



Summary of findings from the 2017 Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR) student and staff surveys

The Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR) project is the first large-scale population-representative study on experiences and attitudes to racism and racial bullying, and on bystander responses to racism and racial discrimination among Australian students in government schools in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria.

SOAR consists of two components:

- a population-representative survey on the experiences, attitudes and intended behaviours of year 5–9 students in NSW and Victorian schools, and their teachers, in relation to racism and racial bullying, prosocial behaviour, bystander responses, health and wellbeing, and school connectedness
- piloting and evaluation of a school-based bystander intervention program to encourage students and teachers to act when they witness racism and racial bullying.

This summary presents findings of SOAR's first component.

SOAR was funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant. It is led by the Australian National University, together with Western Sydney University, the University of Melbourne, the University of Technology Sydney and Deakin University, in partnership with the NSW Department of Education, the Victorian Department of Education and Training, and the Australian Human Rights Commission.

Methods

Government schools in NSW and Victoria were randomly selected to participate. Schools with higher proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were oversampled.

Data collection for the baseline student survey was completed between 23 May and 7 August 2017. Staff (teaching and nonteaching) from participating schools completed the SOAR staff survey by the end of October 2017.

The SOAR student survey was completed by 4664 primary and secondary students across 23 schools: 2081 students in NSW and 2583 students in Victoria.

The SOAR staff survey was completed by 202 participants ($n = 88$ in NSW, $n = 114$ in Victoria). Of these, 138 (68%) were from secondary schools and 64 (32%) were from primary schools across 10 NSW and 6 Victorian schools.

This summary is based on the main report of the 2017 SOAR survey findings: *Findings from the 2017 Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR) student and staff surveys* by N Priest, S Chong, M Truong, M Sharif, K Dunn, Y Paradies, J Nelson, O Alam, A Ward and A Kavanagh.

Student survey findings

Profile of participating students

- About half (55%) of the survey sample comprised students identifying as either Anglo-Celtic or European. The second biggest group (almost 22%) comprised students from South, East and Southeast Asia. Of the sample, 5% identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, 5% as Middle Eastern, 4% as Pacific Islander or Maori, 3% as African and 1% as Latin American; 5% did not report an ethnic background.
- About 46% of the students reported having no religion, 35% reported being of Christian faith, 5% Islamic faith, 6% Buddhist faith, 2% Hindu faith and 2% other religion; 4% of responses were missing or unknown.
- Overall, just over half the student participants and their parents were born in Australia.

Student experiences of discrimination

Students were asked whether they had experienced direct racial discrimination due to their race, ethnicity or cultural background in three contexts: by peers/other students at their school, by teachers at their school, and in the community/society.

- About one-third of all students reported experiences of racial discrimination by peers (31%) and in society (27%), and just over one-tenth (12%) by teachers.
- Compared with students from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, students from all other backgrounds (except European) were 2 times more likely to experience some form of discrimination at least once.

- Students who were born overseas reported 2 times more experiences of racial discrimination than students born in Australia.
- Students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds reported less racial discrimination than students from stigmatised migrant backgrounds. This may reflect greater habituation, desensitisation and normalisation of experiences of racial discrimination, rather than a lower overall burden of racism.

Vicarious racial discrimination

Vicarious discrimination is defined as indirect exposure to racial discrimination, such as seeing racism directed at friends, family and strangers. Students were asked whether they had witnessed other students being treated unfairly, by either their peers or teachers, because of their racial, ethnic or cultural background.

- More than half (60%) of the participants reported seeing other students being racially discriminated against by their peers. This included being left out, teased or treated with less respect by other students. 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.
- Nearly half (43%) of students reported seeing incidents of racial discrimination directed towards other students by teachers. The highest levels of vicarious racism were reported by students from Pacific Islander/Maori backgrounds (71%).

Religious discrimination

Students were asked whether they had experienced discrimination on the grounds of their religion across three contexts: by peers/other students at their school, by teachers at their school, and in the community/society.

- Overall, students who reported their religion as Hinduism, Islam or 'other' reported the highest prevalence of religious discrimination.
- Students who were born overseas and students born in Australia with at least one parent born overseas reported higher levels of experience of religious discrimination (37% and 30%, respectively) than students born in Australia and with both parents born in Australia.

Bystander responses

Students were asked about how they behaved in racial bullying situations according to three roles: as 'assistant' of the bully (actively reinforcing), 'defender' of the victim (supporting and consoling the victim, and/or actively trying to stop the bullying) and 'outsider' (staying outside the bullying situation).

- Overall, students scored highly on the defender role, indicating that they were proactive in supporting the victim and trying to stop the racial bullying. Students scored very low on the assistant role, indicating that they did not join in the racial bullying. Students had a medium score on the outsider role, indicating that they tried to stay away from the racial bullying.
- Student participants indicated whether they had taken action to support the victim in a racial bullying situation. Of students reporting defender action, 60% stated that they tried to make others stop the bullying most of the time or always.
- A small proportion (about 7–8%) of the students said that they laughed or joined in the racial bullying most of the time or always. About 12% of student participants said that they did not do anything in racial bullying situations most of the time or always.

Attitudes about different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds

Students were asked their opinions about six different racial, ethnic and cultural groups (Anglo-Celtic, East/Southeast Asian, South Asian, Aboriginal/Indigenous, African, Middle Eastern/North African).

Overall, students' attitudes (across all ethnic groups) towards different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds were warm. On a scale from 4 (least warm) to 16 (warmest), all groups reported an average level of at least 11.

Self-efficacy to intervene

Students were asked how confident they would be to intervene in a situation in which another student was being treated unfairly. Overall, students across all ethnic groups reported high levels of self-efficacy to intervene in racial bullying incidents. On a scale from 3 (lowest self-efficacy) to 15 (highest self-efficacy), all groups reported an average level of more than 10.

Loneliness and social connectedness at school

Students were asked questions relating to their feelings of loneliness and social connectedness. Across all ethnic groups, students reported low levels of loneliness (7% of the students said that they had nobody to talk to) and high levels of social connectedness (78% of the students reported that they had lots of friends).

Teacher empathy

Students were asked about their perceptions of the extent to which teachers listened and understood their needs and assisted with student learning. Students reported positive perceptions of empathy among teachers. A large proportion (63%) of students responded that they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement 'My teachers are good at dealing with racism when it happens'.

Peer prosocial norms

This section asked students about perceptions of their peers' behaviour towards other students. Students reported positive perceptions of their peers: about 58% of the student participants said that most or almost all of the students at their school cared about other people's feelings.

Interracial climate

This section assessed students' perceptions of whether the school environment is welcoming to students of different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Overall, students reported positive sentiments of their schools' racial climate: 78% reported that 'Students are able to make friends with students from different racial/ethnic/cultural backgrounds'. However, 11% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their friends would think badly of them if they ate lunch with a student of a different racial, ethnic or cultural background.

Engagement and valuing contact with people from other racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds

Overall, students reported positive sentiments towards engaging with students from other backgrounds. The majority (77%) of the student participants agreed or strongly agreed that they learnt new things when they were with people from other racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. A large proportion (75%) indicated that they liked meeting and getting to know people from other racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Socioemotional development and sleep

Overall, about 23% of student participants were identified as being at risk of a clinically significant socioemotional difficulty. Overall, about 30% of the students did not meet the Sleep Health Foundation recommendation for sleep hours on school days, and 25% did not meet the recommendation for sleep hours on non-school days.

Staff survey findings

Profile of participating staff

The participating staff mostly identified as Anglo-Celtic (62%). Of the remainder, 26% identified as European, 2% as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and 6% as other background (e.g. East Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern). The majority were classroom teachers – 58% of NSW participants and 61% of Victorian participants. About half (51%) of staff participants had been working in schools for more than 10 years.

Staff perceptions of their training and available resources

Staff reported mixed perceptions of their education departments' provision of training and resources. A large proportion (60%) of staff participants in NSW and 32% in Victoria thought that their education department provided sufficient professional antiracism education. Approximately one-quarter (28%) of staff participants in NSW and one-third (34%) in Victoria thought that their education department provided sufficient professional education on intercultural understanding.

Staff perceptions of school climate

Overall, staff reported positive accounts of their school climate. A majority (91%) reported that teachers at their school build strong relationships with students, and 85% reported that staff get along well with parents from different racial, ethnic or cultural backgrounds. Just over half (56%) reported that teachers' cultural backgrounds are valued and recognised within the school (72% of staff participants in NSW and 45% of staff participants in Victoria).

Bullying and harassment at school

One-quarter (25%) of all staff participants agreed or strongly agreed that bullying was a serious problem in their school, and 19% agreed or strongly agreed that racial discrimination was a serious problem in their school. Moreover, almost one-quarter (21%) of staff participants agreed or strongly agreed that there were inadequate policies, practices and processes in place to address race-based discrimination in their school (15% of NSW staff participants and 21% of Victorian staff participants).

Discrimination at school

Staff in NSW and Victoria differed in their perception of discrimination in their schools – about 13% of NSW participants and 35% of Victorian participants reported that staff at their school were treated unfairly by students because of their race, ethnicity, culture or language. About 39% of staff participants from NSW and 41% of staff participants from Victoria reported that students at their school were treated unfairly by other students because of their race, ethnicity, culture or language.

Personal self-efficacy in behavioural management

Overall, staff indicated that they felt skilled and confident in managing racial bullying involving students. A large proportion (about 77%) reported that they can successfully handle situations of racial bullying among students.

Diversity beliefs

Staff participants were asked to rate their feelings towards nine different racial, ethnic or cultural groups using a 'Warmth Thermometer Scale' for each group. The possible range was 1 ('Very cold') to 7 ('Very warm'). Scores for all groups were more than 6, indicating high levels of warmth towards all nine groups.

Implicit Association Test

In this measure of the strength of a person's automatic association between concepts (e.g. categories 'white' and 'black' with an attribute 'good' or 'bad'), staff participants showed a slightly stronger association of Middle Eastern names with unpleasant words (compared with pleasant words), and a slightly stronger association of Aboriginal names with unpleasant words (compared with pleasant words).

The following points relate to questions provided to NSW school staff only, because they relate to a specific program that involves the employment of Anti-Racism Contact Officers (ARCOs) in schools in that state.

- The majority of staff participants had read the NSW Department of Education's Multicultural Education Policy (63%) and NSW Anti-Racism Policy (70%). A majority (66%) of staff were aware that the Anti-Racism Policy was being implemented in their school, and slightly more than half (51%) were aware that the Multicultural Education Policy was being implemented.
- Nearly one-third (33%) of staff agreed or strongly agreed that their school's ARCO is active in promoting awareness and understanding about antiracism, compared with 20% who disagreed or strongly disagreed. However, 46% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, or did not answer the question.

Recommendations

- Attention to reducing experiences of racial discrimination and racism among Australian primary and secondary school students should be a major priority, particularly among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students from stigmatised ethnic backgrounds, and students born overseas or with parents born overseas.
- Data should be routinely collected at a population level from students about their experiences of racial discrimination across contexts to monitor change over time, and to inform and evaluate antiracism strategies.
- Data collections should include students' self-reported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, ethnicity, religion and migration history to allow detailed disaggregation of data to inform action and track progress with regard to experiences of discrimination and school connectedness, as well as for health, wellbeing and academic outcomes.
- This study collected data on students' perceptions of experiences of racial discrimination. Data should also be collected and monitored at systemic and institutional levels, such as through policy and organisational audits.
- High-quality, evidence-based, rigorously tested whole-of-school approaches to addressing racism are a critical priority for Australian education. The second component of SOAR directly addresses this need, and findings will be available in a subsequent report.