



Australian Muslim Women's
Centre for Human Rights
Equality without Exception

Stand Out, Speak Up

Racism and Islamophobia in
Victorian Schools

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Authors:

Dr Kate Hammond - Research, Policy & Advocacy Coordinator
Nesreen Bottriell - General Manager

Designed by:

Mariam Hajou - Social Media & Digital Marketing Coordinator

Project Staff

Fazlinda Faroo - Community Programs Manager
Micheline Erbes - Program Coordinator
Sanam Wahidi - Program Coordinator

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Telephone: (03) 9481 3000

Email: reception@amwchr.org.au

Web: www.amwchr.org.au

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About Us

This report has been developed by the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR). AMWCHR is an organisation of Muslim women leading change to advance the rights and status of Muslim women in Australia.

We bring over 30 years of experience in providing one-to-one support to Muslim women, young women, and their families, developing and delivering community education and capacity-building programs to raise awareness and shift prevailing attitudes. We also work as advocates - researching, publishing, informing policy decisions and reform initiatives as well as offering training and consultation to increase sector capacity to recognise and respond to the needs of Muslim women, young women, and children.

As one of the leading voices for Muslim women's rights in Australia, we challenge the most immediate and pertinent issues Muslim women face every day. We promote Muslim women's right to self-Determination, recognising the inherent agency that already exists, bringing issues of inequality and disadvantage to light.

AMWCHR works with individuals, the community, partner organisations and government to advocate for equality within an Australian context. This report is designed to contribute greater awareness of the unique experiences and challenges facing Muslim young people, their families, and our communities when it comes to racism and Islamophobia in Australian Schools. It is hoped that through this report and our recommendations, tangible action on racism in Victorian schools can be made.

Acknowledgements

AMWCHR acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands our organisation is located on and where we conduct our work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present. AMWCHR is committed to honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters, and seas and their rich contribution to society.

This Report recognises that gender, race, and religion intersect to create multiple forms of discrimination and violence against Muslim women, particularly in a context of growing Islamophobia. AMWCHR also acknowledges that preventing prejudice in all forms is bound to the struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Before we can successfully tackle issues within our communities, Australia must address the ongoing impacts of colonisation, systemic racism, and discrimination in all its forms in this country.

AMWCHR would also like to thank the individuals who participated in the Stand Out, Speak Up program, including those who volunteered their time for consultations and interviews.

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1. Executive Summary

The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR) has shed light on the state of racism and Islamophobia in Australia consistently over our 30 years' history. In 2020 and 2022, we continued this work through our Stand Out, Speak Up program, which aimed to promote action on and awareness of Muslim communities' experiences of racial and religious discrimination. Over the course of the delivery of this program, one area which was consistently identified as a high-risk environment for experiences of racism was schools. Young women who participated in the workshop component of the program relayed stories of the racism and Islamophobia they experienced in the classroom. These accounts included serious incidents of racial abuse and targeting from both peers and staff members, including teachers. Consequently, the AMWCHR research team conducted interviews with school staff members and professionals working in the school environment to gather further insight into the state of racism and Islamophobia in Victorian schools. The combined perspectives of students and professionals working in the Victorian school environment have been used to identify an appropriate course of action that ensures the safety and wellbeing of students from diverse backgrounds.

Analysis of the interview data revealed consistent themes in terms of how participants viewed their own, their colleagues', and their schools' responses on anti-racism. Overall, findings revealed that:

- Racism remains prevalent within the schools included in this study. Though the results from this research are preliminary due to the small sample size, they suggest this is representative of broader trends across Victorian schools.
- Teachers are either unwilling or unable to engage in anti-racism research. This means that anti-racism work is sidelined in the face of high workloads, a perception that racism is not an issue within schools, and/or fear of recrimination from management for speaking about existing issues.
- School management is similarly resistant to investigating racism within their schools. Participants felt that management is failing to take a leadership position in prioritising anti-racism.
- When students engage in racist behaviour, responses follow standard punitive disciplinary action set out for behavioural management issues broadly. This means that schools are failing to facilitate long-term behavioural change to prevent further incidents going forward.
- Anti-racism and cultural capacity building training is uncommon in schools. As a consequence, school staff lack the skills and knowledge to recognise and respond to racism and its manifestations, and have little understanding of their students' cultural backgrounds. This is particularly an issue due to staffing of schools being largely unrepresentative of the student bodies.

Considering these findings, AMWCHR recommends the following action be taken by the Victorian Department of Education:

Recommendation 1: Invest in a funded large-scale research project on racism and Islamophobia in Victorian schools.

Recommendation 2: Embed anti-racism frameworks and accountability into schools at every level of the teaching discipline and curriculum, incorporating a dedicated system of data collection for the identification of schools requiring additional support with addressing racism.

Recommendation 3: Demonstrate leadership and commitment to combating racism in Victoria's schools by ensuring anti-racism capacity building training is conducted for all Departmental staff.

Recommendation 4: Mandate anti-racism capacity building training for all school staff, including management and as part of the induction for all new staff.

Recommendation 5: Review hiring policies and formulate a strategy to support diverse representation into senior and teaching positions.

Recommendation 6: Schools, with the support of the Department, should implement programs for students engaging in racist behaviour to support them in unlearning their biases and changing their behaviour.

Recommendation 7: Invest in tailored response services that schools can access, including counselling for staff, to address underlying biases, perceptions, and support attitudinal shifts.

2. Introduction

Going to a majority white private school, it was really difficult. I think it's to do with how the teachers made me feel. I left school feeling like I was less intelligent, that university would be very difficult for me, and that doing anything would be very difficult... it was only when I understood my culture, and myself - understood why I am how I am - that I was able to reverse what I had internalised.

- Consultation participant

In 2021 and 2022, the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights delivered our Stand Out, Speak Up Program funded by the Victorian Government. This program focussed on raising awareness and challenging harmful racist and Islamophobic narratives, building Muslim women and young women's sense of belonging and identity, and promoting values

of anti-racism, acceptance, inclusion, and diversity. The program included three components: educational workshops with Muslim women and young women, an online awareness-raising campaign, and a research project involving interviews with sector professionals to inform the creation of an anti-racism resource. Upon commencing this program and speaking with Muslim women and young women, it was evident that experiences of racism amongst Muslim communities in Australia were commonplace, constant, and severe. One area where the incidents and their impacts were particularly evident was within schools. AMWCHR heard stories and experiences of racism within schools during the initial consultation process, during the online campaign, and during the workshop stage of the program both from the young women and from women who had children attending school.

Concerningly, rather than instances of racism and Islamophobia occurring from peer to peer, participants commonly reported that racism was being perpetrated by school teaching and administration staff, as well as by the schooling system broadly. Consequently, the research component of this program was revised to focus specifically on interviews with school staff and individuals working within or alongside Victorian schools, to inform the creation of a resource for school staff. The outcomes of these interviews, grounded in experiences of workshop participants, are recounted in this report alongside policy recommendations for promoting anti-racism in schools.

It is hoped that through this report and the policy recommendations within, that concrete action can be made to address persistent individual and structural racism and Islamophobia within the Victorian schooling system. The ultimate aim is that students of all backgrounds are afforded safe and equitable learning environments and, where that learning environment falls short, that there are mechanisms in place to promptly action systemic corrections, perpetrator accountability, and behavioural change.

3. Background

There's a lot of fear in you, so sometimes you don't reach your potential... when the teacher says that you won't finish grade 12, you don't reach your potential because someone says you can't do it, and then the children believe it, and the parents believe the teacher too.

- Consultation participant

3.1. What is racism and Islamophobia?

Racial discrimination refers to behaviours, beliefs, or actions that cause disparities in power, opportunities, resources, and rights based on an individual or group's racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious identity (Grosfoguel, 2011). An individual can be discriminated against based on actual

characteristics of their identity, as well as perceived characteristics. Racism can occur from person to person (interpersonal racism) as well as through systems and institutions (systemic racism) (Yeasmeen, et al., 2022). Interpersonal racism manifests in incidents such as racialised insults, physical assault, prejudice, and attributing stereotypes or making assumptions about individuals and groups. Systemic racism is enacted through systems including the political, legal, healthcare, and education systems and their associated policies, practices, and laws which disadvantage particular individuals and groups. Systemic racism can ultimately lead to a lack of access to opportunities and resources, alienation, targeting, inequality, and even death. Examples of systemic racism include the mass incarceration and associated deaths in custody of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Ward, 2022; AHRC, 1996), anti-terrorism laws which target Muslim communities (Akbarzadeh, 2020), as well as things such as the ethnic pay gap between people of colour and white people (which increases for women of colour) (Chingaipe, 2017). In Australia, Islamophobia is both interpersonal and systemic. Islamophobia is a form of racism characterised by fear, hostility, and prejudice towards Muslims (The Bridge Initiative, 2020). Islamophobia is commonly linked to beliefs surrounding Islam being perceived as ‘foreign’ and incompatible with “western values” (Sayyid and Vakil, 2011; AHRC, 2021).

Perpetrators of Islamophobia homogenise Muslims and the Islamic faith through treating prejudiced stereotypes associated with Muslims (violence, misogyny, incompatibility with “western values”) as if they are innate (Pilkington, 2016). Media reporting and public discourse that perpetuates stereotypes and misinformation about Islam and Muslims can give licence to policies and laws which disproportionately target Muslim communities. A notable example of this can be seen through the concerted effort to link Islam and Muslims with terrorism in the two decades since the 9/11 attacks. The cementing of this perception in the public consciousness has allowed Muslim communities to be systemically targeted through anti-terrorism laws, over-policing, and surveillance, and through broader experiences of interpersonal discrimination in people’s public and private lives (Akbarzadeh, 2020; Bedar, Bottriell, & Akbarzadeh, 2020).

Although Australia’s diverse ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious makeup is frequently cited as a case study in multicultural success (DHA, 2017), experiences of racism, marginalisation, and inequality remain commonplace. For the Australian Muslim community, experiences of racism can come in the form of ethnic or racial discrimination, as well as religious discrimination. These experiences intersect with other aspects of Muslim people’s identity, such as gender, speaking languages other than English, and migration status (Selod & Embrick, 2013; Yeasmeen et al., 2022; Eltahaway, 2019). According to the Scanlon Foundation’s 2022 Mapping Social Cohesion report, 16 per cent of Australians have experienced racism in the past year (O’Donnell, 2022). For people who speak languages other than English, this number rises to 35 per cent, with young people within this group (18-24) reporting the highest amount of racism at 48 per cent.

Prejudice in the Australian population remains a common problem. 29 per cent of people surveyed for the Mapping Social Cohesion Report stated that they hold ‘somewhat/very negative’ views towards Muslims (O’Donnell, 2022). This was the highest level of prejudice reported for any religious group. These high levels of prejudice towards Australian Muslims results in the Muslim community experiencing Islamophobia on a frequent basis.

According to the most recent Islamophobia Report, incidents of Islamophobia are gendered, with men being overwhelmingly perpetrators (78%) and women being overwhelmingly victims (82%) (Iner, 2022). Victims also tended to belong to younger cohorts. Almost one quarter (24%) were teenagers and children (Iner, 2022). Alongside public places, schools, universities, and workplaces are a high-risk context for racism and Islamophobia (Iner, 2022; All Together Now, 2022), and are key focal points for anti-racism interventions.

3.2. The impacts of racism and Islamophobia

Racism can have serious and even lifelong impacts on individuals and communities. From a healthcare perspective, racism and discrimination is a risk factor for a broad range of physical and mental health issues. One literature review on the effects of Islamophobia in Australia, the US, the UK, and NZ showed positive correlations between religious and racial discrimination, depression, and self-harm (Samari et al., 2018). The effects of discrimination on health exist both as a function of direct discrimination (i.e., everyday discrimination impacting mental and physical health), as well as a deterrent to seeking care for health issues, resulting in diminished health outcomes (i.e., systemic and individual discrimination within the healthcare system which bars treatment) (Williams et al., 2019).

Racism, including Islamophobia, is also a primary contributor to wealth disparities among groups. The cumulative impacts of centuries of systemic and individual discrimination have caused some racial, ethnic, and cultural groups to hold significantly less household wealth than others. In Australia, this is perhaps most clearly demonstrated through the wealth gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, where over 30% of Indigenous households are in income poverty (AIHW, 2022), compared to just under 12% of the Australian population as a whole (PoA, 2022). The Australian Muslim community is also impacted by wealth and employment disparity, with Muslim households earning significantly less than non-Muslim households, and a quarter of all Muslim children living in poverty (Hassan, 2018). Muslim Australians are less likely to be employed than non-Muslim Australians, and if they are employed, are underrepresented in high-status professional occupations, though overrepresented in other occupational categories associated with lower wages. This is in spite of Australian Muslims having a higher level of educational attainment than non-Muslim Australians (Hassan, 2018). These economic inequalities can cause Muslim communities to be at high risk of entrenched disadvantage impacting multiple generations.

As young people are in the process of developing physically and psychologically, they are uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of racism and Islamophobia. For young people, exposure to Islamophobia can negatively interfere in identity development and belonging, leading to low self-esteem and mental health issues (Younus & Mian, 2019; Iner, 2022; Abdi, Saif, Mohammad, et al., 2019). Experiences of Islamophobia start for children in pre-school years and continue on throughout schooling (Abdalla, 2020). When those in school settings - teachers, school administration and other students - begin to validate and perpetuate false societal narratives about Muslims, this exacerbates their marginalisation and ultimately contributes to decreased



confidence and performance in the classroom (Abdalla, 2020). The stereotypes that are attributed to their communities leads young Muslims to feel that they must prove themselves and these stereotypes false (Hakim, 2020). Over time, this feeling of responsibility to disprove stereotypes damages their confidence and self-esteem (Younus & Mian; 2019). So, although racism and Islamophobia is a common and harmful experience for Muslims of all ages in Australia, minimising young people's exposure to discrimination is a critical necessity to prevent the many social, political, and personal long-term impacts.

3.3. Racism in Australian schools

Racism remains prevalent throughout the Australian educational system on both an interpersonal and structural basis. In 2020, AMWCHR conducted a research project in partnership with Deakin University which focused on experiences of Islamophobia in Australia. Schools were identified within this report as a key area for reform due to the many incidents of Islamophobia that occur throughout young people's schooling years, and within parent interactions with the schooling system (Bedar, Bottriell, & Akbarzadeh, 2020). Our findings that racism remains prevalent in Australian schools is supported by a 2017 survey of students and school staff in New South Wales and Victoria, which revealed that more than half (60%) of students reported seeing other students being racially discriminated against by their peers (Priest, Chong, Truong, et al., 2017). Students from South Asian backgrounds (74%) and African backgrounds (68%) reported witnessing the highest levels of racial discrimination being directed towards students by other students. In addition, nearly half of the students surveyed reported witnessing incidents of racial discrimination directed towards other students by teachers and school staff. The highest levels of vicarious racism were reported by students from Pacific Islander and Māori backgrounds (71%) (Priest, Chong, Truong, et al., 2017). A recent report from The Ubuntu Project Department tailoring racism in schools from the perspectives of African Australian students – 80% of whom were Muslim – also showed that the vast majority of participants (87%) reported experiencing discrimination in schools because of their race, ethnic background, or religion (Arashiro, 2022). For girls and women, this number was 95 per cent (Arashiro, 2022). The racism that students experience in schools can occur in the form of incidents such as verbal or physical abuse including racial slurs, as well as prejudiced attitudes and a lack of recognition of cultural and ethnic practices and beliefs (RNW, 2021; Priest, Chong, Truong, et al., 2017; Bedar, Bottriell, & Akbarzadeh, 2020). These prejudicial attitudes come from both school staff members as well as students (Priest, Chong, Truong, et al., 2017; All Together Now, 2021; Arashiro, 2022). Evidently, racism in Australian schools is not an anomaly nor does it impact one specific minority group.

A lack of cultural understanding and accommodation in schools can result in certain cohorts becoming alienated and excluded. Teachers who do not understand cultural differences related to communication, learning, and socialising can perceive individual students and cultural groups as disrespectful, rebellious, or uninterested in the school environment (Malin, 1997). A recent analysis of racial attitudes within Australian schools found that many teachers disclosed a lack of confidence when it came to interacting with

racially diverse students (Yared, Grove & Chapman, 2020), demonstrating that a lack of cultural competency leads to teachers treating culturally diverse students differently than students of the same or similar backgrounds to them.

When responding to incidents of racism in schools, research has shown that school staff and the schooling system in general are either ill-equipped or reluctant to implement effective anti-racism policies, procedures, and initiatives. One recent study showed that despite over half (55%) of respondents speaking up and reporting incidents to staff members, 88 per cent believed that teachers did not take their case seriously enough (Arashiro, 2022). The vast majority of respondents (89%) stated that they did not feel that they could trust their educators on a regular basis to adequately address racist incidents (Arashiro, 2022).

In recent years, an increasing amount of government and non-government initiatives and advocacy has been centred around preventing and responding to racism in Australian schools. Victoria's 2022-2027 Youth Strategy focussed strongly on addressing racism and discrimination in school environments through increased anti-racism education, multicultural-led initiatives, and the creation of more safe spaces where students can share experiences (DFFH, 2022). The young people whose views informed the Youth Strategy also called for better involvement from and collaboration between education institutions and the government to address interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism in educational environments (CMY, 2021).

Research on responding to racism in schools frequently advocates for both departmental involvement as well as grassroots initiatives. According to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's 2020 Cultural Competency discussion paper, addressing racism in schools will only be effective through 'top down' institutional change in combination with 'ground up' change through collective interpersonal initiatives (AITSL, 2020). One common recommendation for preventing and decreasing racism in schools is community-led, specialist capacity building training for school staff (Tuohy, 2022; DFFH, 2022). Although school staff do receive some level of anti-racism training, these training programs are frequently provided by the education department, rather than organisations led by communities with a lived experience of racism (Priest, Chong, Truong, et al., 2017). Within the 2017 Speak Out Against Racism study, school staff surveyed for the study provided mixed perceptions of their education departments' current provision of training and resources. A majority (60%) of staff participants in NSW and a minority (32%) in Victoria thought that their education department provided sufficient professional anti-racism education, while only 28 per cent of staff participants in NSW and 34 per cent in Victoria believed that their education department provided sufficient professional education on intercultural understanding (Priest, Chong, Truong, et al., 2017).

Alongside teachers being dissatisfied with the current educational materials provided is the issue of school staff being unaware or lacking inclination to engage with existing anti-racism and multicultural policies. One study, for example, reported that less than half of teachers in the representative sample of Sydney schools surveyed had read the NSW Department of Education's Multicultural education policy (Forrest, Lean, & Dunn, 2015). A separate study placed this number at 63% for school staff in both NSW and Victoria (Priest, Chong, Truong, et al., 2017). In both instances, there remain a large portion of school staff

who remain unaware of departmental policies, and who therefore cannot adhere to the contents.

In addition to investment in increased capacity building initiatives, ensuring that schools are implementing diverse hiring practices and building staffing bodies that are reflective of their school's demographics increases understanding between student bodies and staff bodies with relation to shared culture, as well as shared experiences of othering and discrimination in educational settings (Gannaway, Hogarth, Rudolph; 2023; Santamaria, 2013). According to the National Teacher Workforce Characteristics Report 2021, only 17 per cent of the teaching workforce was born overseas, compared to 33.6 per cent of the wider working age population (AITSL, 2021). Unfortunately, there is a lack of data on cultural diversity beyond county of birth, however, some studies have suggested that the number of teachers from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds may be as high as 87 per cent (Santoro, 2014; Forrest, Lean & Dunn, 2015). In comparison, Australia's 2021 Census data shows that only 42 per cent of Australians are from an Anglo-Celtic background (ABS, 2021). Evidently, there remain structural issues which impact Australia's teaching bodies being representative of the students they are teaching and the broader Australian population as a whole.

In all, the literature on racism and Islamophobia in Australia, its impacts on young people and students, and the prevalence and manifestations within the schooling system demonstrates that considerable work remains to be done to create safe and equitable learning environments for young people. Despite the focus on anti-racism for many years, progress has been slow to occur, and little has been done to embedded action on racism throughout the curriculum for both teachers and students. As a result, the schooling environment remains an unsafe setting for culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students, their families, and staff members. The persistence of structural as well as individual racism exposes the central role that government must play in driving long-term systemic change.

4. Young Women's Workshops

There needs to be more grassroots work in schools [because] you're not born being a racist... So [for example]: working with young people, more multicultural programs, normalising seeing people of different cultures and backgrounds.

- Consultation participant

Young people's experiences of racism can have lifelong impacts. When young people experience racism from a young age, it can change their perceptions of themselves, their identities, and their self-worth. Our Stand Out, Speak Up workshops for young women set out to change this. These workshops took place in schools and involved assisting students with understanding and identifying racism and accessing supports available to them. They also provided a safe space for participants to share their own experiences of discrimination. It allowed for mutual learning and

a non-judgement environment to build knowledge and develop their individual capacities to speak about and speak to issues of racism. However, it also highlighted the great deal of work still to be done in Victorian schools. During the conversations with young Muslim women, it was anticipated that incidents of racism occurring within schools would primarily encompass peer to peer bullying both in the school yard and online. In reality, the predominant concerns raised by young people with regards to the racism they experienced was in relation to the school system and school personnel. 60 per cent of young women from the program had witnessed racism, while 33 per cent had been personally targeted. Many of these incidents had occurred within a schooling context.

The impact of pervasive and unchecked racism and discrimination happening within school systems was confronting and devastating for our Program Coordinators to hear - not to mention the impacts these incidents have had on the students experiencing them consistently over 13 years of schooling, and during the most formative years of their lives. Whether witnessing racism or experiencing it themselves, young Muslim women - some as young as 10 years old - are receiving a clear message that they are not equal and will not be privileged with the same opportunities. One extreme example of the state of racism and Islamophobia in Victorian schools is demonstrated through the following case study, which was reported by an AMWCHR Program Coordinator and participant in this research:

In 2022, the AMWCHR team delivered our Stand Out, Speak Up program to a group of young Muslim women in a secondary school in Melbourne. This school was identified as requiring support due to allegations of racism directed towards Muslim students.

During the delivery of the program, participants disclosed to AMWCHR Program Coordinators that Muslim students at the school faced ongoing racism and Islamophobia. Derogatory terms including racial slurs - the 'N-word', 'terrorist', 'monkey' - were used towards Muslim students, and in particular those who were from African backgrounds and who were identifiably Muslim (i.e., wore a hijab). This racist behaviour was perpetrated by both students and teachers.

Students had reported this behaviour to school staff members, though stated that their complaints had been dismissed. In some cases, students were chastised for being 'reactive'. Our Program Coordinators observed that there was a general sense of anger, frustration, powerlessness, and disappointment amongst the students towards the system that failed to protect them.

Through the program, participants were able to process the negative impacts of racism upon them and Department-terminate effective approaches to respond to these experiences that have a sustainable effect upon themselves and the community around them. Our Coordinators provided extensive mental and emotional support due to the observed trauma the students had from their experiences of racism.



Our team also supported the school to understand where the students were coming from with their actions and frustrations, establishing an understanding on the lack of appropriate process and policies within the school to manage the issue of racism. Although some school staff were open to educational material and repairing relationships with students, others were more resistant, including those in leadership positions. Our Program Coordinators felt that more capacity building, training, and support was needed in the school and schools experiencing similar issues.

The above experience is common across the schools that AMWCHR has delivered this program to, highlighting that for many migrant and Muslim students, the more pervasive and challenging issues lie in institutional racism. It highlights, for instance, how there needs to be accountability for the explicit and implicit racism and discrimination that happens within classrooms, while bystander responsibilities must be made a responsibility for all school personnel. School administration and management is equally complicit by failing to create and uphold effective reporting procedures that support victims of racism. The lack of individual and senior leadership in addressing racism in schools creates and perpetuates a culture of denial, minimisation, and even hostility. Addressing racism requires a whole-of-school commitment, and without such a commitment, racism will continue to persist and be normalised into the future.

Over the course of the workshop component within schools, and in addition to feedback from consultations and input from engagement with our online campaign, it became clear that schools were a primary area where racism and Islamophobia was being experienced, and therefore, a primary area where it needs to be addressed - particularly as addressing young people's exposure to and perpetration of racism from a young age can set them up to be anti-racist for life. Consequently, the research team set out to understand racism and Islamophobia in Victorian schools from the perspective of people working in those spaces to identify knowledge gaps, document experiences, and understand school personnel's positions in creating anti-racist schooling environments.

5. Interviews with Education Sector Professionals

My English teacher had confidently told me that I no longer needed to wear my hijab as I was now in Australia... I have not felt more out of place and like I didn't belong than I did in that moment.

- Program participant

5.1 Participant recruitment

Upon commencing recruitment for this research project, we encountered a significant degree of difficulty engaging participants. The recruitment materials were shared within online forums for teachers, via email networks, through WhatsApp groups, and via word of mouth. Despite reaching hundreds of individuals working within schools across the state, only eight participants were able to be recruited. In response to this low recruitment, AMWCHR attempted to gain endorsement of the project from the management of several schools. One school's management was supportive and sent the research flyer around to staff. Conversely, the management of two other schools stated that they would not encourage their staff to participate, as they had reservations about the project and how the results would reflect on their school, and hesitation due to teachers being at capacity. This reluctance from school management is concerning, as it indicates that there may be a prioritisation of optics over progress when it comes to racism in some schools. The difficulty of locating participants for this research is indicative of several potential problems existent across the sector – a) school staff are time-poor and unable to allocate capacity to important albeit extracurricular activities, b) school staff are unwilling to engage in anti-racism research, or c) school staff feel they are unable to engage with antiracism research without express permission from management and/or the Department. All of these options culminate in reduced participation in important research projects, ultimately hindering the development and updating of evidence bases for anti-racism progress.

5.2. Participant & school demographics

The participants involved in this research were primarily teachers. One participant had worked as a teacher for a number of years, though now works at a multicultural organisation developing curriculum for Victorian schools. A further two participants were AMWCHR Program Coordinators who have experience delivering programs in schools, including AMWCHR's anti-racism program. The professional experiences of participants were varied, and included knowledge of how individual schools operate as well as the schooling system broadly.

The participants in this research worked across different metropolitan, outer metropolitan, and regional LGAs including Merri-Bek, Hume, Geelong, and Brimbank. The schools that participants worked in were all state schools with student bodies which were multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious. All schools had a high level of Muslim students compared to the overall Victorian population (4.19%) (ABS, 2021). The staffing at these schools, however, was not reflective of the student body. One participant said that the students at their school 'don't get to see anyone that looks like them' among the staff, and that they believe the school should hire a diversity consultant to repair the hiring processes. Similarly, another participant stated that in their experience working in schools in Victoria, students 'don't see any representation within the management of the school'. This lack of diversity was increasingly prominent within management positions, something which research demonstrates has the potential to impact school-wide culture, policies, and procedures

with regards to anti-racism (Keddie & Niesche, 2012). Conversely, where leadership positions in educational institutions are held by people from culturally diverse backgrounds, lived experience of institutional racism can lead to leadership practices which facilitate social and educational equity in the school environment (Santamaria, 2013).

5.3. Understanding of racism and Islamophobia

Participants had a relatively strong understanding of racism and Islamophobia on an individual level. Common definitions of racism and Islamophobia revolved around things such as discrimination from individual to individual on the basis of race, culture, language, and religion. Many of the examples given which related to their definitions largely ignored structural inequality and discrimination. This may indicate that either there is a need for greater awareness and knowledge of the impacts of structural discrimination, or that individual discrimination is something which participants viewed as the larger issue within schools.

Participants' understandings of racism and Islamophobia stemmed from a multitude of sources. What stood out was the impact of working in schools with diverse student bodies. Two thirds of participants cited the school environment and/or their training to become a teacher as a contributor to shifting their perceptions and understanding of racism and Islamophobia. One participant said that they learnt a lot more about racism and Islamophobia in the school environment because 'in schools, you see a lot more [racism] than you would see in your social circles', and that 'working with Muslim students, I could see the impact that Islamophobia was having'. Another participant spoke of their lived experience of racism as a migrant in Australia as something which informs their views and knowledge on the topic.

The majority of participants saw strong connections between racism and Islamophobia, with some stating that they believed Islamophobia to be a type of racism. One participant argued,

I do think that Islamophobia is a type of racism. I do see a connection. Because I know that racists are a massive part of why Muslims are discriminated against. And I guess the different treatment they get is because yes, it's a religion, but it's predominantly a religion of people of colour... I guess it would manifest slightly differently because of how Muslims are treated in the media and stuff, and the way that the racism manifests might be different to other types of racism.

Two participants were unsure about the connections between racism and Islamophobia, though one of these participants stated that they believed Islamophobia to be 'a more acceptable form of discrimination' in Australia due to media representation and framing, as well as past and ongoing geopolitical issues. This was a sentiment expressed by other participants too, and it was often attributed to a comparative lack of understanding of Islamophobia. As one participant said,

I think people have less of an understanding of what [Islamophobia] looks like than racism. I think that when you say, “that sounds pretty racist”, often people will go, “oh!”. But if you say that something’s Islamophobic, they won’t necessarily have that reaction – that extreme reaction.

The participants who were also AMWCHR employees shared their perceptions on knowledge of racism and Islamophobia in schools. One participant spoke of the positive impacts of diverse schools in fostering inclusion due to teachers’ immersion in multiculturalism, which they believed improved understandings of racism and Islamophobia. Conversely, they believed that within schools in non-diverse areas there exists a less accepting culture. The other AMWCHR staff member interviewed similarly spoke of issues in schools with regards to there being ‘quite a gap within the education system with teachers’ understanding of the basics of racism’, adding that there is ‘a lack of understanding of what racism really is or what kind of actions come under racism’. This participant also cited systemic issues which perpetuate racism on a structural level, causing further harm to students. This is an interesting dichotomy - that school environments can be central to improving teachers’ understanding of racism, but that they are also the environment where a significant amount of racism and Islamophobia occurs. In some cases, this learning occurs precisely because teachers are exposed to incidents of racism and Islamophobia and witness the impacts that this is having on their students.

5.4. Experiences responding to racism and Islamophobia

All participants in this research had either witnessed a racist or Islamophobic incident directly or had had one disclosed to them by a student or colleague within the school environment. These included individual incidents of racism from student to student, teacher to student, or colleague to colleague, as well as instances of structural discrimination towards individual students or groups of students from particular racial, cultural, or religious backgrounds.

Participants responded to these incidents in a number of ways, depending on the type of incident, the person perpetrating the harm, and their relationship with the person perpetuating the harm. For example, one participant spoke of an incident where their direct manager made a broad disparaging comment about parents of Pacific Islander students. The participant reflected on the incident, stating, ‘I didn’t really respond, which I should have. I was in my third week at the school, and she was my boss. And I still think of it, like, every day.’ Conversely, another participant recounted a situation which occurred peer to peer. In this case, the participant involved felt comfortable enough to confront a co-worker who made a racist remark due to there being multicultural/ethnic colleagues present, and they therefore felt that there would be less hostility towards speaking up. This participant stated that when incidents occur in non-diverse settings, ‘you certainly feel less safe speaking up when there’s six other white guys and it’s just you.’



Several participants said that their response was often determined by what the person impacted by the racism wished. For instance, one participant said that they will usually ask the student if they are okay, and if they say they are, then the participant 'won't pursue [the matter], because I don't want to humiliate [the student] further'.

One participant, who works with English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, spoke of actions they take in the aftermath of incidents. This participant said that because they were often not present for the original incident (which may have occurred in the playground or in the non-EAL classroom setting), their role was one of restoring the student's confidence and validating their feelings –

In my class I have a chance to have more extended conversations with the victims. So, we talk about the issue, and we talk about feeling good about ourselves. I have follow-up conversations with them, and I make sure we talk about feeling proud of ourselves. And sometimes they even bring it up themselves... They say things like, "people say that Black skin isn't nice, I think it's nice." And they say how their mum tells them they're beautiful. So, I get to go into that more with them. But I feel like there isn't a set-out way to do it. There are no restorative and proactive teachings [in the school] so that it doesn't happen again.

This participant was concerned that although they had an opportunity to have follow-up conversations with the victims, they were often treated as isolated incidents, meaning that measures to prevent the harm in the first place were not undertaken.

While some participants felt that their responses to incidents adequately addressed the situation, others felt that there was always more that they could be doing – especially in the long-term – to ensure that students were not experiencing any ongoing impacts from the incident/s. As one participant said, 'There's always things that I feel like I could be doing. I think I probably don't follow up with the formal processes as much as I should, mainly because there's not enough time in the day. But I think I should be following that along so that there is a record of what students have said.' Another participant similarly attributed teachers' cursory responses to racism to being overworked, stating that teachers don't follow-up '[be]cause they're busy, and in the moment, they're just going to be like, 'okay, no one is upset anymore. Done''. This teacher also believed that they themselves were not 'completing the cycle' – meaning, that their response was not going far enough to facilitate students' complete recovery and wellbeing following a racist or Islamophobic incident.

Participants believed that teachers' capacity to deal with incidents was heavily restricted by being time-poor and overworked. This resulted in incidents being treated as secondary to other workplace responsibilities. As one participant said –

Teachers have so much on their plates. And I think they're really on top of knowing the individuals in their classes – and that takes so much because they have to know how to diagnose and look for symptoms, and get kids tested, and apply for funding – they have a lot on. And so, they look at the individuals, but they don't zoom out and think, 'those kids are culturally diverse'. That zooming meets a lot of resistance. That's the best explanation I have. That's a charitable explanation. Because I don't think they do a bad job - I think they are good at knowing the kids - but they do not want to engage with these issues.

This participant believed that there was resistance from some teachers to understand incidents as part of a pattern of racism and Islamophobia, and to place incidents within the context of students' broader experiences as individuals from diverse backgrounds. This resistance to 'zooming out' meant that larger trends of racism and Islamophobia in schools remain unacknowledged and unaddressed.

5.5. Staff training and capacity building

Of the school staff members interviewed, only one reported that they had done previous anti-racism training. This training was a one-hour session related to inclusivity of First Nations students. The participants stated that their schools did not prioritise training staff on cultural competency, and none could recall receiving any such training. One participant, who works with many schools across Victoria, said that 'there's no training in schools - there's none. In all the different school contexts I work with, not one... It's departmental issue across all schools – independent, Catholic, and public across all the states. It's not a priority.' This participant stated that when it comes to training, there is a 'loophole' in that individual schools do not prioritise cultural competency training because the Department does not prioritise cultural competency training, and vice versa –

The response [from the Department] is always, 'we can't push that onto the schools'. Like if you're not telling the schools that this is what needs to happen, they're not going to do it. It's like a loophole - the schools will say, 'oh we can't do that because the Department hasn't told us to do that'... or, you know, 'that's something that has to sit at that top level'. So, you go the top level, they're like, 'no, that's a decision that schools have to make'. And so, you stay in this loop because no one wants to take responsibility for it, and no one wants to essentially hang their hat on it and say, 'this is my decision and we're going to do this because it's important.

One AMWCHR staff member similarly spoke about there being 'reluctance' to training, despite teachers and school staff members having a 'huge gap' in knowledge of what



racism is and how it manifests in the school environment. This participant's belief that teachers require training came from their observations of incidents, but also from 'feedback from the students' who had experienced racism and who felt that the schools' responses were inadequate. In their words –

The responses of teachers were inappropriate. There was a lot of downplaying of the racism. So, when students complained about racist remarks or certain forms of discrimination that were occurring from teachers, most of the time it was dismissed... [w]hat we found was teachers being racist, it wasn't just amongst and between students. And that was a bigger problem than between students... eventually we hope to provide [the teachers] with some training, because we could see that gap in knowledge with teachers.

Although there was broad consensus on the need for training, there was variation in belief about what type of training would be most effective for addressing racism and Islamophobia. One participant, for instance, believed that school staff required training not on what Islam is, but rather, what Islamophobia looks like and how it impacts students. They believed that school staff had a strong understanding of students' cultures but were still choosing to make disparaging and discriminatory comments. This may be due to teachers either not realising or not believing that they are engaging in racist behaviour, meaning they are failing to consider the impacts of their behaviour and how it contributes to the casual normalisation of racism in the school environment.

Conversely, two participants said that their school staff members did require cultural competency training based around the specific cultural communities the students were from. One participant had even been attempting to facilitate this training themselves, stating, that they and the other EAL teachers have been wanting to run a professional development (PD) day 'on the communities that our students are from, but that's never gotten across the line'. Knowing the communities and cultures that the students were from was important to these participants. As one said –

I definitely think our school could improve in training new staff, particularly when a new staff member starts... certainly around talking about things like praying and what happens at Eid. Some teachers wouldn't even know what Eid is or how many times it's celebrated, or why the kids are fasting. I feel like, even if the Muslim kids only make up 30 or 40 per cent of the school, it's enough of a percentage that every teacher should have some knowledge of their customs, because we all know what Christmas and Easter is... I certainly think there needs to be some cultural training about that so that you can build better relationships with the Muslim students. And I guess the benefit for teachers is that the students love it when you talk to them about their culture.

Another participant similarly spoke of improvements that could be made at their school with regards to training new teachers. They believed that they would have felt more confident addressing incidents of racism and Islamophobia were there more rigorous induction procedures that trained teachers on responding to incidents.

Participants also suggested that there was a need for more training, resources, and capacity building to educate schools and school staff on identifying and addressing structural racism within the school environment. One participant believed that currently, decreasing structural racism and Islamophobia in schools is difficult because school staff members often do not recognise it in practice –

I think most teachers wouldn't be able to spot the structural racism within the school... For example, in my school, there's a gifted program, and there's two classes in each year. And in my year 9s, out of 50 students, there are two students from Pacific Islander backgrounds in those programs. And I don't think that they would be able to recognise that as an issue because they would just see that as like, well everyone went through the same application process... I think being able to highlight examples of how racism manifests in a school on a structural level would be the best thing. And I think it has to be examples. Like, 'if you are doing this in your school that's really disproportionately affecting these people, then that may well be structural racism'... And I think examples where you know they would apply to a lot of schools... Because I think that even teachers who know about structural racism either don't see it in the school or don't want to admit that it's a problem in their school.

Overall, participants believed that schools were not doing enough with regards to training staff members to recognise and respond to all types of racism and Islamophobia present in the schooling environment. This was an issue both at the individual school level as well as the departmental level.

5.6. School policies and procedures

Participants were asked whether they were aware of their schools' policies and procedures for dealing with racism and Islamophobia. All participants interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of clear and consistent frameworks for responding to incidents. The majority of schools that participants worked in did not have specific policy and procedure documents for addressing racism and Islamophobia. One participant had expressly searched for this policy but could not locate one –

There aren't any [policies] at all. I don't think there is what I would call in any way a policy. Because there might be a word or something like, 'we have no tolerance

for discrimination', but there's no actual policy. Because we were trying to set up a Reconciliation action plan earlier in the year and we tried to find an anti-racism policy, but we couldn't find it. So, if there is, then no teachers know about it so I would say no.

The lack of policies across schools meant that incidents were dealt with inconsistently. Some participants stated that individual teachers were responsible for dealing with incidents, while others stated that the year level coordinators did so. Where individual year level coordinators were responsible for addressing racism and Islamophobia, the appropriateness of the response would depend largely on the coordinator's inclination and ability to effectively manage the situation –

If it's in year 9 and something happens then I have a good year level coordinator who will deal with it well. But in year 7, for example, last year a student said something quite awful... And so, I went to the year level coordinator, and I don't think they even followed up. And then one of the other teachers who overheard me telling the year level coordinator, said, 'don't bother telling him that kind of stuff. It's like pissing into the wind'... So there's no policies at all.

This participant stated that it came down to 'luck' as to whether the situation would be dealt with effectively due to the reliance on year level coordinators to take the incident seriously and respond adequately. Some participants felt that when incidents were escalated to year level coordinators, they felt excluded from the situation and from having an input into the response. As one person put it, 'I think the coordinators probably see the classroom teacher as the least important person in the process whereas I feel that they're probably one of the more important ones because we're the ones who have to see the kids every day.' These participants felt the issues were being siloed across teams and departments, which framed racism and Islamophobia in strictly disciplinary terms where incidents were escalated to coordinators and management because they required disciplinary action. This tied in with schools viewing racism and Islamophobia under a behavioural management paradigm –

I don't think you should be dealing with it like you deal with other petty bickering amongst the students. Because that is how it's dealt with. Like if you look on our school compass, it's like 'this incident happened', and it was a racist incident, and the response was just a standard response you would do to deal with anything. It was like, have the kid apologise, tell the kid it was wrong and get them to separate. But I don't see a wider scale pathway towards that kid understanding the full story.

Dealing with the incidents as any other behavioural issue would be dealt with was not producing fundamental changes in how students understood their behaviour. This was intensified by disciplinary action that school management took. One participant said that 'the student will come back [to the classroom] and they'll feel like they've been told off for being, maybe, antisocial, but they won't feel like they've been racist'. Similarly, another participant who had worked across many schools in Victoria, spoke of the disciplinary framework and its lack of effect on facilitating behavioural change –

I feel like this whole disciplinary action thing in schools doesn't address the root cause. So even if teachers respond by giving a student detention, or suspension, etc., it doesn't address the root cause - that student is just going to come back to school and continue [those behaviours], and we've seen that a lot. So it's a matter of how do we have discussions in the class? Maybe during home group when they're doing attendance - they usually cover some wellbeing topics – why don't we discuss things like racism and Islamophobia to have those preventative strategies, rather than addressing the problem when it's already happened?

Highlighting the punitive approach that schools take to addressing racism was raised by the majority of participants. One participant stated that this disciplinary approach to responding to incidents was related to a lack of understanding and knowledge on how to shift attitudes and behaviours to prevent racism going forward. In their words, 'I don't think [management] have the skills to deal with it other than taking a punitive approach. I don't think they would know how to address it correctly even if they wanted to.'

In all, the lack of school policies and procedures meant that incidents of racism or Islamophobia were not being dealt with consistently. In some schools, the response was Department-termined by individual year level coordinators and their assessment of the situation. In other schools, the teachers themselves were responsible for addressing racism and Islamophobia in the classroom. Participants felt that consistent, clear, and accessible policies would be beneficial to support them and their students and to promote understanding of the impacts of racism and how to encourage behavioural change to prevent harm going forward.

5.7. Managements' role in anti-racism

Participants were asked whether they would feel comfortable reporting incidents of racism by their colleagues to management. The majority of participants stated that they would feel comfortable, while one would not, and one was unsure. The person who would not feel comfortable reporting related this to pressure surrounding staff cohesion, stating, 'I think in schools there's this sense among teaching staff that you have to be in solidarity with each other.' This participant believed that reporting their colleagues to management would reflect

badly on themselves, and not on the person who had perpetrated the racism.

Other participants were more confident with reporting colleagues to management, and two had done so themselves. Of these participants, one similarly believed that reporting was seen to go against an expectation of solidarity, and had experienced negative consequences related to reporting –

Oh, I did [report to management]. Nothing happened. I was the one that was then looked upon as being the agitator or not towing party lines... Don't rock the boat... And in a school environment when executive don't support you, it makes it a very toxic work environment.

In contrast, the other participant had received a positive response when reporting –

It took us a while, but we actually did [report to management] in 2021. It was a part of a whole thing that we presented to the college principal about... this general lack of care or time for EAL. It's not like they don't have time for EAL students, but they don't have time for learning EAL processes so how can they accommodate for these students?... We had suggestions for addressing these things and one part was about how socially there's a huge divide between people of colour who are on staff and non people of colour. And I think that's modelled by leadership. And that's just something that was making life disagreeable for the EAL staff.

Despite the majority of participants feeling comfortable reporting to management, most did not have confidence that management would respond appropriately. As one participant said, 'I would feel comfortable reporting to management, but only as a box-ticking exercise that shows I've followed the correct process'. The motivation for this was to ensure that if the teacher is involved in subsequent incidents, there would be a foundation for disciplinary action. This same participant stated that they 'don't think [their] leadership would do anything... because they like to brush everything under the rug'. In all, participants lacked confidence in their school managements' propensity to respond to incidents of racism and Islamophobia, whether or not they felt comfortable reporting to senior staff members. This was due to a lack of knowledge, understanding, processes, and protocols for dealing with incidents, but it was also due to school culture and a desire to maintain staff cohesion. The results, however, were that incidents of racism from staff members towards other staff members or students would go unchecked.

6. Recommendations

Racism and discrimination remain a persistent and critical issue in Victorian schools. The impacts of racism have been thoroughly documented, including the life-defining impacts for young people. Despite this established knowledge, effective, consistent, and robust action on anti-racism is yet to take place in Victorian schools. As demonstrated through this report, the causes of ineffectual action are varied, and include issues such as a lack of diversity within school management, a reluctance or inability from individual schools and staff members to identify, acknowledge, and address the issue, a lack of prioritisation of the issue in the face of competing priorities and high teacher workloads, and a lack of Departmental support, pressure, or direction.

The outcomes of this research point to a need for drastic changes in how racism is viewed and addressed in the school environment. Participants were clear that action on anti-racism was not meeting students' needs, leaving both students and staff members at risk, and overall school wellbeing fractured. Participants believed that levels of knowledge surrounding racism, its manifestations and impacts, as well as cultural competency was insufficient. When faced with incidents of racism both in the classroom and schoolyard, as well as in the staff room, participants were often ill-equipped to respond due to a lack of clear direction and procedures, a lack of direction or support from management, and cultures of silence. In cases where incidents were escalated, senior staff members were unsupportive. In one case, this lack of support was common knowledge and openly spoken about, while in another, there was active hostility towards those escalating incidents.

In addition, and as demonstrated through interviews as well as the case study prefacing this report, schools are quick to dispense disciplinary action, though have either a lack of desire or an inability to engage in responses to incidents which facilitate long-term behavioural change and promote restorative action. The current punitive framework which schools operate under is inappropriate and even harmful when considering the importance of ensuring that those who perpetuate racism undergo behavioural and attitudinal change to prevent racism going forward. This is particularly important when young people are displaying learnt behaviours, and when there is an opportunity to address prejudices before they become engrained. At the same time, schools must ensure that they are not failing the victims of racism through treating incidents as they would other behavioural incidents. As one participant stated, 'there's a gap in terms of how we can facilitate [racism] being negated, because it's not the same as when you fix another incident of people being mean'. Schools require a framework that moves away from punitive and responsive measures, to one which addresses racism at the root of the issue and implements restorative action for victims, and supports long-term change for people causing racist incidents.

In light of the outcomes from the Stand Out, Speak Up Program, including this report, AMWCHR proposes the below recommendations to address racism in Victorian schools. These recommendations and associated action should be emphasised and supported by the Department, though must include input from community organisations with expertise in this area, and, importantly, students and young people themselves.



Recommendation 1: Invest in a funded large-scale research project on racism and Islamophobia in Victorian schools

The existence of any amount of racism in schools will always warrant further investigation. While the results from this research are preliminary due to the small sample size, they point to the potential of significantly broader trends across Victorian schools. A larger study, conducted by AMWCHR, along with its partners, and with support and funding from the Department, is recommended to obtain broader insights into experiences of racism in schools and to inform and guide anti-racist initiatives for implementation across Victorian schools.

Recommendation 2: Anti-racism frameworks and accountability must be embedded into schools at every level

The Department should develop and implement a framework for an external school accreditation and compliance system which compels schools to monitor and address racism as a requirement of Departmental reporting. Currently, issues of racism and Islamophobia are considered in-house issues, which has led to many schools turning a blind eye to ongoing issues, or dealing with these issues in isolation, rather than as a part of a broader trend or culture within the school. An external system which promotes proactive responses to racism and holds schools accountable for inaction will compel schools to identify, acknowledge, and rectify patterns and individual incidents of racism.

The framework should be implemented at both a micro and macro level through activities such as:

- the implementation of a data collection and anonymous reporting system to monitor and track student and staff wellbeing related to racism and to identify effective interventions and priority areas;
- establishing annual goals and actions towards accreditation with progress towards their achievement measured quarterly;
- implementation of specific protocols for reporting and responding to incidents of racism, with guidance given on actions to take, and a requirement that staff demonstrate that these actions have been carried out; and
- the embedding of antiracism into school curriculum alongside intersectional practices.

Recommendation 3: The Department demonstrate leadership by engaging in antiracism training for all departmental staff

There is an opportunity for the Department to demonstrate a leadership position in promoting anti-racism throughout the school system in Victoria. Currently, individual schools are falling back on internal processes to respond to instances of racism. This is

leading to instances of inaction or inconsistent action in addressing ongoing issues. What is needed now, following consistent reports of racism in public schools in Victoria, is for the Department to demonstrate proactive leadership and commitment to addressing racism by ensuring all Department staff participate in comprehensive anti-racism capacity building. This training will be necessary for the Department to commence its journey towards leading anti-racism reform throughout Victorian schools.

Recommendation 4: The Department mandate anti-racism capacity building training for all school staff, including management

Our research shows that school management appear to be resistant to investigating racism within their schools. Mandates from the Department for dedicated capacity building and training programs for school staff members, including and especially those in senior positions, would encourage individual schools to prioritise anti-racism. This could be done through the implementation of minimum Professional Development points dedicated to anti-racism capacity building for all school staff. Rather than generalist training, these programs should be tailored for individual schools on the basis of their demographic makeup. The training should be delivered by community-led organisations, including AMWCHR, who have expertise in anti-racism capacity building borne out of lived experience. Likewise, to address racism directed towards other cultures and communities – such as First Nations communities – training and capacity building should be delivered by organisations from these communities, and especially the respective communities represented within the school. In addition, we recommend a full and independent review of current Department teacher training modules to ensure that values of inclusivity, intersectionality, and diversity are embedded throughout training curriculums.

Recommendation 5: The Department should review hiring policies and formulate a strategy to support diverse representation into senior and teaching positions.

Victorian schools lack diversity in staffing broadly and leadership positions in particular. Although AMWCHR acknowledges that there are ongoing staffing problems in the sector, this is an issue that pre-dates teacher shortages. In addition, decreasing hiring biases and increasing equitable hiring and promotion practices has the potential to attract and ultimately improve retention of staff from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The Department should therefore implement a strategy to promote diverse staffing bodies across all levels, as well as a system for the identification of schools that may be engaging in prejudicial hiring practices.

Recommendation 6: Schools, with the support of the Department, should implement anti-racist programs for students engaging in racist behaviour to support them in unlearning their biases and changing their behaviour.

The current system of reporting and responding to incidents of racism and Islamophobia as a sub-category of behavioural issues is inappropriate and ineffective. Young people must be supported to understand and take accountability for the impacts of their choice to

perpetuate racism. At the same time, young people should also be supported to unlearn prejudices and initiate behavioural and attitudinal change. Tailored and specific programs should be developed in schools, alongside dedicated reporting and referral procedures, to promote restorative rather than punitive pathways to justice.

Recommendation 7: The Department invests in tailored response services for staff engaging in racist behaviours to address underlying biases, perceptions, and support attitudinal shifts.

The Department should invest in tailored response services for schools to access such as debrief counselling for staff engaging in racist behaviours. Such services will support attitudinal shifts through addressing underlying biases and perceptions. This should be incorporated into the design of the framework established under Recommendation 2 and will serve to demonstrate a commitment to supporting staff wellbeing and professional development. As with young people, staff should be supported to understand and take accountability for their racist behaviours by engaging in tailored programs and services which build awareness and capacity to encourage longer term attitudinal and behavioural shifts, and which extend beyond punitive disciplinary procedures.

7. Conclusion

This report has given insight into the state of racism in Victorian schools, particularly with reference to Muslim young people's experiences of discrimination and Islamophobia, and the shortcomings of individual schools and the Department in response to issues. Although the sample size for this research is small, the participants interviewed have strong and varied knowledge of how schools are currently failing culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse students due to their positions as individuals working across multiple school environments. There was consensus on the fact that students from culturally diverse backgrounds are experiencing high levels of individual and structural racism within schools, and that school management and the Department are not providing adequate frameworks for addressing structural issues and promoting widespread anti-racism action.

Anti-racism is central to wellbeing, and schools have a duty of care to ensure that students, their families, and school staff are not exposed to a school environment where they face individual and/or structural racism. Although cultivating a safe learning environment is a central responsibility of every school employee, the ultimate responsibility for the de-prioritisation of anti-racism falls on individual schools and the Department itself. It is hoped that through this report, the Victorian Department, and individual schools, can implement the above recommendations to create tangible change within the schooling system and environment for the wellbeing of students for generations to come.

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