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Report: Racism in Australian Schools

Impacts and Possible Solutions.   John Bosco Ngendakurio

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Abstract

This report explores the impact of, and possible solutions to, racism within Australian schools. The lack of a wide-ranging existing literature to develop a full understanding of the prevalence of racism in Australian schools and its impact on the victims' wellbeing and academic performance, from their perspectives, makes this topic particularly important. But even less attention has historically been paid to the impact of racism on the victims' sense of belonging in the school community. The victims' accounts presented in this report were secured through qualitative, semi-structured interviews. They graphically outline what students of colour must endure due to high prevalence of racism within Australian schools. Participants in this study recommend a range of approaches and strategies to alleviate or at least reduce the effects on racism, including an anti-racism policy, a tool and framework to assist teachers to deal with incidents of racism appropriately and confidently, on-site support officers to support students facing racism, teacher training to equip them with the right knowledge to respond to racism within schools, more robust discussions about racism at the foundational level, mandatory reporting rules that require teachers to report and act on racism within schools, inclusion of anti-racist discussions in the parent-teacher interviews, and training designed to enhance resilience in students who face racism at school.

Keywords: Racism with Australian schools, vulnerable students, social cohesion, belonging, anti-racist policy.

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Introduction

Australia is a country of paradox; that is, it is renowned for its multiculturalism, with diversity largely celebrated, and overt racism not tolerated at personal, institutional, or systemic level. But it is also known as a racist country (Fozdar 2022, p. 686). Racism remains a reality across Australian social, economic, and cultural spheres. It affects population groups and individuals in various degrees based on their ethnicity and other intersecting identities such as age and gender (Fozdar 2022, p. 686). Racism has also created a system of oppression and hierarchies between social groups based on perceived differences – place of origin, race, and cultural background, exacerbating societal inequalities structurally, institutionally, and interpersonally (Ben et al. 2021, p 2).

Racism detrimentally affects human relations and the overall wellbeing of the oppressed communities (Ben et al. 2021, p 2). It is a historic problem that has taken a particular form in hyper-diverse countries, including Australia, due to increasing intolerance towards some cultural groups, with discourses about who should belong shaping the Australian social fabric and justice (Dunn 2004, p. 410). In Australian schools, for example, racism is a major barrier to marginalised students' academic achievement, particularly when teachers engage in exclusionary practices or demonstrate a certain level of passivity in dealing with racialized incidents (Baak 2019, p. 128). This report was designed not only to explore the impact of racism within Australian schools, but also to outline possible solutions to this critical social and academic issue as demonstrated through the following literature review.

A Brief Literature Review

This literature review explores the impact of racism in Australian schools and possible solutions. The central question this section asks is, "*what does the literature anticipate will be the impact of, and solutions to, racism within Australian schools?*" This section is divided into

three main parts – the first section provides a context for how racism happens in Australian schools; the second covers its impact while the third provides the context for solutions and ideas that have previously worked to eliminate racism or at least reduce its effects on the health and wellbeing as well as the belonging of the victims in the school community.

The Prevalence of Racism in Australian Schools

Racism is widespread in Australia's educational settings. Michael McGown (2019) submits that 40 percent of non-white Australian students are victims of racial discrimination at school. He argues that many of these students are left feeling as if racism has become a part their everyday life. Hannah Yared, Grové Christine, and Denise Chapman (2020, p. 1506) are of the same views and suggest that it is common for non-white Australian students to experience racism through micro-aggressions from teachers and peers as well as systemic exclusions based on Eurocentric curricular that excludes non-white students' experiences and preferences. Racism is often exacerbated by teachers' lack of confidence and competency regarding the issue, white normativity (whiteness is the norm and all other racial categories are contrasted with whiteness as deviations from that norm), colour- blindness (treating individual equally without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity) and silencing (preventing the other party from speaking/expressing themselves) (Yared, Christine & Chapman 2020, p. 1506).

As Peter Hodge (2010, p. 10) notably puts it, it would be naïve to refute a possibility of racist elements in some of the attacks on Indian and other students of colour. This is because, Roz Ward (2017, p. 469) argues, Australian federal and state education policies have always prioritised the voices and experiences of white Australians since the dawn of colonisation. These policies remain intact, with discriminatory ideas about race, gender, and sexuality continuing to shape practices in all schools, at every level. Similarly, Glenn Auld (2018, p. 148) makes a point that Indigenous students, for example, are constantly alienated by teachers and peers who continuously force them to justify themselves, on top of daily experiences of

negative reactions and attitudes against them. These experiences are also the same for African students who, according to Jonnell Uptin (2021, p. 14), constantly feel unfairly targeted by teachers and peers for not knowing class rules or how to behave in different social settings.

Students of Asian backgrounds are also facing racially motivated oppressions in and outside Australian classrooms. Tseen Khoo (2017, p. 14) gives an example of one Asian student who was advised not to bother trying out to the school's play, the Wizard of Oz, simply because there was no way Dorothee would look and sound Asian. Similarly, Dawn Josef and Richard Johnson (2019, p. 332) submits that, for racists, looking Indian implies speaking English with the stereotyped Indian accent, which always trigger the constant comments about the individual's fluency with the English language, even when English is the individual's first language. These stories confirm the point made by Jonnell Uptin (2021, p. 14) who, speaking in the context of African students' experiences, suggested that Australian schools and education institutions generally lacked the cultural competency and the flexibility to properly address the needs of students of colour.

Everyday experiences of racist practices include systemic exclusions and different treatment by teachers, victimisation, and micro-aggressions, with comments such as *'I like your hair, is it real?'* as they refer to African students' hair (Baak 2019, p. 136). More dangerously, violent discourses directed to students of colour, especially Indigenous Australians, demonstrate the contemporary salience of the historical colonial violence. For example, in their paper, Adam Z. Seet and Yin Paradies (2018, p. 454) report that a Year 12 Aboriginal Australian girl in Melbourne who endured overt racial abuse at school was left traumatized upon hearing another student saying that Europeans should have killed them (Indigenous Australians) all. As Seet and Paradies note, a comment of this nature insinuates a valorisation of a systematic genocide against indigenous Australians by European colonisers and the reduction of Aboriginal Australians to the level of vermin in need of extermination.

On the other hand, while school uniforms in Australian schools can help to homogenise the student body and create a sense of belonging in the school community, the relevant policies have sometimes been used to oppress students of colour. As such, Stephanie Mergler (2017) argues, if schools wish to retain school uniforms, they must ensure that the relevant policies do not unfairly impact on one group of students; that is, the marginalised. Renae Barker (2017) made a similar point and gave an example of a parent who had to fight for his five-year-old son after the school made a decision not to enrol him unless he agreed not to wear his patka, a Sikh head covering. Similarly, Kathomi Gatwiri (2018) writes that a south Sudanese couple in Melbourne had to fight for their two daughters who were at risk of expulsion from the school because their braided hairstyle did not comply with the school uniform policy.

Denial is a key feature of modern Australia's racism, and it occurs at individual, institutional, and political levels (Nelson 2013, p. 90). Seet and Paradies (2018, p. 447) posit that racism in Australia is either totally denied by the general population or marked by subtle and covert forms founded upon a belief in cultural superiority where the out-group's supposed values are held against the so-called Australian values. Tim Soutphommasane (2017) is of similar views and submits that, in the typically Australian context, there are fundamental denials of racism, making it hard to reduce its impact in society, particularly within schools.

The Impact of Racism in Australian Schools

Racism within Australian schools remains a significant barrier to accessing, engaging, and succeeding in education (Gibbs, Paradies, Gee & Haslam 2022). Racism towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Glenn Auld (2018, p. 148) writes, affects their affiliation with the school, their self-esteem, and their motivation to succeed. Indigenous students' adverse experiences at school, Auld argues, cause emotional fallout, largely affecting their capacity to be present in the classroom, let alone to succeed academically. Auld's argument

is supported by Tseen Khoo (2017, p. 14) who also makes a point that the lived experiences of Asian students in Australian schools leave them traumatized, angry and ashamed. Furthermore, some of these students feel as if not being white enough is their fault. Africans and Indigenous students face the very same exclusionary practices by teachers with profound and morbid effects, as demonstrated by Melanie Baak (2019, p. 134) who writes that African and Indigenous students are strategically prevented from participating in the school choir, concerts and other activities based on their physical complexions.

In his article, Ahmed Yussuf (2023) points to an incident where an eight-year- old African-Australian child in one of the schools in Melbourne was left uncomfortable, embarrassed, and in tears when her headcover, commonly known as hijab, was forcefully removed by a teacher during the school assembly. Similarly, a principal at one of the Gold Coast (Southeast Queensland) schools pushed for hijab to be banned from his school in 2017 because, he claimed, allowing young girls to wear religious clothing creates a separate uniform for Muslim students. This left the Muslim school community helpless and traumatized because Muslim children were prevented from honouring their culture, which, according to Max Margan and Peter Delvin (2017), is morally wrong and unfair.

In his paper, John Bosco Ngendakurio (2017, p. 67) writes that racially motivated oppressions occur across all non-white school communities. He argues that African students, for example, are sometimes prevented from enrolling in subjects giving them the pathways to university as schools do not believe they fit in those classes. Students have historically had to fight tirelessly or move to different schools trying to get into OP subjects. Fozdar & Torezani (2008, p. 30- 63) support Ngendakurio's points in relation to stereotypes against Africans and give an example of a Sydney academic who declared publicly that black African refugees should not be accepted into the country because they are less intelligent, crime prone and violent (Fozdar & Torezani, 2008: 30- 63). This literature aligns with Dominic O'Sullivan's (2018) conclusions that exclusions from school are the worst fear for Indigenous students and their parents. He argues that indigenous children are constantly denied equal human worth and

are further plunged into vulnerable positions because, evidence suggests, experience of racism at school directly predicts lower test scores (O'Sullivan, 2018)

The above literature also aligns with Jonnell Uptin's (2021, p. 14) findings suggesting that many young students of colour, especially girls, are constantly reminded by their teachers not to dream or aim too high to avoid disappointments, actively discouraging them from pursuing tertiary education. Uptin's findings align with Belinda MacGill, Kay Whitehead & Lester Rigney's (2022, p. 05) submission that women of colour, especially indigenous Australians, have historically been subject to both gender and racial bias as well as discrimination where career advisers dismiss their ambitions to become medical doctors simply because they are black females and, therefore, they are counselled into nursing. But evidence also suggests that when students of colour such as Africans manage to get into university, they end up dropping out before they complete their degrees. Tebeje Molla (2020) suggests that the major reason why they drop out is the very long time it takes for them to qualify for tertiary admission in the first place.

The historic denial of racism in schools is dangerous because, as Seet and Paradies (2018, p. 447) would put it, it usually invokes ambiguity in the response of the receiver as the nature of the comment or the act may not be clearly attributed to racism. These points are also supported by Jacqueline K Nelson (2013, p. 90) who posits that denial comes with detrimental effect on anti-racist initiatives as it reduces the scope for local action and broader community engagement. More importantly, Monarrez et al. (2022, p. 180) argue, denial of racism and power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator create additional barriers to taking meaningful and appropriate action. As such, the pushback against racist norms feels pointless, creates fears of retaliation for speaking out, exposes victims to ridicule, and renders relevant interventions redundant.

Possible Solutions to Help Eliminate Racism in Australian Schools

This section critically outlines strategies and anti-racism policies that have previously been effective in eliminating or reducing racial discrimination in Australian private and public schools. For example, the NSW Government (2005) formulated and implemented an Anti-Racism Policy in 2005 to ensure no student, employee, caregiver, or community member experiences racism within the school environment. The policy was also used as a tool to eradicate any expressions of racism and to challenge the attitudes and actions that enable racism, including but not limited to students' victimisation. It was further supported with the NSW Education Departmental internal policies and frameworks, including student welfare policy, anti-racist values in NSW public schools, anti-racist student behaviour strategy, and wellbeing framework for NSW schools (NSW Government 2005).

Melanie Baak's (2019, p. 137) submits that detecting, understanding, and dismantling racially induced exclusions is critical for schools to foster inclusive environments for students from diverse backgrounds. This is because, Baak argues, inclusion is an ongoing project. For schools to truly be inclusive, Baak further suggests, they must engage in a continuous fight against the politics of identity, making sure they respond to the students' experiences and histories in a way that accommodates differences and eliminates barriers to equality of opportunity. Jacqueline K. Nelson, Kevin M. Dunn, and Yin Paradies (2011, p.63) go a bit further to suggest a 'bystander anti-racism policy'; that is, an obligation imposed to ordinary people to respond to incidents of interpersonal or systemic racism. The bystander anti-racism policy, Nelson et al. argue, would involve confrontational or diplomatic actions against the perpetrator and maintain a delicate balance between communicating disapproval and maintaining interpersonal relations. Such a policy would create new social norms that are intolerant of racism.

The above literature is supported by Natassia Chrysanthos (2020) who reports that students who took part in an anti-racism pilot program in New South Wales and Victoria, which

required them to speak out against racism for six months, developed great skills to interrupt racist behaviours and discriminatory practices within their schools. Similarly, the Australian National University (2020) reports that the Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR) initiative, which ran a school-based bystander intervention program in six primary schools across NSW and Victoria encouraging students and teachers to act when they witness racism, was engaging and effective in reducing racist incidences in those schools. All who took part in this were enthusiastic about it being expanded to other schools.

Based on the Black Lives Matter protests across the world and the urgent need to learn more about racism and talk to students in a way that can lead to positive change, Leticia Anderson, Kathomi Gatwiri, Lynette Riley, and Marcelle Townsend-Cross (2020) came up with a list of 9 tips teachers could use when talking about racism in and outside schools, including i) providing accurate and historical context (to avoid the denial of historic oppression, ii)explain racism is not just done by bad people, iii) show the impact of unintended harm, iv) encourage students to be brave in calling out racist behaviour, v) explain there are hierarchies within racism (experiences of racism are magnified when different forms of discrimination combine to create a more intensified exclusionary experience for people, based on intersections between their multiple marginalised identities.), vi) Be aware of students own racial trauma, vii) model inclusive behaviour, viii) Ensure diversity in the curriculum, ix) focus on change, not blame or shame.

Similarly, Danielle Tilbury and Kate Henderson (2003, p. 89) advocate for the implementation and enhancement of multicultural education as an interdisciplinary area of learning in Australian schools. This should be designed to promote social cohesion, tolerance, understanding, and equip students with the skills and values to successfully participate in a culturally and linguistically diverse society. Glenn Auld (2017, p. 148), on the other hand, makes a point that mandatory reporting laws that have been passed by Australian Parliament to require teachers to report certain child abuse and neglect to government authorities and hence protect the child from significant harm and assist parents or care-givers so the

likelihood of reoccurrence is reduced, should be applied to force teachers to report racist practices in Australian schools. This slightly aligns with the advice the NSW Government (2015, p. 7) sent to schools in 2015 requiring all of them to have a trained Anti-Racism Contact Officer (ARCO). This officer's main task is to assist parents, staff, and students who have complaints regarding racism and facilitates the complaints handling process.

Besides, the Australian Human Rights Commission (n.d) provides an anti-racism e-learning course that aims to equip staff with a general understanding of racism and its impact. It is also an important tool through which staff, especially those in leadership positions, can address racism and exclusionary behaviours in the workplace. The course takes between 2 and 3 hours to complete and it is specifically designed to:

- Increase understanding of racism as a concept and experience
- Increased understanding of race and racism in the Australian context
- Increased awareness of the impacts of racism
- Increased range of strategies and tools to address racism
- Increased skills for effective bystander action.

The methodology used in this report involves a triangulation of the raw data with the literature from primary and secondary sources to fully answer the main research question.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was the most appropriate method to collect data for this report that investigated individuals' lived experiences as they were presented through reflections, feelings, ideas, perceptions, and attitudes (cf. Öhman 2005). With this methodology, the researcher can thoroughly examine phenomena that impact on the lived reality of the research participants in a particular social context (Mills & Birks 2014). As

Dodgson (2017) puts it, qualitative research methodology design empowers participants to share their views on a topic that has shaped their and their family's lives. The researcher guided the participants into reflecting on the 'how', 'why', and 'when' questions in relation to specific phenomena that enabled racism within schools.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with all the sample. Such interview settings helped him to mitigate some methodological and procedural challenges. The settings generally provide more social cues such as body languages, including facial reaction, original voice, and intonation (Opdenakker 2006, p. 3). Semi-structured interviews allowed a relaxed and professional engagement with participants, enabling the researcher to collect qualitative data by asking open-ended questions. The researcher used a written interview guide, including a set of questions (which were provided to participants beforehand), and this shaped the robust nature of the conversations. As it was in this research, semi-structured interviews enable the interviewer to keep control of the interview process and the information flow (Ayres 2008, p. 810).

The Sample

Participants in this research are former primary and secondary school students of colour and their parents/ legal guardians as well as school staff. The victims' sample consist of adult men and women from different regions (Brisbane, Toowoomba, and Cairns), ethnicities, religious, racial, social, and economic backgrounds, who have had direct exposure to racism within Australian schools. The insights gathered through these interviews helped the researcher to achieve data saturation; that is, the point at which no new information or themes were observed in the data (Guest, Bunce & Johnson 2006).

Sampling Overview				
Name*	Age Bracket	Gender	Country of origin	Parent / Staff / Student
Kate	30-50	Female	Pakistan	Parent/staff
John	18-30	Male	China	Former student
Mary	18-30	Female	Somalia	Former student
Joe	18-30	Male	Somalia	Former student
Jacki	30-50	Female	Tonga	Parent/staff
Noella	18-30	Female	Pakistan	Former student
Rosalia	30-50	Female	Burundi	Former student /parent

Name changed for privacy and confidentiality

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling method was used to adequately match the sample with the aims, objectives, and research questions, with the help of Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland (ECCQ). Purposive sampling involves a random selection of participants, but this is strategically completed within the segment of a population believed to hold relevant information on the issues of interest (Guarte & Barrios 2006). Purposive sampling further helps the researcher to save time as it enables them to strategically select cases that will most likely have the merits to be included in the final sample (Campbell et al. 2020).

As it was anticipated, specific people with direct knowledge about racism in Australian schools held different but important views about the issues and possible solutions to racism within

Australian schools. Given the nature of the topic being investigated, there was a risk that participants become upset or feel emotional distress, when discussing their experiences with racism. To mitigate this risk, the leadership at the Queensland Program for Assistance of Survivors of Torture and Trauma (QPASTT) kindly committed to making their duty counsellors available in case of heightened emotional distress during or following the interviews. Fortunately, no participants displayed distress during or after the interview. Moreover, ethical clearance from Griffith University was required.

Ethical Clearance from Griffith University

This research has fully adhered to the Human Ethics Research Committee's requirement that mandates all Australian research involving human subjects to maintain high ethical standards (Usher 2000). A review by an independent committee, which determines whether the proposed research poses risks to either participants or the researcher (Williams 2000), was sought and approved **(GU Ref No: 2023/821)** prior to the actual interviews to ensure the research follows all the ethical principles and guidelines and they collected raw data to inform the following results section.

Results of Qualitative Research

This section contains the most relevant direct quotes from qualitative interviews to help us critically test the key points made in the literature review. Participants' insights have been triangulated with the literature from primary and secondary sources to demonstrate the commonness, the impact of, and possible solution to, racism within Australian schools.

Qualitative Findings on the Commonness of Racism in Australian Schools

The findings that follow confirm the literature suggesting that racism is widespread in Australian schools. Michael McGown (2019) says that 40 percent of non-white Australian students are victims of racial discrimination. This point is also supported by Hannah Yared, Grové Christine, and Denise Chapman (2020, p. 1506) who assert that it is common for non-white Australian students to experience racism through micro-aggressions from teachers and peers. According to my sample, McGown, Yared, Christine, and Chaptman were right, as attested by Kate, a parent of a former student of Pakistani heritage and who was constantly excluded from her reading group by her peers, as she puts it:

> I have worked in the [school] library as well. And all kids are sitting together, but I can see that my daughter has been not (sic) included in the reading group […] because nobody wants to include her in the reading [group]. It's not the teacher, the teacher says, 'can we have her in this group?'. After a while, they would close the circle; they would sit together, and my daughter has moved out of that reading group (Kate, Interview, 06 November 2023).

The experiences lived by Kate's daughter are like Mary's, a second-generation Australian woman of Somali heritage who also faced racially motivated exclusionary practices at one of the schools in Southeast Queensland. She explains:

> I did have the feeling of people leaving me out of things. Like for example if they are picking a team and you are the last person to be picked (Mary, Interview, 8 Nov 2023).

Similarly, Noella, a second-generation Australian woman of Pakistani heritage and former high school student in Southeast Queensland, is of the view that she was not invited to birthday parties due to racial exclusions, leaving her lonely, as she can recall:

> *Kids would have birthday parties, with the whole class invited, and I was the one excluded from that […]. I did care quite a lot because you do get quite lonely as a kid. You'd hear all the stories about how this kid went to that kid's house over the weekend, and they did this, they did that, and you are like, 'oh, that seems [sounds] nice, it would be nice to have [do] something like that." (Noella, Interview, 23 November 2023).*

Yared, Christine, and Chapman (2020, p. 1506) postulate that racism is often exacerbated by teachers' lack of confidence and competency regarding the issue, white normativity, colour-blindness and silencing. My participant, Kate, agrees and gives an example:

> *I have spoken to the teacher (and) to the curriculum team leader. I did not get to speak to the principal because they would say, 'we will get this resolved for you. We will speak to the child. And the child would write a sorry note to my son, and that things would be okay.' But then again after one month, it would start again (Kate, Interview, 06 November 2023).*

The findings from my sample also indicate that Peter Hodge (2010, p. 10) was correct to suggest that it would be naïve to refute a possibility of racist elements in some of the attacks on Indian and other students of colour. Mary, a black African woman makes a point that she was targeted at school simply because she was African and wore a headscarf, as she puts it:

> *There were people specifically, like a few white girls [that] I think targeted me because of me being African; because of me wearing a hijab [….]. I remember one incident we were waiting in line at the tuckshop in*

primary school and they just started making fun of me saying,
'[inaudible] nobody likes you and things like that.'… I felt really bad…I
didn't cry in the moment, but I cried when I got home… The next day, I
was on edge (Mary, Interview, 8 November 2023).

On the other hand, Roz Ward (2017, p. 469) writes that Australian federal and state education policies have always prioritised the voices and experiences of white Australian students since the dawn of colonisation. These policies remain intact, with discriminatory ideas about race, gender, and sexuality continuing to shape practices in all schools, at every level. According to my sample, such mentality leads to minimal investment in students of colour, particularly Africans. Jacki has worked in schools across Cairns for many years, and she gives an example below:

This year alone, there is (sic) two students, for example. One is African,
and one is non-African. The non-African students get a lot of support in
terms of what's out there. What's available for that person. There is
another student who is African who is a wonderful human being, who
is doing well in mainstream and not offered the same advice as what
this [other] person is getting… the non-African person will be told, 'this
is available, this and that is available' and for the for this African
student, no conversation will be had on, 'hey, you know this is what
you can do after your high school'… I don't think they care as much
(Jacki, Interview, 21 Nov 2023).

Accounts from my sample also confirm Jonnell Uptin's (2021, p. 14) point that African students constantly feel unfairly targeted by teachers and peers for not knowing class rules or how to behave in different social settings. Joe, a young man of Somali heritage, gives an example to demonstrate how this practically happens:

I was playing sport on a Tuesday afternoon, and this white kid came out to me and he took my hat while his friends are recording. And then I was, 'can I have my hat back?' He started running. As I was chubby, I wasn't chasing him. I just gave up, and he was like, 'go back to your country, go back to your country'… the teacher was right there, not said a word. I went to the teacher and before I could speak, the teacher was 'where is your hat?'. I got in trouble for not wearing my hat (Joe, Interview, 8 Nov 2023)

Similarly, students of Asian backgrounds are also facing racially motivated oppressions in and outside Australian classrooms. My sample's experiences align with Tseen Khoo (2017, p. 14) example of one Asian student who was advised not to bother trying out to the school's play, the Wizard of Oz, simply because there was no way Dorothee would look and sound Asian. They also align with Dawn Josef and Richard Johnson (2019, p. 332) submission that, for racists, looking Indian implies speaking English with the stereotyped Indian accent, which always trigger the constant comments about the individual's fluency with the English language, even when English is the individual's first language. My sample, John, is of Chinese background, but he was born here and sounds typically Australian. However, he was constantly mocked, as he recalls:

Sometimes when some of my classmates would walk by, they would insult me by making faces, pulling faces. Insulting the way, I speak as well […] if you didn't already [notice] with my name, I am Asian. I am Chinese, mainland Chinese. So very commonly, it would be kind of like how we would pronounce things. Usually try like using broken English, speaking certain words in a mocking tone towards me (John, Interview, 7 November 2023).

Furthermore, racist students constantly remind students of colour that they do not belong. For example, while Kate's son was not refused to take part in school activities, peers would always find a way to demonstrate he was not welcome there, as she puts it:

> *In primary [school], my son used to play cricket and he was a bowler; the first bowler. But then with kids who were around, when he would start to play, they would just use verbal racist comments to put him off, and he would just leave the game and go to the side and just, you know, cry […]. One of the child[ren] even hit him with a ball, you know, to just ask him to leave the play because he was not welcome there … (Kate, Interview, 06 November 2023).*

Speaking in the context of African students' experiences, Jonnell Uptin (2021, p. 14) suggested that Australian schools and education institutions generally lacked the cultural competency and the flexibility to properly address the needs of students of colour, which, Baak (2019, p. 136) adds, has led to systemic exclusion and micro-aggressions. My sample strongly agrees, with Mary giving the example below:

> *I remember when we used to do swimming, I used not to wear my hijab and I would get compliments. So, in that way, it was indirect encouragement to not wear my hijab because they were like, 'oh, you are so pretty without your hijab (Mary, Interviewee, 8 Nov 2023).*

Similarly, some comments made to students of colour in form of micro-aggressions imply that the society and schools do not expect Africans to be intelligent. Mary explains:

> *[…] people would always be surprised by the fact that I was smart, which I never thought was a bad thing, you know. But as I get [got] older, I realised it is [was] just because they expect like nothing from you, or they expect low of you […]. They expect you to be stupid (Mary, Interview, 8 Nov 2023).*

Joe also experienced micro-aggressions from his teacher and peers. He gives an example of an episode during a history class where the teacher would stare at him every time the N-word was read out:

> *When they read a book, they made eye contact with me everytime they came to the N-word. They say [mentioned] the N-word a couple of times, and every single time, without failure, my teacher would stare at me…I don't know if it is her trying to get like an acceptance from me… that was done in a kind of weird way. And that was in year 8 (Joe, Interview, 8 Nov 2023)*

More worryingly, Joe explains, is the teachers' lack of motivation, willingness and courage to act on racist incidents, as he puts it:

> *There is another day I was walking to class and there was one teacher in front of me. There is [were] two boys behind me and they said, 'let's play; let's see who can say the word nigger the loudest…they said. There was the teacher, me, them (showing the physical position on the pathway). For the teacher, if I can hear it, he can hear it [too]. I turned around and said, 'what did you say?... and I called the teacher then, and he kept walking. And I said, 'whatever.'… I did not bother reporting anymore, to be honest (Joe, Interview, 8 Nov 2023)*

Several participants in this research also confirmed Seet and Paradies points that violent racist comments insinuate a valorisation of a systematic genocide against indigenous Australians by European colonisers and the reduction of Aboriginal Australians to the level of vermin in need of extermination. The same fate is faced by Africans, as Mary illustrates below:

> *I was coming back to my lunch table, and they were having a discussion, and I said, 'what are you guys talking about?' and one person told me,*

'Should niggers be enslaved again?" I just left the table… I was pretty upset

(Mary, Interview, 8 Nov 2023).

Besides, personal attacks on African students' looks and smell leave them in vulnerable and inferior positions. Mary gives another example:

> *Not only you smell, but your food also smells weird[ly]. That's another thing… if you are not white and you bring traditional food to school, people will say that it smells weird; that is yuk, or things like that (Mary, Interview, 8 Nov 2023).*

According to Noella, a Muslim woman, verbal attacks are even worse for students of colour who are also visibly Muslim, as she recounts from her own personal experience:

> *I was the only girl that [who] was head-scarfed in my grade […]. I had quite a few times where people pulled it off […] 'she is a terrorist. Allah Akbar [Arabic phrase for 'God is the greatest'. They would pull it off and start screaming that. Or just call me a terrorist (Noella, Interview, 23 November 2023).*

The findings presented above prove that racism is widely prevalent in primary and secondary schools in Australia. Racism involves a range of oppressive practices including, but is not limited to, verbal and physical abuse, harassments, and discrimination, all of which have profound and long-term adverse impact on the victims as demonstrated through the findings below.

Qualitative Findings on the Impact of Racism in Australian Schools

The findings that follow assert that racism remains a significant barrier to accessing, engaging, and succeeding in Australian education. Accounts from my sample confirm Glenn Auld's (2018, p. 148) point that racism affects oppressed students' affiliation with the school, their

self-esteem, and their motivation to succeed. They also confirm Tseen Khoo's (2017, p. 14) point that the lived experiences of Asian students in Australian schools leave them traumatized, angry and ashamed, as confirmed by Noella who claims that racism has significantly impacted her overall school attendance, largely missing out academically. She explains:

> *I lost all motivations to go to school. Some days, I remember, I would use any excuses for not going to school because of how bad it was – how badly I didn't want to be there. Because almost every day or every second day, something racist was being said…. I lost a lot of attendances in crucial classes, which definitely brought down my grades- crucial like exam times, I would not want to go. I missed a lot of studies in terms of preparation… that significantly brought down my grades, I believe (Noella, Interview, 23 November 2023).*

The point made by Noella are supported by Joe who progressively lost his motivation to work hard at school because, he was made to believe, he was already too stupid to succeed academically. He claims:

> *They treated me differently. They assumed [as long as] I am black, I am a refugee even if I was born in Australia […]. I knew that as soon as I came to school, and I think being in ESL class in the first place stuffed my self-esteem generally. It gave me no drive to work any harder. I thought, 'if I am in the ESL, I am not gonna make it […] what's the point of me trying? I lacked motivation […]. When I was in primary school, I wasn't trying to do great […]. It is not worth it. You are already too dumb (Joe, Interview, 8 Nov 2023).*

Baak (2019, p.134) made a point that Africans and Indigenous students face exclusionary practices by teachers with profound and morbid effects. They are strategically prevented

from participating in the school choir, concerts and other activities based on their physical complexions. My sample agrees, but Kate goes a bit further to suggest that it is not just exclusions from activities, it is also the torture and trauma students of colour must endure because of constant alienations, as Kate recounts from her son's experience in primary school:

> *He [my son] would come [back home] in very bad mental state, and I would just ask him to calm down, talk to me, be expressive, don't keep it inside, I would engage him in after school activities so that his mind would be off that negative environment. So, yes, it was tough, but he has passed that (moved on), but he still remembers, unfortunately, he still remembers… He was only five years when he started school (Kate, Interview, 06 November 2023).*

Kate's son experiences align with Noella's fate at the hands of racist students whose action have left her mentally distraught.

> *Mentally, I was very distraught as to why I didn't have any friends; like why doesn't anyone want to be my friend? Why doesn't anyone want to play with me? Mentally, I was feeling lonely… just because of the way I looked (Noella, Interview, 23 November 2023).*

Noella's remarks prove Trent, Dooley and Dougé's (2019) argument that the impact of racism has been linked to birth disparities and mental health problems in children and adolescents. Besides, John Bosco Ngendakurio (2017, p. 67) writes that racially motivated oppressions occur across all non-white school communities. He makes a point that African students are sometimes prevented from enrolling in subjects giving them the pathways to university as schools do not believe they fit in those classes. Fozdar & Torezani (2008, p. 30- 63) make a similar point that stereotypes against Africans as less intelligent, crime prone and violent have

resulted in school management coming up with initiatives that are oppressive and disempowering in nature, as Joe puts it:

> *I was born in Australia, and I was put into ESL (English as Second Language) classes even if I was born here, and I only speak English. So I felt that was very funny […]. It is just this feeling you get. It is this feeling you get where I think all these people don't see me as someone [inaudible]… they just see me as an idiot. A refugee (Joe, Interview, 8 Nov 2023)*

The above findings also align with Jonnell Uptin's (2021, p. 14) submission that many young students of colour, especially girls, are constantly reminded by their teachers not to dream or aim too high to avoid disappointments, actively discouraging them from pursuing tertiary education. My sample fully agrees, with Rosalie, a young Australian woman of Burundian heritage currently living in Toowoomba, attesting:

> *When we were selecting year 11 and 12 subjects […], I remember them [school managers] having a meeting with me and my mum and they tried to explain to her that I am still new in Australia; I can't choose such and such subjects because they are very hard [for me] … I remember feeling this [inaudible] pressure. It's like, 'why are they putting this much energy trying to send me to TAFE? [...]. I was choosing to do biology, chemistry, and mathematics, but they kept saying, 'no, no, no, there are other options, you go to TAFE. Like they were just insisting, 'you go to TAFE.' (Rosalia, Interview, 27 Nov 2023).*

Jacki agrees with the point made by Rosalia in terms of what students of colour must go through as they negotiate their pathways into tertiary education, as she puts:

> *We had a student who was of African background who started here at school. I think this would be the first time we had taken an African*

student or a student who has English as their second language. Now, this student, for example, wanted to go to university, right? So, I learned to speak English when I was 10. So, when this student came, he spoken good [better] language than I ever was at the age of 10… He always wanted to go to university, and all it would take was one staff member to believe in the student, which I think he did not get staff to believe in him. So, they changed his pathways from mainstream to doing VET (Vocational Education and Training) courses (Jacki, Interview, 21 November 2023)

Furthermore, when students of colour such as Africans manage to get into university, Tebeje Molla (2020) submits, they end up dropping out before they complete their degrees. The major reason for this trend, Molla suggests, is the very long time it takes for them to qualify for tertiary admission in the first place. Noella agrees:

It did took [take] me a little while to get to where I am now, where I am happy in terms of my studies…I feel like if I had a little bit more motivation, if had more support from my teachers in terms of what people would say [racist attacks], then I would definitely have got better rank and been able to go to my career lot quicker… 2 years extra that have been added (Noella, Interview, 23 November 2023).

The findings in this research have also confirmed the points made by Seet and Paradies (2018, p. 447) that the historic denial of racism usually invokes ambiguity in the response of the receiver as the nature of the comment or the act may not be clearly attributed to racism. They also support Jacqueline K Nelson's (2013, p. 90) point that the denial of racism comes with detrimental effect on anti-racist initiatives as it reduces the scope for local action and broader community engagement. Moreover, account from my sample prove Monarrez et al. (2022, p. 180) argument that denial of racism and power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator create additional barriers to taking meaningful and appropriate action. As such,

the pushback against racist norms feels futile, exposes victims to ridicule, and renders relevant interventions redundant. According to Joe, as teachers did not believe racism existed, racist students were never held to account. The victims faced double trouble, as he puts it:

> *There was actually a time where I got in[to] a fight because this guy called me nigger and then I ended up fighting him, and they said to me, 'why did you fight him, and I said he called me the N-word. And they said, 'oh, okay', and then nothing happened from there. But I got a school suspension, and that kid got to go, free (Joe, Interview, 8 Nov 2023).*

Several students of color gave up on reporting racist incidents simply because racist incidents were seen as a joke or bullying by the school leaders, and Noella does not agree because…

> *[hijab] is a clothing… you wouldn't take off someone's pants just because you thought it was funny (Noella, Interview, 23 November 2023).*

Jacki, a school staff member over many years agrees that the issue of racism is not only denied, but it is also avoided altogether within school environments, as she puts it:

> *There is a denial that racism occurs… everyone knows that racism is not to take place in our school. Has it been brought up (discussed)? No, it has not been brought up (Jacki, Interview, 21 November 2023)*

The findings above have graphically demonstrated that racism within Australian school comes with detrimental academic and social outcomes for the oppressed students and their families. It is critical to continuously reflect on racism and stand against it to build a fairer and more inclusive for society for all.

Qualitative Findings on Possible Solutions to Help Eliminate Racism in Australian Schools

Participants in this research largely support the solutions to help reduce or eliminate racism within Australian schools as suggested in the literature review. The key accounts from my sample, for example, indicate that the NSW Government's (2005) Anti-Racism Policy and tool to eradicate any expressions of racism and to challenge the attitudes and actions that enable racism, including but not limited to some students' victimisation, could be instrumental in eradicating or reducing racism within Australian school. From her years of experience in the education sector, Jacki believes that teachers have got tools to deal with other pressing and sensitive issues, but not racism, as she puts it:

> *Have I been given tools to deal with bullying? Yes. Have I ever been given with tools to deal with students if a student comes to me when suffering [from] mental health and self-harm? Yes. I have been given those tools. But if a student comes to me with racism, have I been given the tools, no. (Jacki, Interview, 21 November 2023).*

Joe is of the same views, from his experiences as a student of colour. He suggests that either schools do not follow policy procedures, or the actual policy does not exist. He explains:

> *Either they [schools] don't follow the policy that they have now or they don't have one. Because it is just crazy what I have seen in [with] my own eyes. Teachers definetely need to be held accountable for ignoring racism [...] (Joe, Interview, 8 Nov 2023).*

The point made by Joe is supported by Noella who, also from her lived experiences as a student of colour and Muslim, does not believe teachers are equipped with the right tools

and knowledge to address racism within schools and therefore, they are too scared to deal with it. She attests:

> *I think our teachers have to be educated on how to deal with these matters… A lot time it would occur, it would happen in their class, and they would just pass it over. They would flash it under the mat and go on with the lessons. I want at least proper protocols to be implemented into the school system where teachers understand what needs to be done and how to be understanding and accompanying towards people who are being targeted rather than brushing over the matter and expect the child to be okay (Noella, Interview, 23 November 2023).*

Most of my sample also agree with Melanie Baak's (2019, p. 137) submission that detecting, understanding, and dismantling racially induced exclusions is critical for schools to foster inclusive environments for students from diverse backgrounds, as attested by Noella who makes a point that awareness about racism must be enhanced at the same level as anti-bullying education:

> *Zero tolerance for bullying is being pushed quite a lot. But they don't understand what is racism and what is bullying, and how severe some of these racist remarks towards some people can be or the effect they have on a child, especially a child at school (Noella, Interview, 23 November 2023).*

Mary also agrees and recommend more robust discussions about racism at the foundational level, as she puts it:

> *Be open about talking about racism in this country, on a foundational level, to let people in schools, teachers, and students, actually have these conversations… In every other country, it is anti-racism week, in*

Australian, it's Harmony Day.…So we don't have a culture (Mary, Interview, 8 Nov 2023).

Natassia Chrysanthos (2020) reports that students who took part in an anti-racism pilot program in New South Wales and Victoria, which required them to speak out against racism for six months, developed great skills to interrupt racist behaviours and discriminatory practices within their schools. However, my participate Kate does not believe school-based initiatives alone would maximize the outcomes for the oppressed students. She explains:

As far as I remember, all teachers have been very responsible by acknowledging that it [racism] is happening. But … I believe that education also takes place at home. So, the parents also need to little bit, you know, encourage their child[ren] not to verbally abuse somebody… at school, they are there for 6 hours, 7 hours, but kids are more at home … Suspension doesn't help. When it's not coming from the home. Education at home is missing. Education about being accepting of our multiculturalism in Australia, and anywhere in the world ((Kate, Interview, 06 November 2023).

Besides, my sample support Glenn Auld's (2017, p. 148) argument that racist incidents should be reportable under mandatory reporting laws that have been passed by Australian Parliament to require teachers to report certain child abuse and neglect to government authorities and hence protect the child from significant harm and assist parents or care-givers so the likelihood of reoccurrence is reduced. My sample further support the NSW Government's (2015, p. 7) direction to schools in 2015 requiring all of them to have a trained Anti-Racism Contact Officer (ARCO). This officer's main task is to assist parents, staff, and students who have complaints regarding racism and facilitates the complaints handling process. Jacki illustrates below:

We have people in places who look after different areas. We have counsellors. We have counsellors who look after mental health of the students and everything. We have other key personel who look after the bullying at school […]. Each staff [member] has a role, and all the students are under our care… all students know they can report bullying to all staff member. All students know that there is an email where they can email if they want to remain annonymous… where no one knows that they have emailed. And we frequently have a week of focussing on 'are you okay?' I know it is about mental health but in there, we also work on how to stop bullying. It is a week rather than a day thing…. The subject of racism has never been brought up at school, and there is no awarness about racism (Jacki, Interview, 21 November 2023).

Joe, a former student also wished guiding counsellors who were readily available at his school to help students going through a range of challenges also attended to victims of racist attacks, as he puts it:

Having their [students'] own space to go to express their feelings. Because right now, with all the guidance counsellors, it is not really a race thing, it is more like a sex thing. It's just 90 percent a girls' thing… And officer to report to on racism wouldn't be bad (Joe, Interview, 8 Nov 2023).

Finally, while Kate agrees that the Australian Human Rights Commission (n.d) anti-racism e-learning course that equip staff with general understanding of racism and its impact is critical, she would also like to see training designed to enhance resilience in students who face racism almost daily. She explains:

I took this program on resilience… I forgot the name of it. That was for children who were facing racism or bullying or anything of that kind, at

high school level. So, she (my daughter) attended that, and from that,
she learned a few good things and she said, 'mum, I really found this
helpful. Now I know how to deal with my emotions when something
like this happens.' So that is a very good program (Kate, Interview, 06
November 2023).

The above findings indicate that racism can be prevented if right initiatives are put in place as expressed in the literature review, tested in the findings above, and recommended in the following section.

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The key points made in the literature review have been tested through qualitative interviews and it can be concluded that authors such as Baak (2019, p. 128), Michael McGown (2019), and Hannah Yared, Grové Christine, as well as Denise Chapman (2020, p. 1506) were correct to suggest that racism is a major barrier to marginalised students' academic achievement, particularly when teachers engage in exclusionary practices or demonstrate a certain level of passivity in dealing with racialized incidents. It is also clear that Roz Ward (2017, p. 469) was right to suggest that Australian federal and state education policies have always prioritised the voices and experiences of white Australian students since the dawn of colonisation, with discriminatory ideas about race, gender, and sexuality continuing to shape practices in all schools, at every level.

On the other hand, Jonnell Uptin's (2021, p. 14) suggestion that Australian schools and education institutions generally lacked the cultural competency and the flexibility to properly address the needs of students of colour was tested and proven to be true through several accounts from my sample. More dangerously, accounts from my sample have confirmed Glenn Auld's (2018, p. 148) argument that racism affects oppressed students' affiliation with the school, their self-esteem, and their motivation to succeed. They also confirm Tseen Khoo's

(2017, p. 14) point that the lived experiences of Asian students in Australian schools leave them traumatized, angry and ashamed, significantly reducing their motivation to attend school, largely missing out academically. But a range of initiatives that have previously worked to prevent or alleviate the effects of racism with Australian schools were also uncovered by the literature and proven through participants' accounts as they recommend:

1. Every school to have an anti-racism policy and tool like the NSW Government's (2005), designed to eradicate any expressions of racism and to challenge the attitudes and actions that enable racism, including but not limited to some students' victimisation.
2. Teacher training to equip them with knowledge to address racism within schools effectively and confidently. These trainings would help them detect, understand, and dismantle racially induced exclusions, effectively fostering inclusive environments for students from culturally diverse backgrounds.
3. More robust discussions about racism at the foundational level – call racism as it is.
4. Mandatory reporting rules that require teachers to report and act on racist incidents within schools.
5. Expansion of the guiding counsellors' team to include officer/s mandated to help victims of racist attacks at school.
6. Inclusion of the school anti-racist policy as an agenda item during the parent-teacher interviews
7. Training designed to enhance resilience in students who face racism at school.

The recommendations above are particularly important because this report was designed to give a voice to the victims and their families; that is, maximizing their input and participation in determining what could be durable solutions to the critical issue of racism within Australian schools.

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