

COMBATTING RACISM

Race and Racism

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration without distinction of any kind such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. (Article 2, UN Declaration of Human Rights)

The Macquarie dictionary defines racism as:

- the belief that human races have distinctive characteristics which determine their respective cultures, usually involving the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to rule or dominate others.
- offensive or aggressive behaviour to members of another race stemming from such a belief.
- a policy or system of government and society based on it.

This perception of superiority by one group leads to the social, economic and political oppression of other groups.

Racism means disrespect for cultural diversity.

Racism is both overt and covert. Both forms of racism are still widely practised throughout Australian society.

Racism has resulted in dispossession from land and the denial of culture.

Successive Government policies, both State and Federal, are founded upon a legal system which is inherently racist in so much as its prime purpose is to serve the needs of the dominant, Anglo-Australian culture.

It is the same legal system which has consistently denied human rights and freedoms to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is well within living memory that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had to carry passes, were forbidden to consume alcohol, own property and have an equal wage for equal work. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not have the right to vote until as late as 1967.

And today this same dominant culture denies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people their right to maintain their identity, social and culture practices.

Racism also extends to education being delivered in the mode of the Anglo-Australian culture and the denial to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of the right to be educated according to the values of their own culture.

Denying the cultural context of education means denying equality of opportunity. It also ensures that the outcome will favour those who share in the values of the dominant culture. Those who do not share these values are made to feel at fault and are labelled as failures.

The AEU recognises this fact. Educational institutions play a crucial role in maintaining cultural and political values which are ultimately alien to the original inhabitants of this land.

Curriculum materials carry the knowledge and values of the Anglo-Australian culture. Curricula should include both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander materials. Materials should be authentic – thoroughly researched, checked by people from the relevant community groups, or preferably, prepared by people from that group.

Such materials would accurately present the social and historical perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Materials to be avoided are those which are historically inaccurate in that they may romanticise events, blame the victims, pass off acts of oppression as common practice, talk about the good intentions of the oppressors and so on.

Also to be avoided are materials that present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in stereotypes of childlike dependency and where being “different” is seen to mean “disadvantaged”.

While it is true that schools help in shaping and transmitting myths and stereotypes, they can also play significant roles in the redefinition of these myths so that human rights and freedoms are recognised.

One prevalent myth is the expectation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will not be successful at school. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in bottom streams, special education facilities and secondary school drop outs. These low expectations are often mirrored by the parents and the children themselves. It is a self fulfilling prophecy. A vicious cycle that can and must be broken.

The AEU believes that teachers in their roles of educators and unionists should work towards the elimination of racism in schools.

The AEU recognises that within Australian society there exists distinct racial groups with their own culture, values and modes of learning.

The AEU recommends the following action, which will assist in countering racist attitudes:

1. (a) That each affiliate identify an officer to coordinate a working party to address racism.
This working party should consist of teachers, parents, representatives from AECGs, NAEC and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.
- (a) These working parties are responsible for developing action strategies to educate teachers, students and the community about racism.
- (b) The working parties must address racism in:
 - curriculum content (teaching resources to be assessed using the “Black Australian” criteria);
 - teaching practice;
 - school organisation.
2. That all schools examine their curriculum, school management and organisation with a view to promoting social justice and enabling all students to learn from each other’s experience and culture.
3. That Preservice and Inservice Teacher Education courses be developed in consultation with State/Territory AECGs to make teachers aware of racism and its effects upon children’s learning. Courses must specifically:
 - (a) focus on the effects of racism upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children; and
 - (b) provide teachers with strategies to combat racism.
 - (c) Further, State/Territory Departments of Education must provide opportunities for all teachers to attend inservice activities addressing strategies to combat racism.
4. That every child in Australia must participate in studies about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history. The introduction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies into schools will:
 - (a) aid the development of positive attitudes in both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
 - (b) allow the curriculum presented to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to reflect the values of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.
 - (c) enable the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in schools preparing and presenting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.¹

¹ As a guide teachers should refer to such books as [Black Australia](#) and [Black Australia 2](#): An annotated bibliography and teachers’ guide to resources on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Torres Strait Islanders, 1977-82 by Marji Hill and Alex Barlon, published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.

5. The AEU believes that teachers must be inserviced prior to the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies; and further, that parent groups must be informed about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies programs in their children's schools that they too may be exposed to the facts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture.
6. That State/Territory Education Departments develop and implement Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies programs in accordance with NAEC guidelines and in consultation with AECGs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Torres Strait Islander communities.
7. That any materials and programs developed for Australian studies including those developed in the Bicentennial year, must be developed in accordance with the abovementioned consultative mechanisms and must present an accurate image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.
8. That active responses be made by the AEU and affiliates in consultation with AECGs and NAEC to any press articles that are anti Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and racist.
9. Affiliates to place racism and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Torres Strait Islander people on their agendas for full discussion.
10. Affiliates to run articles on racism and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in journals and bulletins. Information for articles can come from NAEC and AECGs etc.
11. That AEU and affiliates support other unions and organisations who have policies and are campaigning to eliminate racism.