



# I'm not a racist, but...

A MAJOR REPORT FROM THE FOUNDATION FOR YOUNG AUSTRALIANS REVEALS THAT AN OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE STILL EXPERIENCE RACISM AT SCHOOL, AND THAT SHOULD BE CAUSE FOR CONCERN, SAYS **LUCAS WALSH**.



Most of us recognise that racism is a problem in Australian society. According to research by Kevin Dunn, Jim Forrest, Ian Burnley and Amy McDonald from the University of Western Sydney, though, young people and those with higher levels of education are less likely to express racist attitudes than older people and those with lower levels of education. This should give us some hope for the future of the tolerant and culturally diverse society we wish to create, but new research shows that we still have a long way to go.

A study commissioned by the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) and conducted by Fethi Mansouri, Louise Jenkins, Les Morgan and Mona Taouk from the Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University indicates that racism remains

prevalent in the experience and attitudes of many young Australians. An overwhelming majority of young people report experiences of racism at school.

The FYA report, *The Impact of Racism upon the Health and Wellbeing of Young Australians*, publishes findings drawn from surveys or interviews with more than 800 students from 18 government and Catholic secondary schools across Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory. Most students were in Years 9 and 10. Around a fifth were first-generation migrants, around a third were second- or third-generation migrants and almost three per cent were Indigenous.

According to the study, 70 per cent of students have experienced at least one form

of racist treatment at or beyond school, such as being the target of racist language or imagery; being excluded, avoided, treated as inferior or treated with suspicion; and being refused access to services or employment.

The pervasiveness of such racist experiences raises deep concerns about what may be an underlying racism among young Australians. As Dunn and colleagues explained in 'Constructing racism in Australia,' contemporary racism in Australia is strongly linked to perceptions of 'who does and does not belong.' Even Australians who don't view themselves as racist may hold opinions that relegate other groups to outsider or inferior status.

*The Impact of Racism* study shows the effect of such views: more than 80 per cent

*Schools are an important source of support for young people suffering racist treatment, but they're also the main setting in which many young people experience racist behaviour.*

of young people from non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds are subjected to some form of racism. Young people who have been in Australia for fewer than five years are six times more likely to report an experience of racism than other young people.

This is borne out by a second study commissioned by FYA and carried out by James Forrest at the University of Western Sydney, which indicates that almost twice as many young people born outside Australia experience intolerance and discrimination within their place of study or work as their counterparts who were born in the country. This latter group is not immune, however. Mansouri and colleagues report that 55 per cent of Anglo-Australian school students testify to experiences of racism while Forrest reports that a quarter of young people aged 18 to 24 born in Australia testify to experiences of racism.

*The Impact of Racism* study shows that racist experiences have a profound impact on young people's wellbeing. Young people subject to racism report a range of effects including ongoing feelings of sadness, anger and exclusion; a lowered ability to perform at school and a corresponding reluctance to go to school; a pervasive fear of physical or verbal attack; a desire to return to their country of birth; and an exacerbation of existing post-traumatic stress. The most frequently recorded effects, according to the study, were 'feeling angry and frustrated' and feelings of 'not belonging to the local community.'

One of the most disturbing findings of the research is that young victims of racism tend to take no action to seek help, but when they do report a racist incident, they most commonly seek help from a teacher. Schools, then, are an important source of support for young people suffering racist treatment, but they're also the main setting in which many young people experience racist behaviour. The study uncovers a clear trend towards structural and institutionalised racism within schools that have a significant Indigenous, migrant or refugee population.

Another disturbing finding is that teachers, as well as students, can often unintentionally be the perpetrators of racist behaviour in Australian schools.

The report makes a number of proposals in light of this. In particular, it recommends better professional development for teachers, school leaders and administrative staff regarding the effect of personal attitudes and structural racism on the health and wellbeing of the school community. This should improve the capacity of school leaders to develop whole-school initiatives to combat racism and enable teachers to identify and address racist incidents within the school, including within the classroom.

In line with these findings, a suite of teaching and learning modules will soon be released by Deakin University and FYA. *Building Bridges: Creating a culture of diversity* by Fethi Mansouri and colleagues will provide important resources to enhance the sensitivity of students towards cultural diversity and equip them with the skills to shape their own opinions on issues connected to social justice and human rights. **T**

*Dr Lucas Walsh is Director of Research at The Foundation for Young Australians.*

#### REFERENCES

- Dunn, K.M., Forrest, J., Burnley, I. & McDonald, A. (2004). *Constructing racism in Australia. Australian Journal of Social Issues*. 39(4): 409-30.
- Forrest, J. (2008). *Report on attitudes towards and experience of racism among 18-24 year olds in NSW, Qld, Vic and SA. Melbourne: The Foundation for Young Australians.*
- Mansouri, F., Jenkins, L., Morgan, L. & Taouk, M. (2009). *The impact of racism upon the health and wellbeing of young Australians. Melbourne: The Foundation for Young Australians.*
- Mansouri, F., Leach, M., Jenkins, L. & Walsh, L. (2009). *Diversity: An educational advantage. Teaching and Learning Modules. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.*