



South Australian  
Commissioner  
for Children and  
Young People  
2024

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# Everyday Racism

The views and experiences of  
South Australian young people from  
refugee and migrant backgrounds

PROJECT REPORT NO. 42 | MAY 2024

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## The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*.

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable and who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular, children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making, and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation. The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda, including ways in which children and young people can have greater input into the design and delivery of policies, processes and practices that affect their lives.

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## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the South Australian children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds who contributed their insights, ideas and suggestions in relation to addressing their experiences of racism at school, work, sport and across their community. Special thanks to the following organisations who supported my engagement with young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to ensure their voices could be heard.

Without their input this consultation and subsequent report would not have been possible.

- Australian Refugee Association
- Multicultural Youth South Australia
- Thebarton Senior College
- Adelaide Secondary School of English
- Multicultural Communities Council of SA
- Australian Migrant Resource Centre

Please note: all quotes used in this report are reproduced verbatim.

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## A note on diversity and labels

Terms such as 'culturally and linguistically diverse' are frequently used across governments and the community to refer to people from non-English speaking cultural backgrounds. However, such terms have been criticised for 'flattening out' complex and multi-faceted identities, for being too broad to reflect the diversity of experiences within and across communities, and for being used to label certain (non-white) groups as 'others' or 'outsiders'.<sup>1</sup>

This report uses the term 'young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds' while also recognising that this definition covers an extremely diverse group of people coming from many different countries of origin, with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, family structures, gender identities and sexualities, socioeconomic circumstances and levels of education, work experience and English proficiency. Those who are born outside Australia arrive at all ages and stages of development, with a multitude of different experiences of migration and individual journeys as refugees.

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## Terminology used in this report

A **migrant** has generally made the choice to leave their country for a variety of reasons, including for educational, employment or other opportunities.

A **refugee** has been forced to leave their country of origin and cannot return due to fear of persecution, conflict, or other circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

**Racial discrimination** refers to the behaviours and practices that result in avoidable and unfair inequalities across society based on race, ethnicity, culture or religion.<sup>3</sup>

**Racism** takes many forms and includes prejudice, hatred or discrimination based on race, ethnicity, culture or religion. It can take the form of harassment, abuse, humiliation, violence or intimidating behaviour. It also exists in systems and institutions that operate in ways that lead to inequitable treatment, opportunities and outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

**White** is used in this report as it is a term used by many young people to refer to the dominant cultural group in Australia from which they feel excluded, although it is 'largely regarded as imprecise and unscientific' as a racial category that emerged to support projects of colonisation.<sup>5</sup>

**Person of Colour (POC)** is a term that appears in several direct quotes from young people consulted for this report to refer to a person who is not white.

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# Commissioner's Foreword

Since commencing as South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, I have engaged with tens of thousands of children and young people across regional and metropolitan South Australia about issues that are important to them. Children and young people tell me about their challenges with education, sport, healthcare, transport, work and community supports. They also tell me they want to voice their ideas and to be trusted, listened to, respected, and valued, and they want to have access to information that will help them to explore solutions, and make decisions.

Through relationships with schools, youth organisations, local government, and service providers, I directly seek to hear the voices of children and young people in all aspects of my work. This work includes development of advocacy plans, public policy submissions, and provision of independent advice to government and the community. I am committed to ensuring that policymakers, business leaders and service providers hear what young people say are their biggest challenges as well as their ideas for solutions.

Children and young people have consistently raised concerns about racism throughout my term as Commissioner. My widespread consultations and report on bullying in 2018 found that children and young people's views and descriptions of bullying behaviour are consistent across school sectors, school types and locations, and are heavily influenced by gender and age.

Bullying was described as most commonly occurring face-to-face, often at school, in public spaces and at sporting facilities. Bullying through technology, via phone, text, and on social media, was described as generally occurring in addition to face-to-face bullying. .

Children and young people told me that bullying is generally focused on issues relating to belonging and identity, and includes references to physical appearance, gender, sexual identity, ability and race. Race-related bullying in primary school was generally described as children using derogatory terms and making comments of a racist nature, such as 'you're part of ISIS', 'I hate your country', 'you're a terrorist', and 'go back to your own country.'

It was clear in this consultation that racist bullying tends to increase as young people age, peaking in the senior years of school.

Since this early work on bullying, I have held a number of major forums and a series of face to face conversations with hundreds of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds through significant collaborations with the Australian Migrant Resource Centre (AMRC) and the Australian Refugee Association (ARA).

Young people have shared insights about the opportunities and barriers they face, including in relation to schooling and finding pathways to further education, training and employment. They have told me about the everyday challenges of resettlement and the additional challenges they face in accessing opportunities and not feeling safe at school, work and in the community.

I have also consulted with parents to gather their insights about their children's experiences of settlement and life in Australia, including interactions with the education system and other service systems. I have also held a number of roundtable discussions with adult stakeholders who work with children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

These include staff of the Australian Refugee Association (ARA), Multicultural Youth South Australia (MYSA), Thebarton Senior College, and Adelaide Secondary School of English.

Implicit and explicit in these conversations was the impact of racism on young people's everyday lives.

Young people are frustrated and concerned that open discussions about the impacts of racism on their lives are rare, despite the fact that their regular experiences of racism at school, work, and in social settings often leaves them feeling unsafe and unwelcome.

Whilst individual experiences vary, many children and young people experience discrimination on multiple grounds relating to their skin colour, appearance, ethnicity, or religion, as well as to their gender, sexuality and ability.

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds want more action to be taken to address and positively transform racist attitudes and behaviours in their schools, sports clubs, workplaces and communities.

**“ Given that racism is taught and learnt, we must understand how systems perpetuate racism, how racism and discrimination play out at a classroom level, and how racism more broadly continues to be an issue within our educational institutions.” – Commissioner Helen Connolly**

While this report focuses on the perspectives and experiences of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, I want to acknowledge that the roots of racism in Australia are deeply embedded in the history of colonisation. Aboriginal children and families continue to endure the impacts of structural racism and racist policies that deny their rights.

While understanding racism in Australia is incomplete without listening to the voices and experiences of Aboriginal young people, this report focuses on the experiences of refugee and migrant young people as one important part of a whole view.

This report outlines the issues South Australian refugee and migrant young people have explicitly raised with me in my conversations and direct engagement with them. It also highlights young people's ideas for preventing and actively challenging racism across a range of settings.

By reporting on these conversations my aim is to increase our understanding of the impact racism and racial discrimination has on children and young people. I seek to open up a dialogue with decision makers that can support systemic improvements in the way communities, schools, workplaces, and sports clubs throughout South Australia address racism.

For children and young people their experiences of belonging and inclusion are vital to their development. It is therefore essential that we do all we can to ensure children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds feel safe and included at school, in sports clubs and in the community.



**Helen Connolly**

Commissioner for Children  
and Young People

# Context

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of all children. The UNCRC clearly outlines that governments must protect children against all forms of discrimination on the basis of their family's nationality, ethnicity, status, religion, or other grounds.

The articles of the UNCRC detail the rights of all children to 'full and harmonious' development. Article 22 of the UNCRC specifically recognises that refugee children are due special protection to enjoy their rights. Article 30 sets out the right of children to enjoy their culture, to profess and practice their religion, and to use their own language.

Non-discrimination (Article 2) is one of the four general principles of the UNCRC, which 'should be considered in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights'.<sup>6</sup> The other three general principles are that 'all children have the right to survive and develop' (Article 6); that 'all children have the right to have their views heard and taken seriously' (Article 12); and that 'all children should have their best interests accounted for as a primary consideration in all actions affecting them' (Article 3).

In 1975, Australia became a signatory to the UN's International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) thereby undertaking to 'pursue by all appropriate means and without delay, a policy of eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms'.<sup>7</sup> The Convention defines racial discrimination as 'any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin, which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or

impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life'. Every few years Australia reports to the UN Committee regarding its progress in meeting its obligations under the ICERD. Australia's most recent report was submitted in 2020.

The *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) gives effect to Australia's obligations under the ICERD. It promotes equality of all persons before the law and makes it unlawful to discriminate based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin in the following areas: access to places and facilities; land, housing, and other accommodation; provision of goods and services; membership of trade unions; and employment. It also establishes the Race Discrimination Commissioner, whose functions include promoting understanding and compliance with the Act.

This Commonwealth legislation is supplemented by South Australia's *Equal Opportunity Act 1984*, which prohibits racial discrimination in the following areas: employment, membership of an association, education, sale of land, provision of goods and services, accommodation, and superannuation.

Further, the *Racial Vilification Act 1996* (SA) makes it an offence to incite hatred, or severe ridicule for, or contempt of, a person or group of people based on race.

There has been no national approach to establishing an anti-racism policy since the end of Australia's first Anti-Racism Strategy in 2015.<sup>8</sup> However, the Australian Human Rights Commission has released its findings from an initial scoping process for a new national anti-racism framework undertaken in 2022.

Despite these human rights obligations and legislative protections, racism remains an everyday reality for many people throughout Australia. This is evident in their interactions with individuals and with services, systems, policies, and institutions. The first national study of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds – the 2017 Multicultural Youth Australia Census – found that almost half of multicultural young people aged 15 to 25 years reported experiencing some form of discrimination or unfair treatment in the previous 12 months (49%), with two thirds indicating they had experienced racial discrimination at some point in their lives (66%).<sup>9</sup>

According to the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's annual Mapping Social Cohesion (MSC) Report, more than one third (35%) of people who speak a language other than English, reported experiencing discrimination in 2022, with this number increasing to almost half of those aged 18 to 24 years (48%).

The MSC Report also measures people's perceptions of how big a problem racism is in Australia. In 2022, 47% of young people thought racism was a 'fairly big' problem while 14% of young people thought racism was a 'very big' problem. Young people aged 18–24 years reported lower levels of 'overall belonging' compared to all other age groups, with an average belonging score 6.7 points lower than the national average.<sup>10</sup>

We do not know the full extent of racism, harassment, and discrimination being experienced in South Australian schools. Studies on the experiences of racial discrimination in schools undertaken by the Australian National University and University of Western Sydney found that as many as 40% of all students in Years 5 to 9 from non-Anglo or non-European backgrounds reported experiencing racial discrimination by their peers.



# Impact of racism

Research shows the wide-ranging impacts of exposure to racism and discrimination on children and young people's development, with negative consequences for health, education and social outcomes, across their life course.

While racism affects people of all ages and genders, research suggests that children and young people are more likely to be exposed to face-to-face and online racism than any other age-groups, with risk of substantial impact given the vulnerability associated with childhood and adolescent stages of development.<sup>11</sup>

Some research highlights the impacts of racism on children even where they are not direct targets. Studies on 'vicarious racism' have indicated an increased risk of common childhood illnesses, as well as social and emotional difficulties among children with carers or family members who experience racism.<sup>12</sup> Others have focused on the harms associated with witnessing racism in media or online.

Australia has been described as one of the most 'successful' multicultural countries in the world. Yet, paradoxically, alongside broad community support for cultural diversity, there are pervasive expressions of racism and a strong denial or ambivalence towards its prevalence, thereby limiting progress toward racial equity.

Racism takes multiple insidious forms, both overt and covert, direct and indirect. These forms range from 'casual' racism, comments and 'jokes' based on stereotypes, assumptions and prejudice, to incitement of hatred, or expressions or threats of physical and structural violence.

Racism is prevalent in a range of settings, including education and employment, housing, health, the criminal justice system, in sport, the media and entertainment. It is expressed and reinforced through policies, laws, systems and institutions, as well as through media representations. It can also occur at many levels:

- Interpersonal (in interactions between individuals)
- Institutional or systemic (practices, policies and processes that reproduce or maintain avoidable inequalities across racial groups)
- Internalised (internalised beliefs and attitudes about racial hierarchies, whether conscious or unconscious).

Some forms of racism are more visible than others. Systemic racism can be particularly difficult to perceive and is often so pervasive that it tends to be rendered invisible and taken for granted, while internalised racism 'is by its very nature, not recognised by those suffering from it'.<sup>13</sup> Wherever it occurs, research has highlighted the long-term intergenerational consequences of both current and life-time experiences of racial discrimination.<sup>14</sup>

Racism undermines young people's sense of belonging, their developing identities, their relationships, and their citizenship. It can be a barrier to education, employment, and participation in civic and social activities, and can involve exclusion and marginalisation that

can lead to withdrawal from school and social connections leading to disengagement from 'healthy' activities. It has also been linked to 'anti-social' behaviour.

Racism at any level impacts children and young people's lives across the five dimensions of South Australia's legislated Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People: health, wellbeing, education, safety, and citizenship. Nevertheless, children and young people's views and day-to-day experiences of racism are often overlooked.

Children and young people in South Australia have reported experiencing and witnessing racism at school, on public transport, at work and when applying for jobs. They describe being treated differently or 'lesser than' their peers by teachers, strangers, peers, prospective employers, and others. Many examples of racism are occurring in the very systems and services that are critical to young people's wellbeing and development.

Young South Australians report being singled out or being made fun of based on stereotypes, their clothing, their appearance, the food they eat, their level of English capability, their accent, how much money their family has, or the kind of jobs they are told to pursue.

They also describe the ways in which some teachers fail to protect students from racial discrimination by actively protecting students who say or do something racist, or by perpetuating racist stereotypes, language, and behaviours themselves.

Children and young people have highlighted what they see as inadequate responses to racism at an individual and structural level. They emphasise that racism 'does not get dealt with' because it is 'not seen as an issue'. There is also a common perception or fear that complaints about racist behaviour or incidents are not taken seriously, and that it is rare for anything to actually be done about complaints.

It is well-documented that many experiences of racism take place in school settings. Schools have a critical role to play in influencing children and young people's attitudes, views, and behaviours, as well as contributing to the formation of their identities, self-esteem, and sense of belonging.<sup>15</sup> It is too simplistic to suggest schools can address racism alone, however school leaders and school environments can send powerful messages to young people about what is unacceptable and inappropriate.

It is critical that we adopt policies, practices, and legislation across schools, workplaces, in the media, and within our communities that actively embed anti-racist practices. These will work best when informed by the experiences of children and young people themselves. Through better understanding of children and young people's experiences, we can develop the responses that are appropriate, and more likely to work.

- 
- “ I would sit teachers down and educate them about racism and put them in a scenario that people of colour go through.”  
– 15 year old, female
- “ Stereotypes - poor, broken English, skin colour and making fun of our English. All black people like chicken. We have to work more than whites. When talking about slavery in class, they refer to you and say ‘you’ll know about it’. ” – 16 year old, female
- “ Restorative class, educating teachers on different racial slurs and ways to be racist. Receive an apology whilst insuring there’s change”  
– 16 year old, male

## Key messages

- Racism takes many forms and is prevalent in many of the settings, systems and services that are critical to young people's wellbeing and development, including schools, sports clubs, workplaces, and public transport.
- Racism is considered a normal part of life and is not reported due to concerns about the inadequacy of responses to racism when it is reported.
- Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds believe it is often those who speak out against racism who are punished or excluded, while there seems to be fewer consequences for those being racist.
- Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds want more discussions and education about racism at school from a young age. They want more action taken by teachers and schools when they are bullied and mocked by their peers and seek anti-racist strategies that involve student input, and which encourage active participation by all students.
- Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds want a new approach to building cultural safety within schools; one that includes their insights, and involves them in designing a range of strategies that would include teacher training, wellbeing support, behaviour management approaches, a diverse curriculum and access to external services.

- Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds want schools and workplaces to embrace cultural diversity and cultural safety as part of everyday policies and practices rather than only on ‘special days or events’.
- Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds said they often feel misunderstood by service providers and are uncomfortable engaging with them as they don’t have staff who speak their languages, and who look like them.
- Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds want more tailored settlement and ongoing support from organisations that specialise in responding to young people from refugee and migrant communities experiences and needs.
- Adult stakeholders also noted a lack of action and accountability in response to racism, reporting that responsible adults in school and community settings may be reluctant to take action against racism due to concern about potential repercussions.
- Adult stakeholders described how the cumulative impacts of racism, exclusion and marginalisation can lead to disengagement and withdrawal from school, employment and social activities and connections, and that this can leave young people vulnerable to ‘antisocial’ behaviour and substance abuse.

# Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed as whole-of-government responses to everyday racism as experienced by young people.

## 1

Department for Education, in conjunction with students from refugee and migrant backgrounds, review existing anti-racism teaching materials and ensure they specifically address race-based bullying and adopt a zero-tolerance approach to racism and racist behaviours.

## 2

Department for Education develop an internal campaign to encourage all students and staff to make complaints by putting processes in place that enable any student or teacher to call out racism without fear of retribution. This should include supporting students and staff to talk about, prevent and respond to racism, and creating environments that consistently and actively promote cultural safety.

## 3

Office for Recreation, Sport and Racing ensure sports associations and clubs have the resources to actively drive and implement principles of non-discrimination in their governance, recruitment, training programs, and club culture, to ensure children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and ethnic and religious minorities can participate in and play sport.

## 4

The Department of Human Services invest in proactive and dedicated peer-led mentoring and advocacy programs aimed specifically at refugee and migrant children and young people, developed with their input and available in schools and community settings to augment and complement adult-focused settlement services.

## 5

Department for Industry, Innovation and Science provide funding for multicultural youth agencies to deliver mentoring and work experience programs for refugee and migrant young people to build professional skills and employer relationships.

**“ I don’t feel safe in education because there is a lot of racism going around daily.” – 17 year old, female**

**“ I want to receive the same opportunities that the local students receive.” – 18 year old, male**

**“ [I would feel culturally safe] if people could stop judging others by their skin tones and accept other cultures and religions.” – 15 year old, female**



## What we did...

- Between 2018 and 2023, four forums were held in collaboration with Australian Migrant Resource Centre (AMRC). A total of 600 young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds living across both metropolitan and regional areas of South Australia took part. Participants had the opportunity to workshop what opportunities and barriers they face at school and across their community. The forums focused on the following topics:
  - Leading for our Future (2018)
  - Tapping into our Talents (2021)
  - Pathways to Belonging (2022)
  - Celebrate Youth Diversity (2023)
- In 2022, six school based focus groups were held with 125 young people from diverse refugee and migrant backgrounds in collaboration with the Australian Refugee Association (ARA). The focus groups enabled participants to discuss the impact of their personal experiences of racism.
- In 2022, four community-based consultation sessions were held with 22 young people from diverse backgrounds in collaboration with Multicultural Youth SA (MYSA). The focus groups enabled the participants to discuss the impact of their personal experiences of racism.
- In 2023, a parent forum on cultural safety for 60 parents/carers from migrant and refugee backgrounds was undertaken in collaboration with the AMRC. The forum focused on the challenges being experienced by parents and their children.
- In 2023, four roundtable discussions were held with 30 staff from Thebarton Senior College, Adelaide Secondary School of English, MYSA, and ARA, who are in regular and direct contact with children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

**“ Incidents of racism and racial discrimination of refugee and migrant students at school impact on the wellbeing, participation, engagement and learning experience of all children and young people.” – Commissioner Helen Connolly**



# What we heard...

## Experiences of racism at school

**From racist name-calling and stereotyping through to more overt bullying, aggression and physical violence, young people reported frequent occurrences of racism at school – from both students and teachers.**

They reported being antagonised by white students and subjected to racial abuse in the form of slurs that include being told to ‘go back to their own country’. Some also described racist iconography being graffitied around school buildings and property.

Young people described experiences of white students using racial slurs to trigger a response or bait them into a fight. They also reported that there is seldom any consequences for the perpetrators of racist bullying, and that it was usually the victims of bullying who received the harshest punishment. This deterred them from standing up for themselves and others and meant they felt powerless to report racist bullying, either to their teachers or parents – mostly out of fear for the retribution and violence from the perpetrators that this might provoke.

One group said that pulling girls’ hijabs off was a ‘common form of bullying’ they observed, while others described witnessing numerous incidents of racially motivated violence and physical fighting at their schools.

Beyond overt violence and racist language, young people also reported a more subtle forms of ‘everyday racism’ that treat cultural differences as problematic or ‘less than’.

They reported being subject to racial teasing and stereotyping, and to having this brushed off as being ‘just a joke’. They also described instances of white students refusing to sit next to students from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

These ‘everyday’ instances of racism are damaging to students’ mental and physical wellbeing. Students said they often felt powerless to stand up for themselves against this type of racism, because it is so normalised and often ‘invisible’ to those not experiencing it or dismissed as being ‘just a joke’.

Young people described in detail what they perceived to be the different treatment they received from their teachers, when compared with their white peers. This included unequal administration of discipline, as well as teachers showing favouritism towards white students and making assumptions about students based on racial stereotypes.

They described how students from refugee and migrant backgrounds were often subjected to ‘ineffective’ punitive measures, such as school suspensions and exclusions. Some young people reported being suspended for ‘speaking their first language’ or ‘sticking up for’ themselves. A number of adult stakeholders highlighted that responses tend to be exclusionary and punitive where schools are not equipped to understand and support children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. They spoke of exclusion of boys from refugee backgrounds who are not provided with alternative or

modified education or adequately supported to re-engage with school. They also raised concerns about the way schools communicate with parents about their child's exclusion or education more broadly, particularly where language barriers exist. Punitive measures fail to address the root of the problem and limit the opportunities for young people to be involved in designing the solutions. Exclusion from schooling has serious learning implications for refugee and migrant students.

In schools, young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds felt that their mental health and safety was not a priority, or even being considered. As a result, they said they did not feel safe confiding in their teachers about the racism they had experienced at school. Racism was also seen as a key factor in why students disengage from their schooling and education altogether.

In addition to individual incidents of racism at school, young people and adult stakeholders highlighted broader issues of racism that appear to be embedded within the education system. They provided insights into the functioning of the schooling system, and highlighted where there are limits to opportunity, or where students are being excluded based on race.

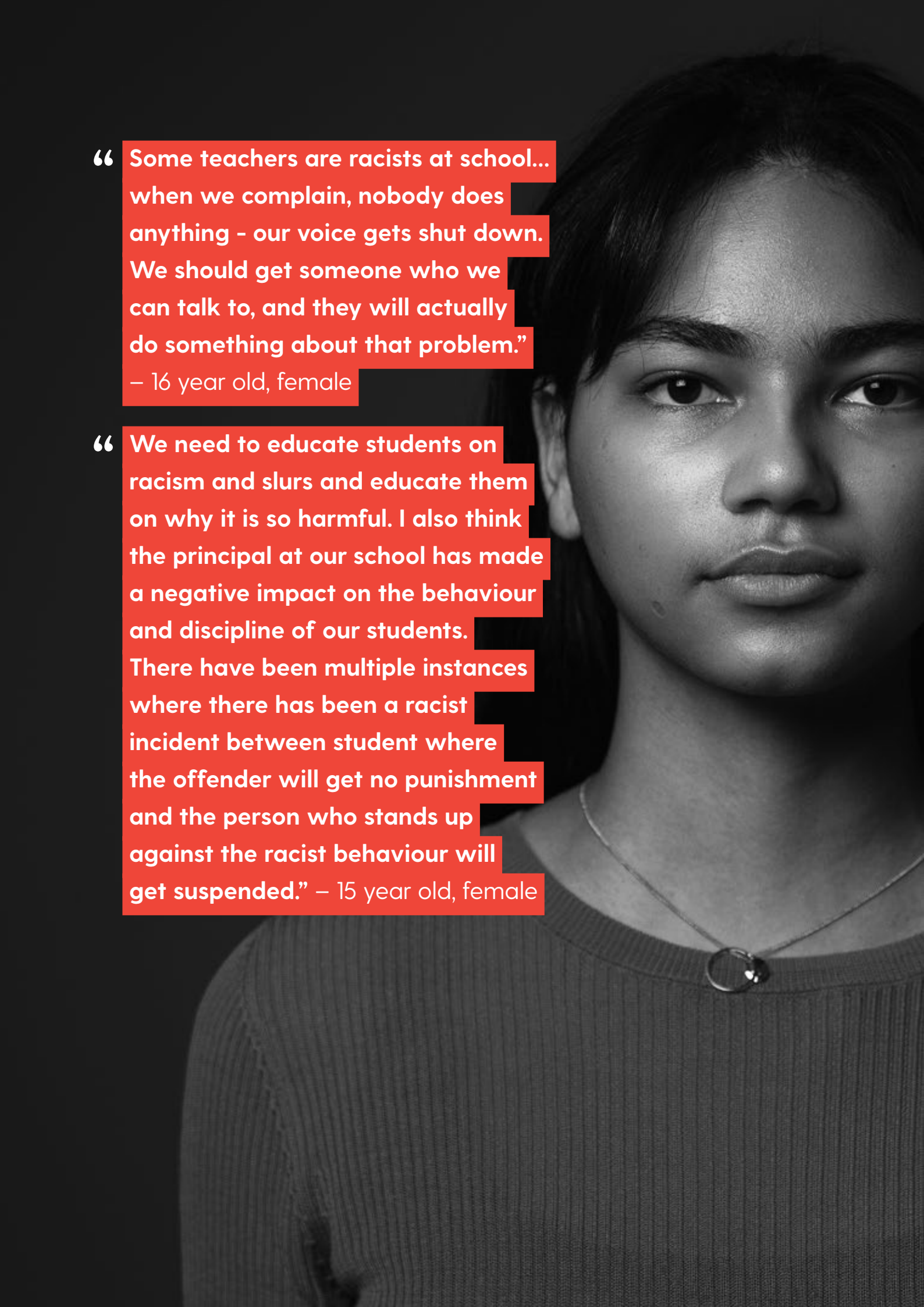
Stakeholders highlighted how the education system limits opportunities for refugee and migrant students through a lack of support for students with learning difficulties, and for those for whom English is not their first language. This results in young people feeling left behind and ostracised.

Many young people from refugee and migrant communities reported that they were being directed to vocational education training (VET) programs, rather than offered the full range of career and educational pathways. 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 of their intelligence and ability to complete SACE, as well as on the prioritising of white students.

International students believed there were perceptions of them being incompetent, less intelligent, or difficult to work with. These students also reported that for assessments, white students often requested to move groups when they were placed with international students or refused to work with them altogether. They also described disparity in the number of opportunities they had for work experience and internships compared to their white peers.

“ **Our school has normalised racism. Students aren't being penalised harshly enough for inappropriate behaviour and people aren't being given the same opportunities, rights in schools.**” – 15 year old, female

“ **Schools don't really care about POC mental health. It's not seen as a huge issue or [something that] should be dealt with (our school at least)**” – 16 year old, female



“ Some teachers are racists at school...  
when we complain, nobody does  
anything - our voice gets shut down.  
We should get someone who we  
can talk to, and they will actually  
do something about that problem.”

– 16 year old, female

“ We need to educate students on  
racism and slurs and educate them  
on why it is so harmful. I also think  
the principal at our school has made  
a negative impact on the behaviour  
and discipline of our students.  
There have been multiple instances  
where there has been a racist  
incident between student where  
the offender will get no punishment  
and the person who stands up  
against the racist behaviour will  
get suspended.” – 15 year old, female

## Experiences of racism at work

**Many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds spoke about the importance employment has on both contributing to their family's situation and to improving their own lives. Young people spoke about the prevalence and impact of racism and discrimination by employers and potential employers, as well as work colleagues, customers, and the broader community.**

They said they are disadvantaged in terms of preparedness for entering the workplace because they do not have access to the networks that would enable them to gain work experience opportunities or undertake internships.

Lack of access to support networks, including professional and informal networks, also makes it difficult for young people to understand workplace entitlements and expectations. This was not only a barrier for young people but also for their parents, families and communities. This lack of opportunity often leads to young people internalising feelings of inadequacy and helplessness.

A common way racism manifests in the workplace is in discriminatory hiring practices. Refugee and migrant young people described witnessing and experiencing racism from employers.

They felt their opportunities for employment were limited. To combat this, some young people reported using an anglicised pseudonym to apply for work, and to receiving a vastly different – more positive – response to their applications as a result.

Those who did gain employment described being subjected to racism from customers. They reported regular incidents of being spoken to differently, having their skill or knowledge called into question, or being avoided by customers. Some reported more overt instances of racism, such as verbal abuse or outright refusal from customers to be served by them.

**“ In the beginning at work, it was very hard to understand Australian slang and the accent of the people that I work with. Some of the Australians who work with me do not speak clearly. And two of them do not have teeth, so the way they speak is very different and hard to understand. It is getting easier, but sometimes I still struggle. Sometimes I just pretend that I understand and hope I get it right.” – 18 year old, male**

## Experiences of racism in the community

### Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds spoke about the prevalence and impact of racism and racial discrimination in public spaces across the community, including in shopping centres and public transport.

People from newly arrived communities face many cultural differences when they come to South Australia, both large and small. Young people and parents highlighted that they need more support to understand and successfully navigate key systems and environments, including the education and health systems, public transport and workplaces.

Refugee and migrant young people reported experiencing racial abuse and harassment while they were in public places. Their experiences ranged from instances of ‘everyday racism’ including people refusing to make eye contact or sit next to them on public transport, to more extreme acts, such as racist rants being directed at them and harassment from members of the public.

When subjected to these racist behaviours young people said they felt powerless to do anything about them. They felt unsafe standing up for themselves in the moment, and worried that doing so would only incite the situation further and put themselves at risk. Some young people described how the ‘pressure to fit into a new society’ makes it difficult to respond to racism.

Young people also said they felt self-conscious and unsafe when they went out with friends at night. They mentioned feeling worried about crowds and how they felt they needed to alter their behaviour so as not to draw any attention to themselves. For some young people, these fears were linked to their experiences of being profiled and criminalised.

Young people reported being racially profiled in their community and described accusations of shoplifting that had been levelled at them. This was particularly so for African young people. These young people described experiencing increased surveillance and bag checks from security staff in shops as well as being targeted by police and ‘picked up’ when they had done nothing wrong. Alarming, these young people also described instances on the street where police had turned off their body cameras to swear at and racially abuse them.

“ Living in South Australia, acceptance is an issue. There is a lack of trust. Having a foreign name and an accent makes it hard to get a job.”

– 20 year old, male

“ It’s hard always being seen as ‘different’, always being asked, ‘Where are you from?’”

– 15 year old, female

“ There are teachers who give preferential treatment to Australians and treat migrant young people unfairly. Companies and organisations think that you are not competent enough to understand English.” – 17 year old, male

## Experiences of racism in sport

**Sport is an important part of the lives of many children and young people. It helps them to connect with their peers, as well as to other members of their community. It also helps children and young people stay healthy and motivated to participate and engage with others their own age more broadly. However, some young people described being subjected to racial abuse in sporting environments and at sporting events.**

Children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds described finding it difficult to get involved or stay involved in sport due to overt forms of racism and discrimination they witnessed or experienced.

They said that racism in sporting environments ranged from subtle exclusion to overt harassment, and that this not only occurred between young players on the same and different teams, but was also directed towards young people by adults, including spectating parents and coaches. Some young people described a 'cliquey' culture in some sporting communities, which can 'ruin the social side of sport' and 'leave people out', particularly if they are 'new' or 'different'.

Others talked about not getting many chances to play, about being 'subbed' or 'benched', or put in a position that 'you don't play well in'.

Other young people described more explicit bullying, bigotry and 'hate speech' that was based on race, cultural background, gender, age, physical size and ability, or skills.

This included being yelled at, put down, or 'looked down upon', shamed, 'othered' or laughed at. Some young people described the impact of others judging them and making assumptions about how they might play sport based on racial stereotypes.

The use of the word 'toxic' was common amongst those who described the 'culture' of sport as being the worst thing about it. Many described toxic 'clubs, players, and coaches', along with 'toxic communities', 'toxic competitiveness', and 'a toxic mentality'.

While being involved in sport can provide an important sense of community for many young people, adult stakeholders noted that young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds face particular barriers to participation. In addition to experiences of racism and discrimination that make it difficult for young people to stay involved, cost and transport barriers make it difficult or sometimes impossible for young people to get involved or access facilities in the first place.

**“ People often judge people like me (as I am an African-diaspora) as well as have preconceived ideas of what I play like, and often discriminate against me in order to make me feel 'othered'.” – 17 year old, female**

# What we need to do...

From what children and young people reported, there is significant work to be done to make South Australia a culturally safe place for refugee and migrant young people, so they can learn, earn, and thrive alongside their peers.

Cultural safety must be embedded in policy, processes, and behaviours to ensure all young people, no matter where they come from, feel safe, respected, included, and accepted in their community, at school, at work, and in sport.

Young people, families and service providers said that the lack of culturally safe support in schools, paired with systemic and casual racism, means refugee and migrant children and young people are often made to feel isolated and marginalised. They emphasise that this can be a significant driver of disengagement with and withdrawal from education and learning, and risks limiting young people's education outcomes and career trajectories.

Adult stakeholders interviewed noted that refugee and migrant students who were disengaged from their education and social connections, and who were not receiving adequate support, were at risk of being groomed into gang membership, crime, and substance abuse.

Young people reported feeling invalidated and silenced, and described schools' attempts to address racism as 'acting like white saviours'. Young people said they wanted to be listened to, understood, and treated equally by their teachers and peers. They want their voices and lived experiences to be positioned at the forefront of discussions on how to tackle racism.

## Young people said they want their peers to:

- treat them as equals
- ask questions about their culture and experiences
- listen to those who have experienced racism first-hand
- help them stand up to racism
- act on their ideas for ways to address racism
- support them to share and celebrate their cultural and religious traditions.

## Young people said they want teachers and their school to:

- educate everyone about different cultures including cultural celebrations and religious traditions
- talk about racism and its impact and take meaningful action to address racist attitudes and behaviours when they occur
- employ staff from diverse backgrounds who can provide culturally safe support
- challenge assumptions and racial stereotypes and have high expectations of refugee and migrant young people.

## Young people said they want service providers in their local communities to:

- make them feel welcome
- let them know what support services are available to them
- create spaces, events, and services that are culturally safe and which cater to their specific needs and interests
- support them to learn English and to adapt to Australian culture
- help them to prepare and apply for jobs and understand Australia's work culture and systems.

## Feeling safe and included at school

### Awareness and education

To tackle racism in schools there needs to be greater awareness amongst staff and students about the impacts of racism and school-based strategies to tackle it. Young people want to see better school-wide policies that embed anti-racism and include compulsory cultural safety and diversity training for students and teachers, with a particular emphasis on restorative processes for those who perpetrate racism.

They also want to see ongoing workshops on racism – especially casual racism – and how it presents in schools and classrooms, including those who have experienced racism. Many young people say their peers have limited understanding of what racism actually is or the impact racist behaviour has on those who experience it, as well as on those who witness it. They want a more diverse curriculum that promotes respect, embeds anti-racism and includes learning about migrant history, different languages, cultures and ‘big things’ happening around the world.

Young people also say their teachers need to be better educated on racism and how it manifests in schools. Young people want teachers to examine their own bias and consider whether their reactions towards students from refugee and migrant backgrounds are culturally safe and inclusive. They want teachers to challenge assumptions and listen to them ‘before jumping to conclusions’ or ‘always believing the white kids’.

### More consequences for perpetrators of racism

To feel safe and respected at school young people expressed the need to see more consistent and formal consequences for

students and teachers who commit racist acts, or who express racist attitudes and behaviours – including those who use racial slurs and stereotypes. Young people wanted to see these students and teachers receive education on the impact of their racist behaviour. Most felt that punitive measures including suspensions and exclusions may end up being ineffective at best and at worst could exacerbate racist behaviour. Many young people described experiences where discipline was administered to students from refugee and migrant backgrounds who stood up for themselves, rather than being directed at the students who were the perpetrators of racism.

They described a lack of willingness by teachers and leaders to call out racist incidents along with a general tendency to let racist slurs and innuendo slide. They felt teachers and wellbeing staff need more training to better identify racism and racist behaviours so they can respond to racism in ways that are culturally safe, and review their own role in accepting racism in their classrooms.

Young people need to know that when they report racism to their teachers and school leaders, there will be an appropriate response.

“ If I was a teacher for a day, I would implement stricter rules surrounding racist students. Instead of suspensions, students would be required to attend a 3-day program that ensures students are educated about what they have done, what it means and what they should’ve done.”  
– 16 year old, female



**“ I think that schools and teachers need to do a much better job at pulling up racists comments by students and encouraging other students to do the same. We can't be fostering racist and discriminatory behaviours in our schools. There needs to be harder punishment for racist students. It has become so incredibly normalised.”** – 15 year old, female

### Diverse teaching and support staff

In addition to creating awareness and education around racism in school, and ensuring disciplinary action for racist behaviour, inclusion means creating safe spaces for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds to share their stories and culture with their peers. It also involves having opportunities to acknowledge, celebrate, and educate students on the cultural celebrations important to them, such as Diwali, Eid, and Dashain, highlighting these religious traditions in the same way schools may celebrate Easter and Christmas. Some young people noted the importance of embedding cultural safety in everyday policies and practices rather than this being limited to 'special days or events'.

Young people observed a distinct lack of diversity in staff cohorts, and an absence of strong leadership on addressing racism in schools. In some instances, they reported teachers and students who are in denial around racism at their school. This view was endorsed by adult stakeholders who reported that some teachers appear to be concerned about the consequences of taking any action against incidents of racial bullying. Others were concerned that some teachers do not appear to have an adequate understanding of the experiences of young refugees, including

the impacts of trauma. They were concerned this lack of understanding increased the likelihood of punitive responses.

Both young people and adult stakeholders spoke to the need for more culturally diverse teaching and wellbeing teams. A lack of representation and diversity in school leadership contributes to young people's experiences of being 'othered'. It also contributes to racism being silenced or minimised, and a lack of accountability for teachers and students who behave in racist ways.

Adult stakeholders also reported that staff from a refugee or migrant background often felt they were not listened to in staff meetings, were culturally unsafe themselves, and knew of racist incidents that had not been adequately followed up.

Young people want all staff to be equipped to respond appropriately and professionally to incidents of racism and racial discrimination. They felt it was particularly important to have access to staff members (teaching/counselling/SSOs) who have shared experiences and understandings of racism. They thought that more diverse wellbeing teams would be best-placed to provide culturally safe support for students who have experienced racism.

**“ I would hire more POC teachers and educate all the white ones. Celebrate events of different cultures to make everyone feel wanted. Make safe spaces for people.”** – 15 year old, male

**“ Educate everyone about different cultures. Teachers should have seminars/workshops about different cultures, so they understand other cultures/students more, and bring this new mindset. Draw the line between jokes and racial comments disguised as jokes. More diverse teachers so students get more comfortable with more teachers.”** – 16 year old, female



**“ The community needs to be more socially aware of their actions. The community needs to know racism is not okay.”**

**– 14 year old, female**

**“ Better acknowledge students from refugee and migrant backgrounds, giving them opportunities and treat them equally, not as lesser people. Educate teachers. ASK + LISTEN + ACT = happy days.”**

**– 16 year old, female**

**“ Having more diverse teachers so we have more teachers we are comfortable with, and that can relate to us and our experiences.”**

**– 16 year old, female**

## Feeling safe and included in the community

### Community support

Young people want to feel safe and welcome in South Australia, and to be living in communities that are kind, warm and open-minded. Young people expressed a need for there to be dedicated spaces, events, and services where those from refugee and migrant backgrounds are made to feel as though they belong, and which cater to their specific needs and interests. Importantly, young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds said they need access to more information about the support services that are available to them.

**“ Community provides a foundation where young people are able to openly seek help. A strong community produces strong youth who will create an even stronger future.”**

– 17 year old, male

**“ Communities should always be looking out for one another and defending refugees and migrants from racism and discrimination and allowing them the same opportunities as everyone else.”** – 15 year old, male

**“ Stand up for them, even in public. This will show them the support they need.”** – 15 year old, female

**“ Bring the community together. Zero tolerance for racism. Teach about diversity in schools to educate the young generation.”** – 18 year old, male

Like other young people, those from refugee and migrant backgrounds highlight a need for spaces they can go to connect with each other as well as with support networks.

They want these community spaces to be places where migrants and refugees can gather to share their experiences and struggles, so they don't feel so alone and isolated.

They emphasised how important it is for these services to be both culturally safe and informed.

Adult stakeholders identified a need for these services to be delivered outside the education system, while acknowledging that school is the best place to reach young people. While some partnerships between external service providers and schools are important and working well, adult stakeholders also noted that some refugees and migrants had concerns about accessing external service providers who were not culturally safe. Whilst adult stakeholders highlighted the importance of services being provided to young people in schools, they were clear that for some young people school was not the most appropriate setting. For those already disengaging from school, a greater range of specialised services should be made available in local communities. For services that are not migrant and refugee specific, addressing cultural safety must be paramount. Young people also said it was important to see people from refugee and migrant backgrounds represented in the staff of service providers and agencies, particularly if they want refugee and migrant young people to access these services.

### Raising community awareness and education

Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds want the community to be aware of the impact racism has on them and to know that often they do not feel welcome in their own neighbourhoods. They feel there is a lack of cultural safety in some communities and that this is being underpinned by racist attitudes.

They want to see that other members of their communities will stand up for them, calling out racism whenever they hear or see it. Some young people noted that more positive news stories and media representations of children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds would help with this.

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds want more support to learn English and help to adapt to their new country. They also want opportunities to share some of their experiences with white members of their community, and to have more opportunities to foster local connections and access support.

#### **More inclusive and culturally safe events**

Young people would also like more opportunities to share and celebrate their culture with their local community. They want to show how 'everyone has an amazing culture' as a way to break down barriers. In their view, sharing their culture with community and other young people is 'an important way to build understanding and combat racism'.

Adult stakeholders identified a need for youth-specific events and opportunities for community engagement. They noted that sport and sports clubs offer an important community-building role that can promote positive and inclusive behaviour and relationship building between people from different backgrounds. Sport can be a great leveller in a community, and this should be leveraged to create culturally safe environments. This requires efforts to address racism and discrimination in sporting environments, including known barriers to participation by young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds such as player fees, uniforms and transport costs.

**“ Based on my experience, racism happens more often in young generation which is quite surprising. Racism occurs mainly based on appearance. To change this should help kids & young people have more knowledge & expose more to other culture because sometimes lack of knowledge make people act racist unintentionally.”** – 19 year old, female

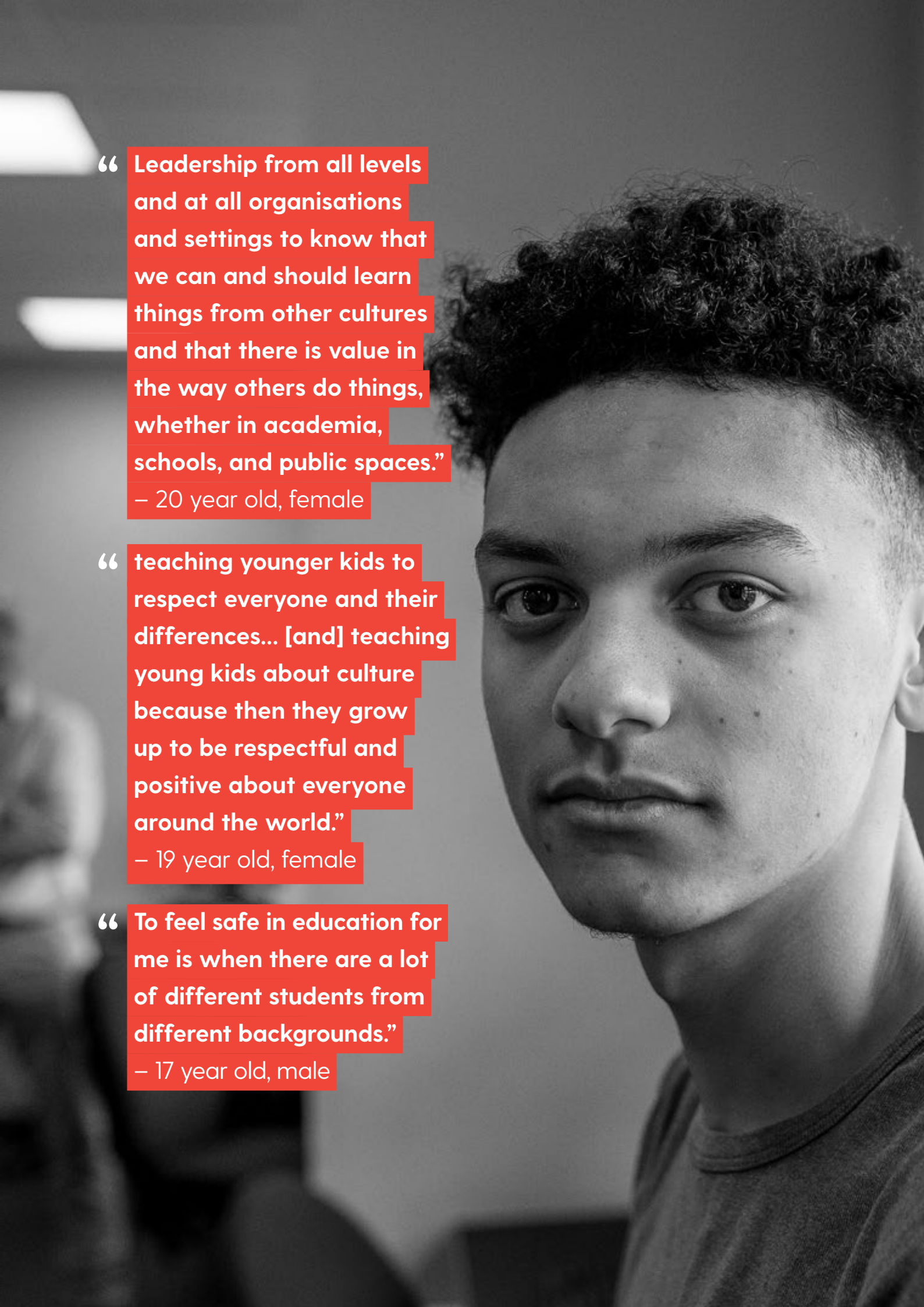
#### **More work and employment opportunities**

Many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds suggested that gaining work experience or undertaking an internship should be a mandatory part of their school experience. In this way all students would have the same opportunities. Young people thought this might provide industries looking for new graduates with more recruitment possibilities. It would also increase opportunities for international students looking to gain employment while studying in Australia.

Young people also spoke of the need for more support with résumé writing, job interviews and searching for jobs in the Australian job market. This would be in addition to having more information about Australia's work culture and systems, including legal requirements and procedures related to employment and workplace agreements.

**“ It's hard when you don't have enough knowledge of the support available – not knowing where to get support and the appropriate pathways towards education and employment.”** – 17 year old, male

**“ There's limited support from job service providers with things like CVs and job interview skills.”** – 16 year old, male



“ Leadership from all levels and at all organisations and settings to know that we can and should learn things from other cultures and that there is value in the way others do things, whether in academia, schools, and public spaces.”

– 20 year old, female

“ teaching younger kids to respect everyone and their differences... [and] teaching young kids about culture because then they grow up to be respectful and positive about everyone around the world.”

– 19 year old, female

“ To feel safe in education for me is when there are a lot of different students from different backgrounds.”

– 17 year old, male

# Where to next?

Children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds have told us racism is an everyday problem for them. It is incumbent on us as decision makers and leaders within various contexts to ensure we call out policies, practices, attitudes and behaviours that discriminate against children and young people based on race.

This requires us to work directly with children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. By examining their current and everyday experiences of racism within their schools, workplaces and community, including local sports clubs and other social settings, we can co-create strategies to actively challenge racism.

Children and young people's experiences of racism can damage their individual sense of identity and self-worth. Racism can make children and young people feel marginalised, unwelcome, and resigned to being unable to access opportunities and experiences.

We have a responsibility to ensure all children and young people feel safe and included at school, at work and in our communities. This starts with tackling everyday racism, both casual and ingrained, and taking actions that prevent its occurrence as well as deal with its impact when it does.

Through open and safe discussions about racism we send a strong message to children and young people that this behaviour should not be tolerated and that there are consequences for those who are racist.

We need to make changes at the systemic level that help to prevent, challenge and reduce the incidents of racism within our schools, workplaces, communities, and sports clubs.

There are clear steps that can be taken within local settings to bring about lasting change, and some of these are outlined in this report. However, there are also significant structural and system changes required to address the racism in our institutions that manifests in everyday racist language, actions and abuse towards South Australian children and young people.

It would be a missed opportunity to fail to address the issues identified by refugee and migrant children and young people in this report, including the ways in which schools may be reinforcing or normalising racist attitudes and behaviours.

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