

‘Can it really be this bad?’: racism in schools shocks South Australia’s children’s tsar

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Helen Connolly was taken aback by reports of playground abuse in a report that suggests behaviour is often set by teachers and parents



South Australia’s children’s commissioner, Helen Connolly, says she was shocked by the pervasiveness of racism in schools. Photograph: Paul Miller/AAP

Tales of schoolchildren pulling off girls’ hijabs, using the N-word, and accusing other kids of being terrorists have “shocked” Helen Connolly, the South Australian commissioner for children and young people.

“I kept thinking ‘is this right?’” she said.

“Can it really be this bad? Because surely we would be doing something about it.”

In an interview with Guardian Australia, Connolly says she has been stunned by the level of racist language used by children in Australia, as outlined in the Everyday Racism report, produced by her office.

A separate, recent report from her office also found misogyny and sexism in schools.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/article/2024/may/08/can-it-really-be-this-bad-racism-in-schools-shocks-south-australias-childrens-tsar>

Connolly's comments are timely amid a national conversation about racism, [Islamophobia](#), radicalisation, sexism and misogyny escalates after a series of attacks and murders.

“When I first started, when I was listening to the kids talking about bullying, I was really surprised by the level of racist commentary in little kids,” Connolly said.

“All about Islamic State, terrorists, the N-word. I was a bit shocked ... that's when I started hearing about kids in primary school pulling off girls' hijabs. And it just kept coming up every time I connected with kids from refugee and migrant backgrounds, this everyday racism.”

That racism also comes from teachers and random adults, her survey found.

“Adults think it's OK to have racist commentary towards children who are just going about their business, waiting for a bus,” Connolly said. “I was shocked by the pervasive nature of it.

“The shocking thing for me was this whole resignation to it. There's just no point telling anyone, there's no point talking about it, there's no point kicking up.

“I don't think any of us would understand just how prevalent, persistent, everyday racism is.”

[‘Our voice gets shut down’](#)

Connolly said racism among children is a pervasive national, and probably global issue. Meanwhile, “we just don't ask the kids what their experience is”, she said.

“Parents' voices are important but parents are not proxies for children,” Connolly said.

“The stuff they say to me is quite different to what they say to their parents. We need to hear children's voices in this as well.”

The Everyday Racism report canvassed 600 people over five years from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and followed up with other forums. It found bullying occurred in face-to-face situations, via phone, texts and social media and involved references to physical appearance, gender, sexual identity, ability and race. “You're part of Isis”, “you're a terrorist”, “go back to your own country” were among the common phrases used.

“All black people like chicken ... when talking about slavery in class, they refer to you and say ‘you'll know about it’,” one girl said.

Another said: “Some teachers are racists at school ... when we complain, nobody does anything – our voice gets shut down.”

Children reported others using racial slurs to bait them into fights, after which they were punished. They reported favouritism and stereotypes from teachers, including getting into trouble for speaking their first language.

“One group said that pulling girls' hijabs off was a ‘common form of bullying’ they observed,” the report found.

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The 2023 Islamophobia in Australia report found women wearing hijab were “the most convenient and frequent target of Islamophobia”, while a [2022 report](#) found religious bullying, including the ripping off of hijabs, was [rife in the playground](#).

Connolly’s report also found that young people were being directed to vocational education training (VET) programs rather than being offered the full range of options.

“They repeatedly discussed being prevented from taking certain subjects, and that they were not being encouraged to take up opportunities to complete their SACE certificate or obtain an Atar for further study. Many felt this was based on racist perceptions,” it found.

‘The cruelty of it surprised me’

Adults who work with the children warned the cumulative impacts of everyday racism can lead to disengagement and withdrawal, and vulnerability to “antisocial” behaviour and substance abuse.

In sports, migrant and refugee young people reported being “benched” or “subbed” more often.

In the community they experienced racial abuse and harassment in public places. African young people particularly described being targeted for increased surveillance and bag checks.

Connolly’s recommendations include listening to children, having a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, specifically addressing race-based bullying and ensuring people can make complaints about racism without fear of retribution.

A separate report published in April, *Seen, But Not Heard*, canvassed children in years eight, nine and 10. The girls talked about ongoing sexist and gendered commentary, while those who were sexually or gender diverse, neurodiverse or non-Anglo Saxon were subjected to more bullying.

They said they were rarely asked for their views or suggestions.

“We are young. We are smart. Listen to us. We have good shit to say. Listen and learn,” a year 9 girl said.

The Yarra Valley Grammar principal, Dr Mark Merry, said on Wednesday that he was shocked by the cruelty of the boys at his school.

Two boys [were expelled](#) from the private school for publishing a list ranking girls as “wifey”, “cuties”, “mid”, “object”, “get out” and “unrapable”.

“The cruelty of it surprised me The viciousness and the cruelty of this particular post is what struck me, and it was so alien to everything that usually goes on here that it really did cause quite a shock,” he told ABC Radio National.

Merry acknowledged it was a cultural issue in a letter to parents and said that sexism and misogyny did happen from time to time in schools, and throughout the community.

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“It is a problem in the community. It is rife,” he said.