artworks, mural and sculptures to promote inclusivity in the school and community. Develop reconciliation gardens and meeting places in the school. Construct memorials for events such as Sorry Day and world events that commemorate the sufferings caused by racism (e.g. the holocaust or local Indigenous massacres) or the triumphs of humanitarianism over racism (e.g. the end of apartheid in South Africa).</p> |

Detailed strategies for developing whole-of-school strategies

- Make an Acknowledgment of Country a normal part of the school parade proceedings. For special events provide a Welcome to Country. QSA provides some guidance for this. See *Welcome to Country and Acknowledgment of Country* (Protocol P001) on the QSA website <www.qsa.qld.edu.au>. Select P–12 syllabuses > Indigenous Perspectives > Support materials.
- Consult with groups such as your school’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education committee or IESIP (Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program) committee to develop annual plans for hosting events within the school such as Reconciliation Week, NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) Week, Sorry Day,

Harmony Day and World Indigenous Day. If you don't have a school committee to consider Indigenous education you should establish one. Celebrations can involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and personalities from the local area. Order, distribute and encourage staff and students to wear the respective badges before and during the events. Invite Elders and traditional custodians to open the celebrations.

- Form or join a local Reconciliation committee. This might be a locally-based school student committee or a whole-school community committee. Distribute Reconciliation materials generated in the previous 10 years and use these to promote Reconciliation in your school. Encourage your school to subscribe to *The Koori Mail*, Australia's national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander newspaper, and make this valuable resource available through the school library.
- Invite an Indigenous representative (e.g. Indigenous education workers) to conduct a cross-cultural workshop for the staff instead of a staff meeting.
- Include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education issues and community awareness within new staff member orientation.
- Create a whole-school approach to embedding Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum. This involves the organisational environment, curriculum and pedagogy, community engagement and participation, and personal and professional accountability. See the approach that Department of Education, Training and the Arts takes as a model of best practice: <<http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/indigenous/educators/eatsips-overview.html>>.
- Host a Torres Strait-style Kup Muri or an Aboriginal feast at school functions other than Indigenous functions e.g. celebrations of the school year.

Detailed strategies for developing classroom activities

- Consider Indigenous perspectives in **all** units you are delivering. Some questions that you might like to consider include:
 1. How can you involve Indigenous people?
 2. How is the content area relevant to Indigenous cultural and social practices and contexts? How can you show this relationship?
 3. Have you checked that your unit materials are not biased towards one particular way of viewing an issue or event?
 4. Have you included Indigenous resources in the unit?
 5. Have you created opportunities and choices in the assessment tasks for checking students understanding of Indigenous perspectives within the unit?
- Display the Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation and other reconciliation resources prominently in the classroom.
See: <www.reconciliation.org.au>.

- Keep up to date with news items on Indigenous issues. The SBS and ABC offer a fantastic view on Indigenous issues, while ABC radio, AAA and other local Indigenous radio stations provide Indigenous perspectives throughout their programming. For example, on Thursday 24 May 2007 at 8:21pm on ABC, Lowitja O'Donohue denounced the recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* report, stating that there has been a failure of moral authority and ethical leadership in Australia.

Current perspectives of Indigenous Australians provide a useful resource for classroom debate and discussion.

- Watch anti-racism films and videos. Preview videos to assess their appropriateness and decide what follow-up may be necessary. Suggested titles include:
 - films and television programs set in Australia: *Women of the Sun* (1981) which presents four stories in separate episodes, *Fringe Dwellers* (1986)
 - films set in South Africa: *Cry Freedom* (1987)
 - films set in America: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *The Hurricane* (1999)
 - films set in Europe: *Kinder der Landstrasse (Children of the Open Road)*, which presents striking parallels between the stolen generations and Swiss Government policies towards the Rom (gypsies) in the first half of the 20th century
 - *Kanyirminpa Jukurrpa*, the Martu History and Archive project, which is a collaboration between The National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) and the Martu peoples of the Australian Western Desert: <http://www.abc.net.au/canberra/stories/s1871756.htm>
 - From Wave Hill to Wik and Beyond 2002 (ABC): <http://www.abc.net.au/darwin/stories/s655768.htm>.
- Read related books, e.g. books and articles by historians such as Henry Reynolds, Jackie Huggins, Martin Nakata, John Pilger, Marcia Langton and others, *My Place* by Sally Morgan (2000), *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown (1970 — set in America), *Maybe Tomorrow* by Boori Pryor (1998), *Inside Black Australia* edited by Kevin Gilbert (1989 — poetry anthology), *Don't Take Your Love to Town* by Ruby Langford (1989). See also the QSA website www.qsa.qld.edu.au, select P-12 syllabuses & support > Indigenous perspectives > Support materials.
- Listen to songs, e.g. *Gurindji Blues* (Ted Egan), songs by Archie Roach, Goanna, Yothu Yindi, Paul Kelly, Tiddas, Christine Anu.
- Display relevant statistics — birth/death and infant mortality rates. Take care not to reinforce negative stereotypes with data, for example, percentage of Aboriginal people in prison populations. The ABS has a direct theme page to assist with locating Indigenous statistics. See: <http://www.abs.gov.au/Websitedbs/c311215.nsf/20564c23f3183fdaca25672100813ef1/0179c2b24398e077ca2570a8000945d2!OpenDocument>.

- Develop specific units and assessment items that consider Indigenous issues. For example consider a SOSE unit on why “immigrants” came to Australia in the previous 200 years — where from and how — and relate to refugees, persecution, racism and “misfits”.
- Visit an Indigenous cultural centre, e.g. Tjapukai (Cairns), Ngutana Lui (Inala) or local significant sites. Record these visits and publish in newsletters and on the school’s website.
- Promote the concepts and stories of Indigenous role models, intersperse with positive non-Indigenous role models. Access local role models and past students (e.g. invite them to speak, or to an informal social event, such as lunch or afternoon tea, with your students) to discuss their approaches in countering racism from their experiences.
- Familiarise yourself with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice issues. The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s website <www.humanrights.gov.au> is a useful resource.
- Invite guest speakers and cultural teachers from the local community to participate in the planning of your unit, the delivery of the unit and/or the evaluation, and viewing the outcomes of the unit.
- Display relevant posters and images of Indigenous Australians within the classroom. For example, display a map of Australia showing the diversity of Indigenous language groups across Australia.

All links in this document were correct on 7 February 2008. If any links have broken, please advise IndigenousPortal@qsa.qld.edu.au