



SHOW US YOU CARE:

exploring the cumulative impact of
racism upon racialised young people
in the Welsh education system



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Peer-led Research report by Race Alliance Wales



'Show us you care: exploring the cumulative impact of racism upon racialised young people in the Welsh education system' aims to foreground young people's voices in relation to racism in education and to make recommendations for change in Wales.

“I think experiencing racism in schools is somehow worse. Because by experiencing it there it's like reinforcing that's the way you should be treated through your entire life, you know? **”**

(Shona, Young Research Participant)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Race Alliance Wales

Race Alliance Wales is a new initiative, established in December 2018, which aims to provide a self-directed space where Black, Asian and other ethnically minoritized¹ organisations and individuals can come together to discuss experiences as ethnic minorities in Wales, share information, and develop new ideas and solutions to the growing challenge of racism in Wales.

For more information please visit:
racealliance.wales

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We would like to thank the racialised people living in Wales who took the time to contribute their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

This paper is dedicated to all the people before us, around us, and ahead of us, who have fought and continue to fight against racism. With a special remembrance to those who have died at the hands of it. This is about real people, real lives. To our ancestors, and to our future generations, this is for you.



¹We use the term 'racialised' not as means of self or community-identification but as a socio-political categorisation formed by White-led systems and society, applied to people based on individual differences and characteristics such as skin colour, hair type, name, dress, religion, nationality, migration status or ethnic heritage, to justify our oppression. We are actively racialised. Full definition can be found in the full research report.

OVERVIEW

Around 12% of Wales' school children are from minority ethnic backgrounds and there is growing evidence of the extent of racist bullying they experience in schools and colleges during their formative years.

Although not new, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement during 2020 and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, has brought fresh attention to the issue, as has the recent publication of the 'Cynefin' report by Professor Charlotte Williams on increasing representation of racial diversity in the new school curriculum in Wales.

In this context, this research by Race Alliance Wales brings fresh in-depth empirical evidence of young racialised² people's experiences of this phenomenon, focusing on the changing experiences of this at different stages of their education journey. Importantly, this research is a peer-led one, conceptualised, planned and undertaken directly by young people from racialised backgrounds, supported by the RAW staff and volunteer team. This sits firmly within the ethos and aim of RAW of being a self-directed and collaborative network of individuals and organisations seeking to increase racial equality in Wales. We seek to shift and share power and decolonise institutionally stale approaches.

This methodological approach is a unique one, yielding findings which are profound and at times disturbing. The research shows how multiple and repeated experiences of racism from small to large, and from primary school up to Higher Education level, have a lasting and often traumatic impact on young people, impacting on their long-term mental health, identity and aspirations for the future.

The call is therefore a loud one. Hear us, support us, represent us and do something about our concerns and what we are going through – show us you care.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper is part of Race Alliance Wales' 2-year work programme which has received funding from Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

Supported by the Race Alliance Wales Development Workers, between July-September 2020, four volunteer peer researchers conducted research into the experiences of young racialised people in educational settings in Wales. The aim of the research was to explore the cumulative impact of racism in education upon racialised young people in Wales.

Research questions focused on young people's experiences of direct racism within schools – what had happened, how was it dealt with; their experiences of indirect racism including representation in the curriculum, microaggressions and diversity of teaching staff; and, looking to the future, what they wanted to see change. Young people made a timeline of their educational journey and used it as visual stimuli for interview.

20 young people took part as research participants. They were an ethnically diverse group including young people of Arab, Asian, Black, European and Latin American backgrounds, of different religious backgrounds including Christian, Muslim and no religion, and living in locations including North Wales, West Wales, Swansea, Cardiff and Newport.

² We have moved away from using the term 'BAME' due to it not sitting comfortably with most people. We have instead opted to use the term 'racialised', acknowledging the process of active racialisation by the perceived White majority in the world.

FINDINGS

As explained by young people, racism can be direct (overt), indirect (covert), displayed through microaggressions, and experienced at an institutional level through policies and procedures which may negatively impact racialised communities in comparison to their white counterparts.

The majority of young people expressed concerns about the increase of indirect and covert expressions of racism, especially as they moved through their educational journeys.

A recurring message we heard in relation to racism for young people was racism as *felt* but not always *seen*. As young people expressed, acknowledging the nuanced and sometimes invisible expressions of racism in education is a vital starting point.

"I just want to highlight the fact that people think that racism is becoming less and less but I would say it just gets expressed in different forms... nowadays raising awareness of microaggression is actually really important [because] people are not as daring to be racist right in front of your face."

(Zahra, Young Research Participant)

Experiences through the educational journey

Within a primary school setting, racism was less prevalent compared with secondary school. Of the young people who shared experiences of racism in primary schools, the racism always came directly from other pupils, including name-calling or being left out. In primary schools which lacked racial diversity, many young people shared perceptions of teaching staff as unprepared and lacking understanding when dealing with diversity. Even though racism was experienced the least in primary school settings, being picked on and highlighted as 'different' at such a tender age can have lasting traumatic impacts, with many at an early age wanting to be more like their white peers.

Within secondary school educational settings, racism is seemingly expressed in a much more complex way. Similar to primary school, many young people experienced name-calling based around racial and religious characteristics. However, at this stage young people explained that, unlike that experienced at primary school level, the name-calling was with intent, and sometimes malice, including being called the P-word and the N-word, referring to their race. Many explained the difficulty in dealing with what was said to be jokes and '*banter*', but often felt like racism. Islamophobic name-calling was reported by every young person who followed Islam during their secondary school experience. In addition, young female Muslims reported regularly having their hijabs (headscarves) '*pulled off*' by their peers.

Fortunately, when young people progressed to further education, in sixth forms and colleges, many reported experiencing less racism. There were still incidents of direct racism for some, but these mainly occurred outside of educational settings, such as when using public transport to get to/from colleges and sixth forms. However, indirect forms of racism continued, especially through lecturers and the way in which lessons were delivered. We heard examples of the misrepresentation of racialised communities within lessons and heard that some lecturers were bolder with their statements and sometimes borderline racist opinions.

Less can be said within this research about the experience within Higher Education, as the majority of young people interviewed had only just embarked upon their university experience. Many young people enjoyed the relative '*diversity*' that can be found in university settings which has helped with their sense of belonging. However, we also heard that many young people experienced complex processes of enrolment, leaving them with the feeling of not knowing if it was difficult because of the system, or due to indirect racism from university staff. Additionally, even though universities purport a zero-tolerance approach to racism, it can be difficult for young people to know who to speak to about racism.

Teacher Responses

Overwhelmingly, teachers' and schools' responses to racist incidents were felt to be poor. Identifying racism in secondary schools can be difficult for educators, particularly when secondary schools lack racial diversity amongst their educators. Young people expressed that many teachers seemed 'clueless' about racism, finding it a touchy subject to talk about, as "*they don't really understand racism themselves. They are quite old-fashioned, and they don't really see it as a big deal*".

Unfortunately, the problem seems in some cases to go beyond cluelessness, and a few interviewees shared experiences of teachers openly voicing personal, negative opinions about minorities, mixing up identities of racialised young people, and in some extreme cases even using racial slurs.

When young people took the trouble to report racist incidents, we heard repeatedly that schools did not respond effectively. Too often, there was felt to be too great a burden on the victim of the aggression to provide concrete evidence of the incident, with many feeling they wouldn't be believed or taken seriously, so there was 'no point' in reporting. In the few examples of what had worked well, this majority of participants talked about restorative approach being preferred over a punitive one, as this enabled both parties to rebuild a more positive relationship going forward.

For those attending sixth form, there was continuing mistrust in their schools' reporting system, having already witnessed a lack of understanding and conviction from teachers in dealing with previous complaints. By this point students had resolved to internalise any struggles and just deal with things themselves.

Representation

Seeing yourself represented in your peers, educators and in your textbooks is key when considering young people's sense of belonging and identity in Wales. Sadly, the majority of young people we interviewed felt that this representation was lacking in their own experiences.

In secondary schools, nearly all young people responded that they did not see their race, ethnicity or religion portrayed in the curriculum. Most of the young people described their subjects as Eurocentric, overlooking and 'erasing' the contributions made by racialised communities in the UK, with subjects such as history presenting a '*whitewashed*' and '*romanticised*' version of UK history.

For those who did see themselves reflected, this was mostly in negative ways, and many described instances of reinforcing negative stereotypes around race. In subjects such as sociology, young people described instances of feeling uncomfortable due to generalised representations of Black people.

Anti-racism

Our research also highlighted the contributions of charities in Wales who deliver workshops and educational sessions to both young people and teaching staff, such as Show Racism the Red Card (SRTRC) and Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team (EYST Wales) around anti-racism, Islamophobia and cultural diversity. Young people still clearly remembered these sessions as their approach to racism was so different to that of the education system, and more of these sessions would be welcomed by young people in order to break down the stereotypes attached to different ethnic groups, as well as religious groups.

Lack of diverse workforce

The lack of representation in the curriculum is further exacerbated by the lack of educators in Wales from racialised backgrounds, which was noted by all young people across all levels of education. This left many young people feeling '*misunderstood*' and unable to share racist incidents with teaching staff, due to it being such a '*touchy subject*'. Some young people viewed efforts from schools to be inclusive, diverse and to promote equality to be superficial, one offs, and tokenistic.

We also heard examples of teaching staff using inconsiderate examples and language when exploring subjects, for example when explaining the connotations of the word 'black'. There is a need for educators to be sensitive, thoughtful and knowledgeable about topics of which they may not have extensive experience or understanding.

Long-term impact of racism

Racism isn't a one-off incident. It isn't something that stops after completing education in Wales. Racism and its impact is something that stays with these young people. One of the key long-term impacts of racism, both direct and indirect, is upon young people's mental health, particularly their confidence and self-esteem. Many young people who had experienced direct racism throughout their educational journeys expressed how incidents had had a long-term effect on how they see themselves in relation to others:

"It did like hit my self-esteem I'd say. It did make me feel sometimes [like] I'm never going to be good enough as certain people because of the way I look or the colour of my skin. There's things like that...it does make me feel like I'm not as valuable or as worthy as other people."

(Sophie, Young Research Participant)

CONCLUSION

Many young people expressed a degree of acceptance and inevitability over experiencing racism throughout their lives, internalising their feelings. It is paramount to recognise the emotional and mental toll of racism experienced by young people in education. Even recalling these experiences in order to hopefully influence positive change for future generations was at times traumatic, tiring and emotional. The onus should not be upon these young people to constantly evidence and explain their experiences, but sadly due to a lack of effective processes in educational institutions in Wales, racist experiences are mostly left unresolved.

"Even speaking about it gets me a bit emotional [and] I know it's not my fault as well... I'm just different. I haven't really learned how to overcome racism and Islamophobia. I have just learned to keep it in and keep it to myself, not make it an issue."

(Wafaa, Young Research Participant)

Racism also impacts long-term on young people's identities and how they see themselves in relation to others. Young people are conditioned by their schooling to think a certain way and consciously need to challenge ways of thinking rooted in white hegemony, as it can damage their sense of self.

Because of prior experiences of racism, for some students their long-term career aspirations are affected, and they will avoid certain careers where they anticipate too much exposure to racism. There was also a sad sense of expecting racism to happen, and to have accepted that they will need to '*work three times as hard*' in order to succeed and compete with white counterparts.

These young people's experiences and stories demonstrate the complexity of racism felt and experienced within the Welsh education system. Stories from primary school all the way through to university express the ongoing impact of racism upon racialised young people.

At worst, young people experience direct racism, mixed with microaggressions so they question the validity of their experiences, with racialised communities continually represented as less than/other to white people. At best, young people experience microaggressions through racist 'banter' and accept casual racism as just part of everyday life.

Yet despite these serious concerns, young people also expressed a great deal of hope and optimism about changes in representation in the education system in Wales. In particular, there was hope due to the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the planned changes in the Welsh school curriculum, and the forthcoming Welsh Government Race Equality Action plan.

Regardless of experiences, different forms of racism are manifesting across educational institutions in Wales. Regardless of where, how and what form it takes, racism is still very much prevalent within the education system in Wales. We need to do better.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the voices and experiences of the young people who took part in this research, we are making the following proposals and recommendations.

Become anti-racist

Young people we spoke to want teachers to be more proactive in educating themselves and others about different forms of racism. The *culture* of some educational institutions needs to change, taking a proactive, anti-racist approach.

Schools, Welsh Government and Education Stakeholders should:

1. Develop their own race equality action plans to move towards becoming anti-racist, considering the recommendations in this report within the framework of the Public Sector Equality Duty, the Future Generations Act 2015 and with guidance from Welsh Government's Race Equality Action Plan. These plans should set out the steps the school will take and who will take them, and should be developed in consultation with racialised young people, parents, families and school staff.

2. Proactively engage with third sector anti-racism practitioners, such as Show Racism the Red Card and EYST Wales, to develop staff understanding of racism as an evolving issue, particularly in the educational setting, and learn how they can address racism pragmatically at institutional, indirect and direct levels.
3. Increase engagement with families, committing to an inter-generational approach to addressing racism. Schools should play a more active role in Community Cohesion programmes to achieve this.
4. Take an intersectional approach to challenging racism, in its many forms, recognising intersections of race with gender, class, sexuality, religion and disability. Teacher training should adequately reflect an intersectional approach.

Represent Us

Young people we spoke to want to see more racialised educators at all levels in Wales. They want to see themselves reflected in what they learn in education.

We therefore recommend that Welsh Government and the Education Workforce Council should:

5. Commit sufficient resources for the timely implementation of Professor Charlotte Williams' Cynefin report recommendations towards a representative curriculum reflecting racialised communities.

6. Increase efforts to inspire, recruit and support racially diverse educators to progress within schools in Wales³, utilising positive action provision as outlined in the Equality Act 2010 to its fullest resource

Improve reporting mechanisms

Young people we spoke to want available, accessible, and more robust reporting systems for racist incidents in schools. They do not just want educators to hear them, they also want educators to really listen and then act on their concerns.

We therefore recommend that Welsh Government, working with Education Stakeholders should:

7. Evaluate together with young people the effectiveness of current policies and procedures in relation to recording and reporting racist incidents, making current data about racist incidents experienced in education publicly available.
8. Introduce robust minimum requirements for policies and procedures in relation to recording and reporting racism for educational institutions, including making policies accessible and available to young people and their families, including provision in languages reflected in the educational setting.
9. Review current policies in primary and secondary schools, to ensure students can express their language, culture and religion freely, in line with Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

³ As recommended in Race Alliance Wales' (2020) Manifesto for an Anti-Racist Wales, From Rhetoric to Reality. www.racealliance.wales/research/

Level the Playing Field

Young people spoke about a lack of level playing field, partly due to unequal levels of parental knowledge, partly due to teacher bias, manifesting in unequal attainment for racialised young people:

We therefore recommend that Welsh Government working with Education Stakeholders should:

10. Implement measures to counter bias, anonymising methods of assessing student's coursework and examinations.
11. Provide transparent and accessible information for young people, parents, and guardians regarding accessing education, particularly newly arrived sanctuary seekers to Wales.

Recognise the Trauma

Young people we spoke to described the ongoing traumatic impact of racism experienced in education. Racism experienced during a person's formative years can have a devastating long-term impact including on employment, health, and mental health. These young people do not want their children to go through this in the future

We therefore recommend that all of those working with children and young People in Wales should:

12. Recognise racism as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), ensuring racialised young people have access to appropriate, culturally sensitive support, such as counselling. To achieve this, Welsh Government and Education Stakeholders should provide learning opportunities to practitioners to embed the understanding of links between racism and ACE, as well as what support is available for such children and young people.
13. Urge Welsh Government to implement Show Racism the Red Card's recommendation of undertaking or commissioning an inquiry into racism in schools to scrutinize and expose the extent of traumatic racism experienced by children and young people in educational settings in Wales. This inquiry should be sufficiently funded and led by an independent body based in Wales, with specific experience in racism and school settings.

"We need a vast amount of training. We need organisations like RAW to get the resources they need to train people so they can be more aware of reality. Giving people the help they need to help them[selves]. Governments need to incentivise people to actually do it. Government needs to invest in these organisations, charities to give people the tools to train people. We need this before even progressing to the next step. You can't build a house on sand. You can't build a house on water. You need solid foundations for the basics."

(Joseph, Young Research Participant)

For a copy of the full report see:

www.racealliance.wales/research
or email: info@racealliance.wales

Race Alliance Wales

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