

Mental health impacts of racism and attitudes to diversity in Victorian schools

A SUMMARY OF SURVEY FINDINGS

Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD)

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This research summary is an overview of findings reported in more detail in 'Priest N, Perry R, Paradies Y, Ferdinand A and Kelaheer M. 2014. Experiences of Racism, Racial/Ethnic Attitudes, Motivated Fairness and Mental Health Outcomes among Primary and Secondary School Students. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. In press.'



Background

In 2007 the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) published findings from a survey of 4,000 Victorians, the majority of whom supported a society that included people from different cultures. These conclusions were published in the *More than tolerance: Embracing diversity for health* report (VicHealth 2007). Yet approximately one in 10 of those surveyed held views that were clearly racist, responding positively to questions such as 'some groups are inferior to others' and/or 'people from different 'races' should not marry'. Approximately one in three respondents suggested that they did not tolerate certain ethnic differences, for example holding the belief that some groups do not fit into Australian society.

The Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) program was developed in response to these findings. LEAD was designed to trial new community interventions that address racism in two communities. The communities were selected due to their broad ethnic mix and local government commitment, not because they were any more or less racist than other localities. LEAD was undertaken in partnership with VicHealth, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, *beyondblue*, Municipal Association of Victoria, City of Whittlesea, Greater Shepparton City Council and other academic, policy and community experts. It was supported by the Department of Social Services through its Diverse Australia Program and the Lowitja Institute.

This research was conducted at the beginning of the LEAD program to ascertain the level of racism and its impacts on the mental health of school students and staff in these local government areas and to explore their attitudes towards cultural diversity.

For more information about the LEAD project, please go to www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/LEAD.

What is racism and race-based discrimination?

Racism can be broadly defined as behaviours, practices, beliefs and prejudices that underlie avoidable and unfair inequalities across groups in society based on race, ethnicity, culture or religion.

Race-based discrimination occurs when those behaviours and practices result in avoidable and unfair inequalities across groups in society (Berman and Paradies 2010). This definition encompasses overt forms of racism, such as racial violence, as well as subtle forms such as race-based exclusion. Race-based discrimination can occur at individual, interpersonal, community and societal levels.

Direct racism is based in differential treatment that results in an unequal distribution of power, resources or opportunities across different groups, such as a refusal to hire people from a particular ethnic group.

Indirect racism is equal treatment that affects groups differently and results in an unequal distribution of power, resources or opportunities. For example, a policy that requires all employees to have their head uncovered while working is the same for all employees, although it jeopardises the employment opportunities of those who wear head coverings for religious or traditional reasons.

Racism and children and young people

Children and young people are particularly vulnerable to the detrimental effects of racism (Sanders-Phillips 2009; Williams and Mohammed 2009). Racism has the potential to negatively affect the development and adjustment of children and young people, with negative consequences across health and wellbeing, educational and social outcomes both in childhood and throughout life (Priest, Paradies et al. 2013). This includes direct experiences of racism where children and youth themselves are the targets, vicarious experiences such as hearing about or seeing another person's experiences of racism, as well as carers or close family members experiencing racism that may or may not be witnessed by children and youth (Kelly, Becares et al. 2012; Priest, Paradies et al. 2012). In the absence of racism, the benefits of cultural diversity include improved productivity, creativity and improved student wellbeing in schools (Page 2007).

Schools are key sites in the lives of children and young people as settings for peer relationships, including racism as expressed through racial discrimination, racial bullying and racial victimisation, as well as for academic learning and socialization (Mansouri and Jenkins 2010). Schools are also powerful places in which children learn about cultural diversity and understand their own cultural identity and sense of belonging in a multicultural society (Walton, Priest et al. 2014). They also play a major role in the formation of attitudes toward cultural diversity and understandings of racism (Paluck and Green 2009; Walton, Priest et al. 2013). Schools, as a microcosm of society, also reflect broader social attitudes toward cultural diversity and racism. As such intercultural tensions and racism are often more prevalent in schools compared to other settings (Mansouri and Jenkins 2010). Thus schools were identified as a key setting for action within the overall LEAD intervention.

A snapshot of findings

DATA COLLECTED

- 444 staff surveys (across 9 schools)
- 264 student surveys (across 7 schools)

STAFF EXPERIENCES OF RACISM AND ATTITUDES TO CULTURAL DIVERSITY

- Most rarely or never reported experiences of direct racism (i.e. that they themselves were the target of racism).
- Most sometimes or often experienced vicarious racism at their school (i.e. that other staff or students were the target of racism).
- Most agreed or strongly agreed that their school was characterised by a culture of fairness or anti-racism.
- Most agreed or strongly agreed that cultural diversity is important at school.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF RACISM AT SCHOOL AND ATTITUDES TO CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Types of direct racism experienced by students monthly or more at school

i.e. Has this happened to YOU at school...because of your culture?

- 19.5% "Other students said you don't belong"
- 16.4% "Other students didn't want to play with you"
- 15.6% "You were left out by a student"
- 14.1% "You were spat on, pushed or hit by a student"
- 9.2% "A teacher thought you couldn't do something"
- 6.5% "You were left out by a teacher"
- Primary school students experienced significantly more direct racism compared with secondary school students.
- Students who were born in non-English speaking countries, had parents born in non-English speaking countries or did not know where their parents were born reported more direct experiences of racism than students who were born in English-speaking countries and had parents born in English-speaking countries.

Types of **vicarious** racism experienced by students monthly or more at school

i.e. Has this happened to OTHER STUDENTS at your school... because of their cultural group?

- 65.6% "Students are called names or teased"
- 44.3% "Students are left out"
- 40.8% "Students are spat on, pushed or hit"
- Self-reported experiences of direct racism were associated with higher levels of loneliness and sadness.
- Students who reported that people from other cultural backgrounds were good (or nice, kind etc.) were less likely to report feeling sad.
- Students who reported more motivation to be fair to those from different cultures were less likely to report feeling lonely than students who reported less motivation to be fair to those from different cultures.

Racism and child and youth health

Globally, racism is receiving increasing attention as a determinant of health (Braveman, Egerter et al. 2011). There is a growing body of epidemiological evidence showing strong associations between self-reported racism and poor adult health outcomes across diverse minority groups in developed countries (Brondolo, Brady et al. 2011; Brondolo, Hausmann et al. 2011). There is also a growing body of evidence that considers the effects of racial discrimination on child and youth health (Priest, Paradies et al. 2013). This includes strong and consistent relationships between racism and negative child and youth mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and psychological distress, as well as behavior problems and substance use. Evidence is also emerging of associations between racism and poor physical health outcomes, including immune and inflammatory markers of chronic disease and obesity.

Throughout the life course, racism at institutional and interpersonal levels serves to structure the distribution of risks and opportunities. Children may experience racism and discrimination directly and/or vicariously, and, in turn, these experiences may influence psychological and physiological processes that lead to poor health and developmental outcomes. Further, evidence suggests that vicariously experienced racism and discrimination influences child health and development via aspects of the family and school environment such as supportive parenting, racial socialisation and access to health supporting resources such as education and health care and that such conditions do not promote favourable developmental outcomes in children (Kelly, Becares et al. 2012).

About the surveys

The LEAD Education setting surveys investigated staff and student self-reported experiences of racism, attitudes towards cultural diversity, and student mental health outcomes associated with experiences of racism. Survey data were collected across nine schools at the beginning of LEAD in 2011. For more information about survey methods see Priest, Perry et al. (2014).

STAFF SURVEYS COLLECTED DATA ON:

- demographics
- school policies and practices in relation to cultural diversity
- direct/personal experiences of racism within the school environment
- vicarious experiences of racism within the school environment (i.e. experienced by parents, teachers, within the school, the wider community)
- quality of intercultural relationships within the school community.

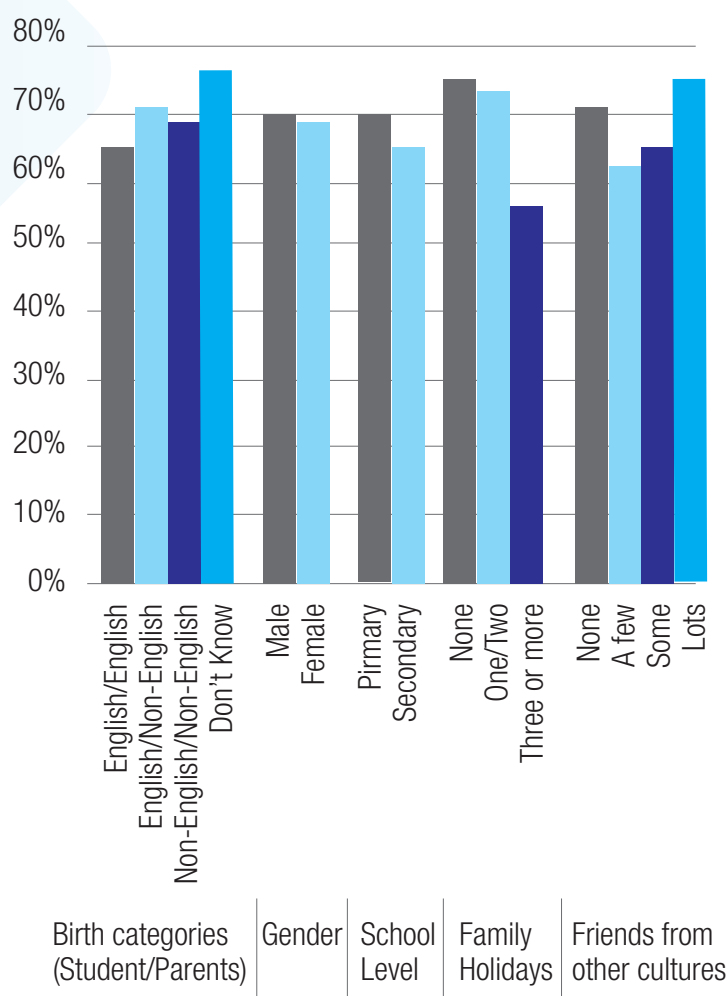
STUDENT SURVEYS COLLECTED DATA ON:

- demographics
- motivations for fair behaviour towards students from different cultural backgrounds
- attitudes towards those from different cultural backgrounds
- direct experiences of racism at school
- vicarious experiences of racism (racism experiences among other students at school)
- emotional health outcomes (loneliness and sadness).

Surveys were collected from 444 school staff (48.9% female with a median age range of 35-39 years across 9 schools. Most staff (86.6 % n=382) were born in English-speaking countries and 13.4% (n=59) were born in non-English speaking countries.

Surveys were collected from 264 students (54.2% female) with a mean age of 11.2 years (SD = 2.2) across 7 schools. Approximately one third of students (37.6%) were born in English-speaking countries and had parents that were also, 29.3% were born in English speaking countries and had parents born in non-English speaking countries, 25.1% of students were born in non-English speaking countries as were their parents and finally 8.0% did not know where one or both of their parents were born.

(Note: All analysis was adjusted for clustering at the school level.)



Students reporting positive social attitudes 'most times' by sociodemographics

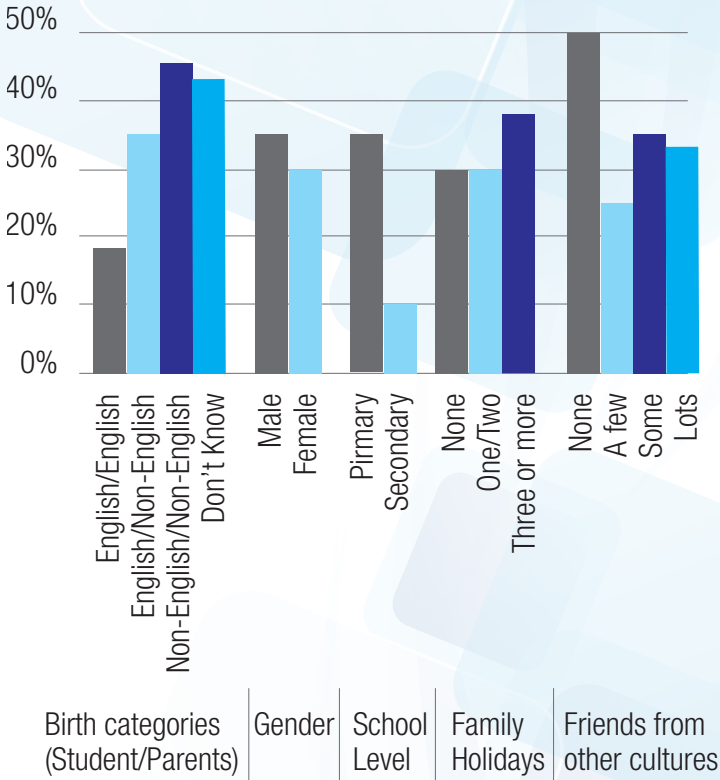
Key survey results

STAFF DATA

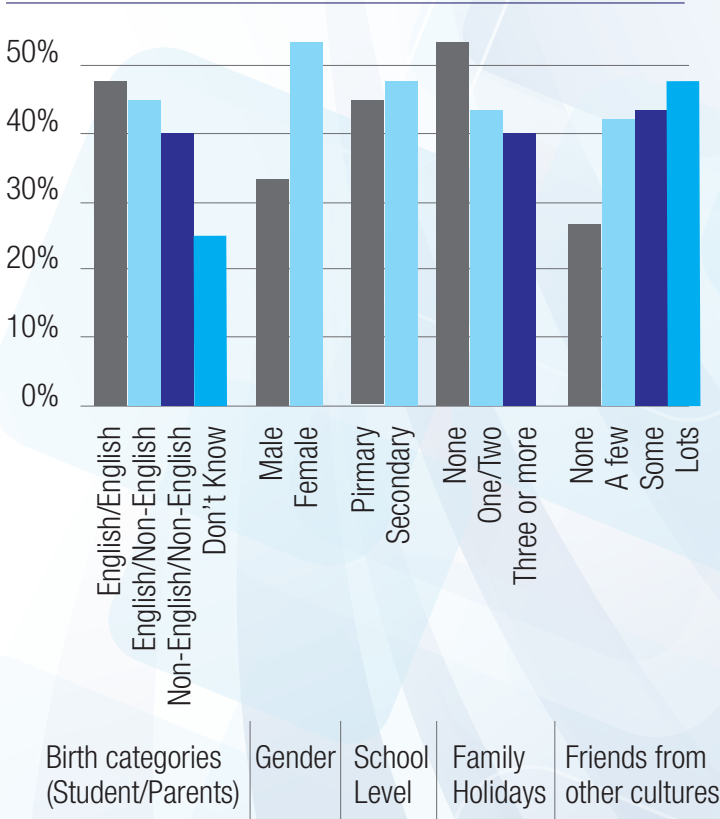
Findings from staff members suggested reasonably positive attitudes and experiences of diversity overall at school.

- **89.6%** agreed/strongly agreed that **school staff get along well with students** from different racial, ethnic, cultural or religious groups
- **88.2%** agreed/strongly agreed that **school staff** from different racial, ethnic, cultural or religious groups **get along well with each other**
- **56.1%** agreed/strongly agreed that **school students** from different racial, ethnic, cultural or religious groups **get along well with each other**
- **92.8%** reported **never or rarely** staff at their school are treated unfairly **by other school staff members** because of their race, ethnicity, culture or religion.
- **63.5%** reported **never or rarely** staff at their school are treated unfairly **by students** because of their race, ethnicity, culture or religion (28.4% reported sometimes and 6.3% often/very often)
- **89.7%** reported **never or rarely** students at their school are treated unfairly **by school staff members** because of their race, ethnicity, culture or religion (7.7% reported sometimes)
- **47.3%** reported **sometimes** students at their school were treated unfairly **by other school students** because of their race, ethnicity, culture or religion (36.9% reported never or rarely and 14% often/very often).

Most staff agreed their school was characterised by a culture of fairness with a mean score of 1.87 (SD = 0.54). Most staff also agreed that cultural diversity is important with a mean score of 1.78 (SD = 0.71). (Note: For both of these constructs 1 represents the best possible score on a 5 point scale.)



Students reporting direct racism at least once a month by sociodemographics



Students reporting fairness 'most times' by sociodemographics

Student data

DIRECT EXPERIENCES OF RACISM AT SCHOOL

Over a third (33.2%) of students reported direct experiences of racism at school and over a fifth (22.5%) experienced at least one form of direct racism every day.

For direct racism in particular, most reported experiences of racism were perpetrated by other students rather by than teachers, and the most common direct experience reported was students being told they didn't belong in Australia (19.5% monthly or more).

There were significant differences in the level of direct experiences of racism among students from different sub-groups. For experiences of direct racism overall (i.e., every month or more often), 19.2% of students born in English speaking countries (whose parents were also) reported experiencing racism, whereas 34.2% of students born in English-speaking countries whose parents were born in non-English speaking countries, and 45.3% of students born in non-English speaking countries reported experiencing at least one form of racism. Of this latter group, 6.2% reported experiencing all six forms of direct racism at least once a month. About 22.5% of the baseline sample reported experiencing at least one form of direct racism every day with no significant differences across demographics within this frequency of experiences.

Survey findings indicated that primary school students reported significantly more experiences of direct racism compared with secondary school students. Students who were born in non-English speaking countries, had parents born in non-English speaking countries or did not know where their parents were born reported more experiences of direct racism than students who were born in English-speaking countries and had parents born in English-speaking countries.

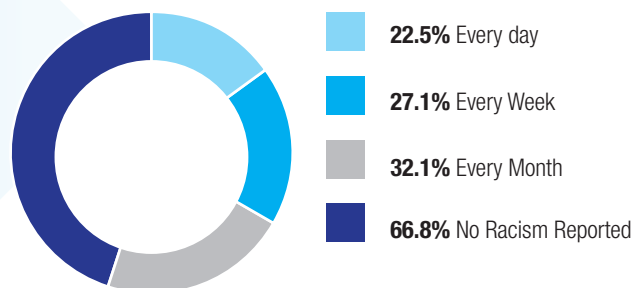


Figure 1. Percentage of students who reported experiencing one or more form of direct racism at school - "Has this happened to YOU at school...because of your culture?"

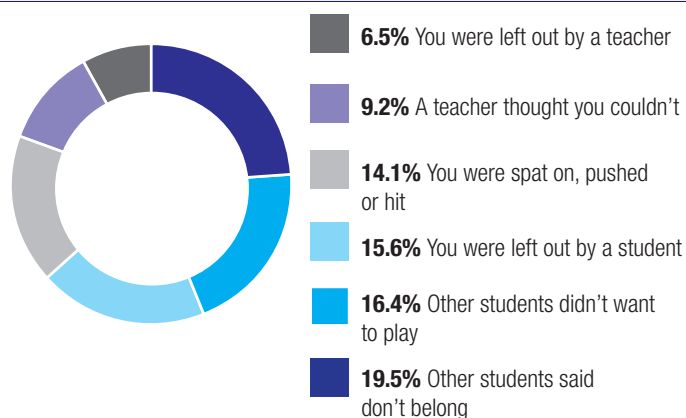


Figure 2. Percentage of students reporting types of direct experiences of racism at school monthly or more - "Has this happened to YOU at school...because of your culture?"

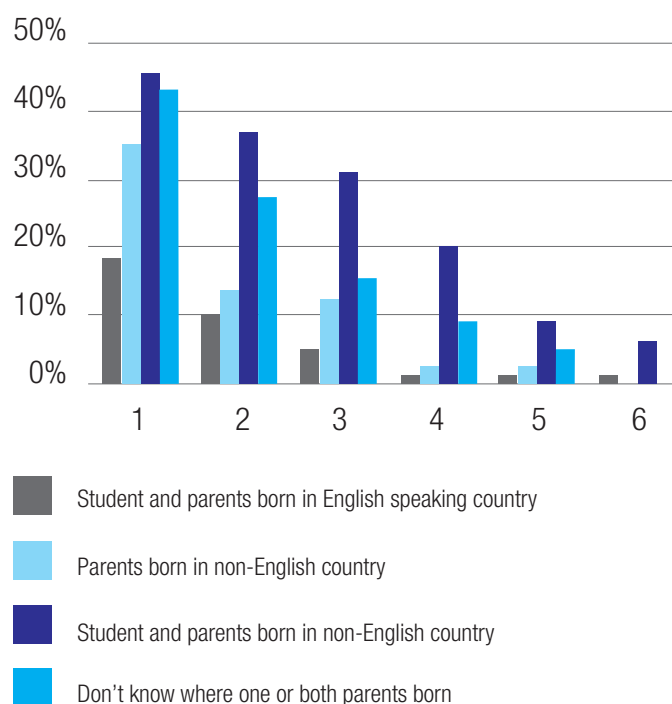


Figure 3. Percentage of students reporting direct experiences of racism at school by their own and their parent country of birth category

VICARIOUS EXPERIENCES OF RACISM AT SCHOOL

Far more students reported experiences of vicarious racism than reported direct experiences of racism. Students most commonly reported other students being called names or teased because of their cultural group (65.6% monthly or more), followed by other students being left out (44.3%) or being physically targeted (40.8%).

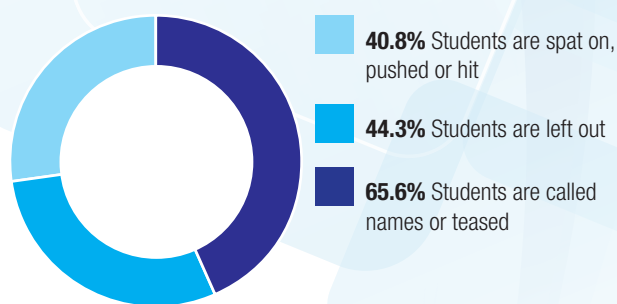


Figure 5. Percentage of students reporting types of vicarious racism by monthly or more – “Has this happened to OTHER STUDENTS at your school...because of their cultural group”

MOTIVATED FAIRNESS AND INTERGROUP ATTITUDES

Students reported high levels of motivated fairness internally, as well as from external adult sources such as teachers or adults. However, just over half reported that they felt other students expected them to be nice to others.

Female students were significantly more likely than male students to feel motivated to be fair to people from other cultural groups. There were no significant differences in levels of motivated fairness reported by students by their own and parent country of birth categories.

Less than half of the students surveyed reported positive attitudes towards those from other cultural groups. There were no significant differences in attitudes between males and females or between different child and parent country of birth categories.

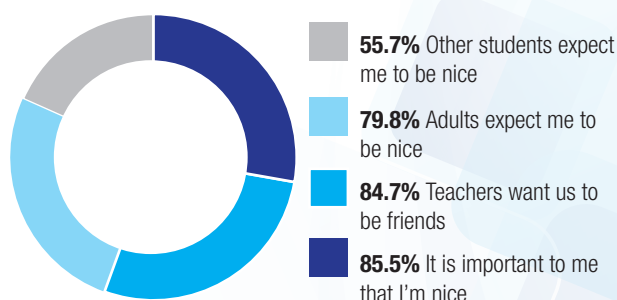


Figure 6. Percentage of students reporting internal and external motivation to be fair to those from other cultural groups 'most times'

PREDICTING LONELINESS AND SADNESS

Self-reported experiences of direct racism were associated with higher levels of loneliness and sadness. These associations remained when adjusting for demographic variables, racial/ethnic attitudes, motivation to be fair to others, and vicarious experiences of racism. Additionally, students who felt that people from other cultural backgrounds were good (or nice, kind etc.) were less likely to report feeling sad. Students who were more motivated to be fair to others were also less likely to report feeling lonely than students who were not as motivated to be fair to others.

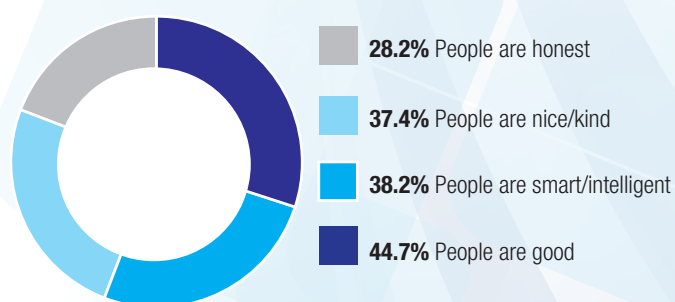


Figure 7. Percentage of students reporting positive attitudes about people from other cultural groups 'most times'

What was learned?

- Most staff reported that their school promoted a high culture of fairness and that they had high levels of support for diversity, although close to half of the staff also reported that students at their school sometimes experienced racism from other students.
- Student experiences of direct and vicarious racism were quite common, with nearly half of students born in non-English speaking countries experiencing at least one form of direct racism once a month or more frequently and nearly a quarter of all students reporting experiencing at least one form of direct racism every day.
- Vicarious experiences of racism were more common than direct experiences, with two thirds of students reporting seeing other students being called names or teased due to their cultural background.
- Experiences of racism had consistent detrimental effects on students' mental wellbeing as measured by loneliness and sadness across demographic groups.
- Most students reported high levels of motivated fairness internally as well as externally from their teachers and other adults, although expectations from other students regarding fairness towards others were reported as much lower.
- Only around half of students reported positive attitudes towards students from other cultural groups.

What's needed?

- These results strongly support the need for effective school-based interventions to prevent race-based discrimination through the establishment of systemic organisational and policy changes. They also suggest that interventions to promote a culture of fairness in school may have a positive impact on experiences of loneliness for all students.
- The contrast between student experiences and staff perceptions may indicate that some staff are not fully aware of the discriminatory behaviour being perpetuated at school. Students' experiences of racist incidents and the resultant effects of these experiences may need to be communicated more clearly to school staff in order to build support for school-based pro-diversity interventions.

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