

Today, I am writing to submit my personal experience of racism in education to the inquiry of Racism and Violence against First Nations peoples. I wish to share my personal experiences as these experiences have had lasting impacts on me.

During my childhood and teenage years, I was constantly subjected to repeated racial abuse because of my culture.

In primary school, I was constantly referred to as a "monkey" by other students because of my Aboriginal identity. These comments were never isolated incidents, they were repeated and dehumanising. Being compared to some animal because of my culture deeply affected my sense of self-worth and belonging at a young age. School is meant to be a safe place where children can learn and grow, yet for me it was the constant harassment and bullying because of who I am. It was a place where I was made to feel ashamed of who I was, with little support from teachers to prevent this behaviour from happening.

This racism continued as I went on into high school. I can recall towards the end of year 12 I was called a "half-caste" by a fellow student, a term that is historically loaded, offensive and rooted in colonial attempts to categorise and diminish First Nations people. I can recall when hearing this from another peer, it reinforced the message that my identity was something to be judged and divided. I can also recall being told I wasn't indigenous or it can't be possible because of the colour of my skin.

What compounded the harm was actually the lack of appropriate support from teachers. When this concern was raised, I was told by the unit coordinator to "toughen up", despite having endured racism for most of my life. Instead of emphasising what had happened, I was made to feel that burden was on me to endure it. That response minimised my experience and signalled that racism was something I simply had to accept.

The consistent impact of these experiences has been significant. Racism to me is not just words, it affects confidence, mental health, cultural pride and for me, my ability to feel safe within institutions that are meant to support me. In my opinion, when teachers dismiss racial abuse, it reinforces the fact that students feel less confident speaking up about their problems, and hold it in till potentially a bad outcome happens.

I am sharing my story today, in the hope that this contributes meaningful change. No child, indigenous or not, should have to endure racial abuse in our education institutions, and no young person should ever be told to "toughen up" in response to discrimination and/or racism.

In light of this, there must be stronger accountability and cultural competency training for all educators across the board. There also must be clear consequences for racist behaviour within our schools. Thank you for this opportunity to provide this submission and for undertaking this important inquiry.

Kind Regards,

**Aaren Tei Ona-Lovett, proud Gunditjmara man**

