

WHAT WE HEARD

Unteach Racism Synthesised Insights Report

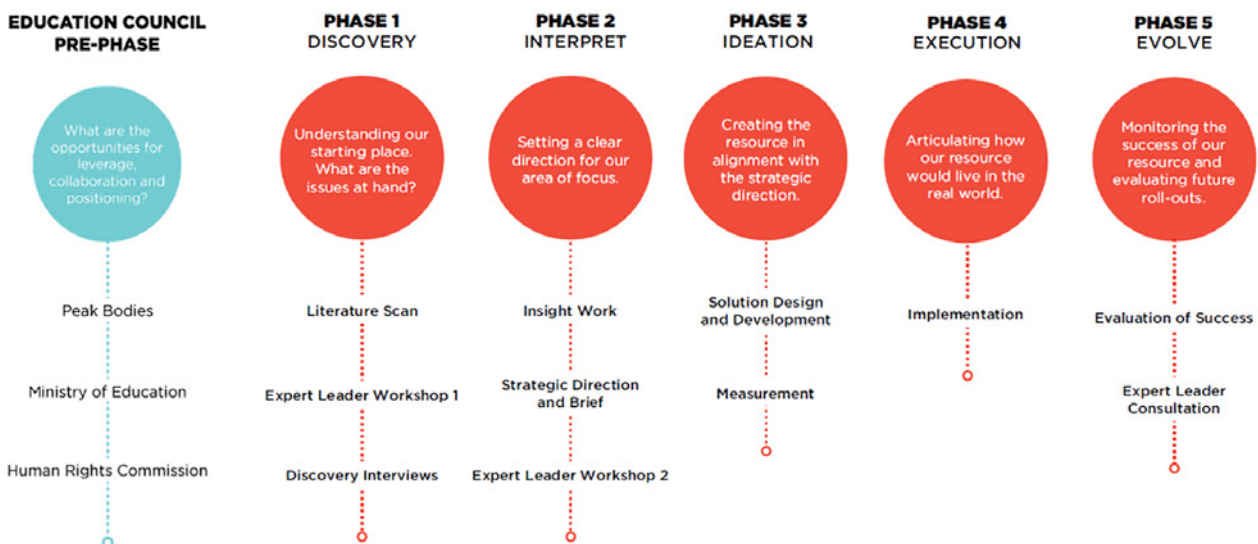
“Why do teachers tolerate racism in the education system?”

Executive Summary of the Teaching Council’s
Give Nothing to Racism in Education Discovery Insights

Background

In 2018, NZSTA and The Office of the Children’s Commissioner published *Education Matters to Me*, a collection of reports which identified six key insights about how children and young people experience school and what could be improved in the education system to help make them experience it more positively. From their analysis, six key insights were identified including “People at school are racist towards me”.

Following the release of *Education Matters to Me*, the Teaching Council carried out a literature scan which discussed current research and professional development initiatives related to addressing racism in our education system and provided the background for the then proposed Give Nothing to Racism in Education project.



Discovery phase – understanding our starting place

On completion of the literature scan, in late 2018 the Teaching Council invited 18 teachers within the Wellington Region to participate in hour long, one-on-one interviews, with the aim of answering the question”

“Why do teachers tolerate racism in the education system?”

Hearing their perspective was a crucial step in the strategic direction of our initiative and for developing a resource that would empower the profession to have safe and productive conversations about racism. The Teaching Council recruited the pool of participants with the goal of representing the profession’s scope in sector, tenure, age, gender and ethnic make-up. The one-on-one interviews were complimented by 126 anonymous responses to a nation-wide online survey.

This report summarises the key insights and observations from the series of interviews and nationwide survey. The array of comments presented in this report indicates the broad range of perspectives and understandings across the teaching profession of racism in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The teacher interviews, nationwide survey, workshop with expert thought leaders, literature scan and existing evidence base all comprised the Discovery phase, informing the strategic direction of the Give Nothing to Racism in education initiative including the design and development of the solution (Ideation phase, see above diagram). Key findings in the report are linked directly to the relevant app modules and supporting resources.

Key insights and observations

Teachers have a good understanding of racism existing within and between individuals, but are less familiar with how it shows up in our systems and processes.

We encountered a diverse range of views on the prevalence of racism in the education sector. While a few participants recounted the various ways it is embedded in our systems and processes, others felt that it did not exist at all, or if it did, only to the extent that there are people with racist beliefs who likely operate within the system. One participant surmised that teaching is a people-based profession and you can’t control the mindsets of people, racist or otherwise. Another had observed very little racism in education altogether and felt that it was only organisations, such as the Ministry of Education and the Teaching Council, who continue to raise the issue.

- > **Unteach Racism app - Module 2: Unteach Racism**
- > **Identify: Terms and definitions to support conversations about racism**

The concept that it is people who are either racist or not grounded some participants understanding of racism in interpersonal exchanges.

The most common manifestations of racism, for those teachers interviewed and who participated in the survey, were harmful words resulting in hurt feelings. Consequently, for a number of teachers, when they reflected on racism, they were likely to only reflect on experiences of discrimination that they had witnessed. A number of participants referenced the mispronunciation, whitening or shortening of Māori and Pacific names. However, this was seen more as a sign of disrespect, as opposed to racism.

- > **Unteach Racism app - Module 2: Unteach Racism**
- > **Identify: Terms and definitions to support conversations about racism**

An unclear or limited definition also lead to confusion about what fits under the umbrella of racism.

A number of participants cited reverse or positive racism, as examples of racism that they were familiar with. For example, when Māori are perceived to be given concessions or privileges more than non-Māori or if an individual is perceived to be successfully appointed to a position because they tick an ethnicity box. One participant felt that it was lamentable the way the word racism can be thrown around to shut down conversation. They felt the idea that minority groups are holders of a moral high ground and can't be racist, is unfortunate. From their perspective, it is always implied that the perpetrators of racism are white, and minority groups are victims. Whereas in their experience, they had never met a teacher who was racist toward Māori or Pacific peoples, but knew of many Māori and Pacific kaiako who actively discriminated against Pākeha learners.

- > Unteach Racism app - Module 2: Unteach Racism
- > Identify: Terms and definitions to support conversations about racism
- > Unteach Racism app - Module 8: Unteach Equal Treatment as Equality

An unclear or limited definition of racism can also lead to a mismatch between intention and impact and a commitment to “colour-blindness” in the learning environment.

With the best of intentions, many teachers who participated in the survey and interviews leaned closely to ‘colour blindness’ stating that regardless of race, culture or ethnicity, they avoid favouritism and treat all learners equally. They discussed how all cultures should be equally recognized and that no one culture should take precedence over others in learning environments. Some felt that when teachers and centres/schools stop identifying learners by their race, then racism has a chance to be eliminated. They considered that this type of comparison is pitting groups of children against one another in competition unnecessarily. Identifying learners by their ethnicity in official papers for example, means a continual focus on differences, instead of our commonalities. A number of participants specifically raised the prioritisation of Māori learners, including from organisations such as ERO. They felt that this was emphasising the failure of akōnga Māori, when as educators we should be focussing our efforts on any and all learners who might be underachieving. Some felt that the emphasis on underachievement statistics would only serve learners and teachers to expect more of the same.

- > Unteach Racism app - Module 8: Unteach Equal Treatment as Equality
- > Unteach Racism QPT

Still, several participants acknowledged the existence of implicit bias, with some participants discussing their own journey to overcome it.

Most teachers agreed that their colleagues would never intentionally or knowingly say or do anything that could be considered racist. However, there was recognition that bias can and does exist at an implicit level. One teacher discussed how it is nearly impossible to avoid implicit bias from growing up in Pākehā dominant society and recounted times where they recognised their own biases creeping in on occasion. They discussed how it can be easy to believe that our own worldview and lived experience is the normal or default, and therefore the right one.

A number of participants witnessed implicit bias in their colleagues behaviours and practice and discussed how this can happen regardless of whether they are good people or how committed they are to their learners. One teacher raised the Pākehā dominant make-up of the teaching profession itself. They felt it would be likely that most learners therefore would at some point throughout their education experience the impact of their teacher's implicit bias. They discussed how the very least we can do is acknowledge our own identity. It's not possible to change who you are or your upbringing, but if you are aware of this and create ways to overcome bias, that's what is important.

- > [Unteach Racism app - Module 4: Unteach Low Expectations](#)
- > [Unteach Racism app – Module 7: Unteach Assumed Superiority](#)

For some teachers, racism is an uncomfortable topic to talk about and they need support to lean in and confront it once they have identified it.

Most teachers across both the nationwide survey and one on one interviews felt that racism is an uncomfortable topic to talk about, both with their colleagues and their learners. Many teachers who have witnessed racism in education reported feeling unequipped to respond, or unable to have any effect if they were to respond. They recognised that this resulted most frequently in their silence, where as the conversation should be normalised.

Calling out racism was also perceived by some participants as disruptive to the professional environment and felt that it would often result in social exclusion. One of the most common examples of racism given is when teachers share racist comments, or their low expectations, with other teachers. This is most commonly done in private, and 'in confidence'.

Some teachers spoke about how they call on resources to introduce themes of discrimination and judgement to their learners but recognised that they don't explicitly address racism. Instead the conversation is around respect and disrespect. For these teachers, they felt it can be hard to know how to talk about racism with learners without saying the wrong thing or saying something that can be interpreted as racist.

- > [Unteach Racism app - Module 5: Unteach Racist Exchanges](#)
- > [Guide to Safe and Productive Conversations about Racism](#)
- > [Analysing Racist Jokes and Comments](#)

Some teachers observe low expectations and deficit-theorising by colleagues, while others are less aware of how this surfaces in practice.

A number of participants recognised that low expectations meant they were unlikely to form or nurture genuine relationships with Māori and Pacific learners: the very learners who require a high level of emotional connection in order to thrive. As a result of low expectations, Māori and Pacific learners are seen by some to be taught at a 'maintenance' level.

One teacher discussed how, in their opinion, teachers can default to deficit-theorising because it is easier to blame underachievement on someone else, rather than inquiring into practice and being honest about what you are doing that's not working for particular learners. Others recognised that low expectations either aren't noticed or it's not spoken about between colleagues enough.

One teacher recalled that a group of diverse Pacific learners in their setting were encouraged to enrol in Maths General when a number of them were contemplating Maths Advanced. Another teacher reported feeling frustrated that Māori and Pacific learners were frequently pushed to sporting success, but less attention was paid to their learning achievement.

On the other hand, one teacher felt that inequitable learner outcomes are unrelated to teaching practice and not indicative of educational malpractice, but rather are a reflection of the importance that some cultures place on education. Likewise, the frequently low turnout at parent meetings for Māori and Pacific parents and whānau.

> Unteach Racism app – Module 4: Unteach Low Expectations

There was recognition that the education system does not serve all children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

A number of participants discussed how Māori learners are not able to succeed ‘as Māori’ so long as their success is narrowly measured in a Pākehā system, where soft skills such as collaborative learning, community involvement and reo are not prioritised. They acknowledge the systemic changes required to balance these values alongside traditional academic learning. Secondary teachers in particular, recognise that external assessments will often have a Eurocentric bias and are constructed to suit the needs of Pākehā learners. Teachers discussed how the topics that are chosen in the later years of NCEA are Pākehā centered and irrelevant to the diverse range of voices and interests in the learning environment and that a degree of prior knowledge is assumed, with modes of questioning often quite nuanced and designed for those learners with English as a first language. One teacher participant recognised the Pākehā bias in various system-wide processes, including the exclusion of koha on funding forms and the ability to provide kai for whānau visits. One teacher also discussed the limitations in terms of euro-centric professional learning and development. In their setting, colleagues developed their own learning programme and resources, as previous programmes and material did not serve to benefit their learners. They could not easily find resources that celebrate the science of all cultures, in particular.

> Unteach Racism app – Module 6: Unteach Exclusion

> Unteach Racism app - Module 2: Unteach Racism

Several teachers recognised that Māori learners and their whānau see their identity as a weakness in an environment that favours Pākehā.

Several participants discussed how they strive to help and build pride in a culture that their young people have been taught to disregard. One teacher discussed how not seeing the worth of yourself and who you are and where you come from is a disadvantage for many learners. They felt that a lot of teachers may not be aware of this and the wide-reaching impacts if you and your whole family are disconnected from belonging somewhere.

Another teacher talked about how their learners and their whānau view themselves as second class citizens and recognise they are treated differently because they are Māori. For some learners, their whānau encourage them not to do things Māori and that it is best to go the Pākehā way. Teachers also recognised that some learners feel compelled to put on a different persona to be accepted in the culture of their setting.

One teacher spoke about their commitment to changing their learners mindset and ensuring learners no longer talk about themselves in the negative – they also explicitly teach their learners about stereotypes and how to resist them. They discussed how it is slowly coming, their learners pride in themselves as Māori but they have felt undervalued and that their culture is not respected, but they are starting to feel empowered.

> Unteach Racism app - Module 3: Unteach Low Self-belief

> Framework for analysing resources for diversity and stereotypes

Teachers also recognise that it is only with a genuine cultural and emotional connection that Māori learners can thrive, though this is not a universally shared view, nor is the failure to provide this viewed as racist.

A number of teacher participants recognised that many learners do not see themselves in their learning environments, with Māori and Pacific culture not evident in the curriculum, language, activities and the teacher-learner relationship. There was recognition that in some cases it is actively excluded.

One teacher participant spoke about how teaching in a euro-centric way wouldn't suit all learners and would lead to disengagement. They also recognised that some classroom management practices can trample the mana of Māori learners. One teacher discussed the negative impact on akōnga Māori when they are made to remove their taonga, as it is against the school's uniform policy.

Others spoke about how efforts to cater to the unique needs of Māori and Pacific learners would often appear tokenistic, in that they began the day with a karakia or used minimal te reo Māori and felt this was sufficient. One teacher discussed how learners are very aware that this is often done because teachers and settings have to, rather than from a genuine commitment to te reo me ngā tikanga Māori.

- > Unteach Racism app – Module 6: Unteach Exclusion
- > Unteach Racism app – Module 7: Unteach Assumed Superiority
- > Unteach Racism QPT

For some teacher participants, learner disadvantage is attributed to socio-economic issues, rather than racism.

One teacher spoke about how, in their school, learners come from good homes so they are fortunate not to see many of the home-life challenges that are present in lower decile schools, for example when entire families are absent from school because they do not have enough uniform. Another spoke about how their families struggle financially, so their children are not well-nourished which impacts on their ability to engage fully in their learning. Others spoke about how their learners come well prepared to learn because their family is prepared, they feel safe at home, so they feel safe at school.

- > Unteach Racism app - Module 2: Unteach Racism
- > Identify: Terms and Explorations (Intersectionality)

Similarly, a number of teacher survey and interview responses indicate assumptions about the wider dynamics and culture of their learners and their whānau.

Several participants report that whānau have had negative experiences with schooling, making it difficult to overcome the negative perceptions they have of teachers and learning environments. Some teachers believe this negative perception can be passed down to their tamariki who, in turn, have low levels of respect for the learning environment. One teacher discussed their experience at a lower decile school, where they had parents who didn't value education themselves and therefore didn't push that value onto their children. So, for example, when those children received a certificate, they weren't celebrated at home.

Another teacher participant talked about how mathematics in particular can exclude learners because the contexts for problem solving, which for example might involve calculating the cost of refuelling a car, will be unfamiliar to many learners whose families are unable to afford to re-fill their cars.

One participant discussed that it's not until you engage with diverse families, that you find out that just like in any family, they have their own skills, hopes for and knowledge about their child. But for some teachers, for reasons unknown to them, some whānau simply don't respond when they reach out in an attempt to engage.

In contrast, one teacher participant discussed a power-distance between whānau and centres/schools and their perception that whānau aren't truly valued. They suspect it is because whānau may not be educated in the academic ways that learning environments value. Another teacher participant spoke of the ways they have observed colleagues judging parents and whānau for decisions which are in accord with their culture, such as prioritising family or church obligations over school obligations.

- > Unteach Racism app - Module 4: Unteach Low Expectations
- > Unteach Racism app - Module 5: Unteach Harmful Assumptions

Teacher participants acknowledge that it is often easier to communicate and form relationships with families that are 'like face, like mind'.

A number of teachers spoke about the need to put in greater effort for whānau from another culture, or who do not have the same levels of English proficiency. They discussed how it is easier to connect with and carry a conversation with parents and whānau who are more like them. One participant recognised that they didn't use the names of some parents as they weren't comfortable that they were pronouncing them correctly. Other participants reported a need for greater support in engaging with refugee communities.

- > Unteach Racism app - Module 4: Unteach Low Expectations

Exposure to minority cultures (through personal or professional life) is seen to personalise the issue of racism.

A number of teacher participants recognised that for those who have lived a predominantly 'white' life, racism is not seen to be an issue that takes priority. One teacher discussed how many of their colleagues were students at their school prior to returning to teach there and without thinking outside of themselves and their lived experiences, it can make it difficult to authentically engage with learners and whānau from diverse backgrounds.

- > Unteach Racism app - Module 7: Unteach Assumed Superiority

A number of responses indicated that there is a tendency to group Māori or Pacific learners as one without recognising the spectrum of identity and affiliation.

There was recognition from some participants that this can lead to more generic efforts of bringing culture into the learning environment. One teacher participant spoke about how they had witnessed all Cook Islands children being grouped together with teaching and learning designed the same for all. They recognised the danger in this and the importance of knowing the learner.

- > Unteach Racism app - Module 5: Unteach Harmful Assumptions
- > Unteach Racism QPT
- > Our Code|Ngā Tikanga Matatika Online Resource Bank

Celebrating Māori and Pacific culture at a school/centre-wide level can be met with adverse reactions from those who do not appreciate or see the value in it.

A number of teachers discussed a tension that they perceived can result between Pākehā and Māori and Pacific learners, or between Pākehā parents and the school/centre, when culture is celebrated. In instances such as these, culture is most commonly shared at set times, or days. One teacher discussed how they have witnessed a fear in leadership that if they support the Māori roll, they'll get white flight which leadership perceives would lead to lower achievement levels. Another teacher, who recognised that the majority learners in their setting are Pākehā, spoke about how the parents of their learners do have a negative view of Māori and Pacific culture which has been made clear to teaching staff. One teacher discussed how just because your school runs ethnic food fairs and all communities are present and contributing does not mean that there is no racism, exclusion or isolation. They recognised that learners are the builders of a future where Māori and Pacific cultures are part of the 'norm'.

- > Guide to Safe and Productive Conversations about Racism (In progress)
- > Unteach Racism app – Module 6: Unteach Exclusion

For a number of participants, the term 'cultural competence' doesn't hold much equity or understanding. For those that remember it, it's seen as somewhat bureaucratic terminology.

When pressed to define the term, 'cultural competence' it was used interchangeably with 'knowing the whole learner'. For some teachers, the connection between cultural competence and priority learners is that the necessary full knowledge of the individual learner might also require knowledge of their background. That is, depth of understanding of Māori and Pacific culture is not central to many participants definition of cultural competence.

One teacher discussed how cultural competence should be about making sure that every child, not just Māori, has a relationship with you as the teacher, feels connected, feels like they belong, and knows what they should or shouldn't be learning. Another considered that a culturally competent environment is one which treats all learners as equal and in which nobody would have any idea of anybody else's ethnicity.

Ensuring te reo words and names are present and pronounced correctly is also seen by some as the key to showing the learner that their culture is valued. One teacher discussed how their learning programme includes New Zealand Sign Language, French and German and so te Reo Māori should also be a part of this.

- > Unteach Racism app - Module 8: Unteach Equal Treatment as Equality
- > Our Code|Ngā Tikanga Matatika Online Resource Bank
- > Unteach Racism QPT

The proportion of Māori and Pacific learners and kaiako dictates how strongly racism is felt, and how strongly cultural competence is prioritised in learning environments.

One teacher spoke about their experience at one school, where they assumed there were Māori and Pacific learners both in their classroom and across the wider learning environment, however there was no teaching or learning to meet their needs. They felt this was due in part to the majority Pākehā role. Another participant discussed the tension involved in balancing out resources, for example if you have five learners with dyslexia but two Māori learners, all of whose needs must be met.

Those participating in cultural practices to live up to professional expectations alone, are more likely to 'perform' activities rather than truly embed them in their practice.

A number of teacher participants discussed how they understood the importance of cultural competence and bicultural practice, however with all the expectations placed on teachers these days, it can become just one more thing they are required to do.

One teacher felt it was unrealistic to force Pākehā teachers to include Māori words in classes which have difficult enough vocabulary for young people to grasp already. In Physics, for example, many of the concepts are already difficult to teach without the unnecessary complication of adding Māori terms and expressions, particularly, they felt, in a school where all learners speak English.

- > [Unteach Racism QPT](#)
- > [Our Code|Ngā Tikanga Matatika Online Resource Bank](#)

Pacific and Māori Kaiako that participated in the survey and interviews report at times feeling tokenised their settings, which has adverse effects on their wellbeing.

A number of teachers reported that they are automatically made responsible for learners of their own ethnicity and are frequently made responsible, in consultation or otherwise, for cultural competence across their setting. They are made responsible for kapa haka, for connections with whānau and iwi, for the Māori unit and on some days, have no interaction with other teaching colleagues because of these commitments. This leads to feelings of exclusion or being othered. Some participants felt that being a minority within a group of colleagues was intimidating and that they felt pressure to speak on behalf of their people. At times, teachers would be volunteered to participate in various groups, but from their perspective, this was only when leadership became aware of the absence of Māori voice.

- > [Unteach Racism app – Module 6: Unteach Exclusion](#)
- > [Unteach Racism QPT](#)
- > [Code of Professional Responsibility resource bank](#)

Teachers look to leadership for priorities in their learning environments, including racism.

One teacher spoke about the positive impact on staff, to have their principal recognise his privilege as Pākehā and share with the teaching staff how he intended to use that privilege to influence and open up doors for their learners. For those who have witnessed low expectations for Māori and Pacific learners, teachers question what leadership is doing to address this. They have found that if leadership looks the other way, then their colleagues will too. Participants recognised that for leadership to say you must know yourself, know the ethnicities in your setting, and monitor your expectations for learners, for this to come down to more than personal choice, is important.

Summary

The broad range of teacher perspectives on racism in education in Aotearoa New Zealand outlined in this report, indicated that the Teaching Council's initiative must allow for the varied starting points on teacher's unteaching racism journey. The initiative is therefore set out in three stages of identify, confront and dismantle racism in education. While there are many things to address to dismantle racism in education, the focus for our initial work is on how systemic racism shows up in education and contributes to inequitable learner outcomes. We seek to create the foundation for change in learning environments; to create greater (deeper & more consistent) levels of teacher involvement with the issue of racism.