Anti racism resource series

Gathering student voice on racism and mental health in schools

Co-authored by Hon. Stuart Lawrence

> I think that things could greatly improve if there was a safe space for minorities to voice their opinions, and if teachers could structure the way they respond to racism around the feedback received.
>
> **Student**[1]

[1] This quote is from the Anna Freud Centre's survey on racism and mental health. A total of 796 respondents aged 13 to 20 completed the survey between 23rd September and 11th October 2021.

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Why is student voice important in anti-racism work?

Taking a whole-school approach to anti-racism means putting the views and ideas of students at the centre of everything we do.

Taking students' views into consideration should always be a part of decision-making at your school. Schools should provide children and young people with meaningful opportunities to share their experiences, views and hopes about their school.

When this decision-making involves race and racism, it's even more crucial to bring students into the process. Listening to the lived experiences of those from racially minoritised groups is absolutely vital for any anti-racism work.

However, this doesn't mean that only schools with diverse student populations should undertake this work. Learning about your pupils' experiences, what they know and what they want to learn about racism is valuable, regardless of your student demographics.

Asking students for their opinions and ideas around anti-racism has benefits for both the school and the students and can be done in many different ways.
It can provide:

- an improved sense of belonging and community in the school
- an improved sense of identity for students
- developing students' confidence and self-esteem
- a safe space for students to share lived experiences of racism
- identification of issues or specific students who are having difficulties and who may need further support.

All of these improvements will act as protective factors for students' mental health, helping them to feel more supported and valued in the school setting.

Find out more about why pupil voice is important on **Mentally Healthy Schools**



How to gather student voice

There is no one correct way to gather the voices of students. Every school and student population is different, and certain strategies may work better for different schools.

Some ways to consider gathering student voice for your anti-racism work could include:

- making space in tutor time to discuss relevant anti-racism topics with students, or to ask for feedback on initiatives you have implemented
- dedicating RSHE lesson time to focusing on topics related to race and racism
- running assemblies on the topics and asking for student feedback
- using feedback boxes to gather anonymous comments and thoughts from students which you can then review in staff meetings
- involving student wellbeing champions or student councils in the process, asking them to give their thoughts on actions you plan to take
- setting up an anti-racism working group comprised of students, having them regularly feed back to designated staff members.



Student questionnaire

Another way of sourcing student opinions is through asking them questions as part of an existing survey that you may already conduct.

In this resource, we are sharing a set of questions that can be inserted into any annual student surveys you may already run.

Running a survey can allow a space to listen to the voices of quieter pupils or those who don't often open up about sensitive issues. It can offer a way for those who don't feel comfortable talking in a more open setting to still share their thoughts and opinions.

There are of course limitations with any type of survey. A survey is just one of many ways to get an understanding of your students' experiences and opinions, but they won't give the whole picture. They don't replace having conversations with students, but can be useful as the starting point for discussions.

Things to consider

Raising issues relating to racism and mental health need to be done in a safe way, and there are certain things you will want to consider. If you already run an annual student wellbeing survey, you will have your own policies about things like parent/carer consent, anonymity and data sharing.

It's important to let parents and carers know that you'll be adding these questions to your existing survey, because the topics are sensitive and may be difficult for some young people.

You should do this for two reasons: firstly, to get their consent that they are happy for you to ask their child about these potentially difficult topics.

Secondly, by securing their consent ahead of time, you will be better involving parents and carers in your anti-racism work, encouraging opportunities for parents and carers to have discussions at home with their children about racism.

It's also important to consider the responses to the survey in line with other work in this area. If you are at an early stage on your anti-racism journey, the responses will be different.

It is advisable to repeat these survey questions in each annual survey that you run. You can then use the results as a benchmark to review the impact of your anti-racism work year-on-year.

If you do not already run an annual student wellbeing survey, please refer to **our guidance** on this topic.

Example questions

These are some questions we would suggest including in an existing survey of pupils. You can add or remove questions depending on what you want to find out.

We have designed these questions specifically for secondary-age students. Secondary school staff should read the questions and consider which age groups of students would be best suited to answering the questions.

At the end of the survey, we have included links to further sources of support for any students who may need it. These questions should not be issued to students without this list also being shared with them.



Current issues

1. Which of the following have you seen take place in school (not directed at you)? Please mark on the scale how often this has occurred.

(rarely=once a year, occasionally=several times a year, regularly=monthly, often=daily, constantly=several times a day)

	0 (never)	**1** (rarely)	**2** (occassionally)	**3** (regularly)	**4** (often)	**5** (constantly)
a. Racist language (e.g. use of racist slurs, racist jokes)						
b. Racist bullying (repetitive hurtful behaviour due based on race/ ethnicity)						
c. Microaggressions (smaller, subtle acts or behaviours that may not be considered overtly racist)						
d. Other (please state)						

2. Have you experienced any of the following in school (directed at you)? Please mark on the scale how often this has occurred.

(rarely=once a year, occasionally=several times a year, regularly=monthly, often=daily, constantly=several times a day)

	0 (never)	**1** (rarely)	**2** (occassionally)	**3** (regularly)	**4** (often)	**5** (constantly)
a. Racist language (e.g. use of racist slurs, racist jokes)						
b. Racist bullying (repetitive hurtful behaviour due based on race/ ethnicity)						
c. Microaggressions (smaller, subtle acts or behaviours that may not be considered overtly racist)						
d. Other (please state)						

3. Would you consider any of the following to be an issue in our school?

a. A lack of understanding of what racism is (from fellow students)
b. A lack of understanding of what racism is (from staff)
c. A lack of understanding of the impact of racism on mental health (from fellow students)
d. A lack of understanding of the impact of racism on mental health (from staff)
e. A lack of support from the school for students from racially minoritised backgrounds
f. A lack of representation of people from racially minoritised backgrounds in the staff
g. Other (please state)
h. No, none of the above

Current provision

4. If you brought up an incident around racism that you had seen or experienced with a staff member, how do you think they would respond?

a. They would listen and understand and take the action that is needed
b. They would listen and understand but not take any action
c. They wouldn't take the time to listen and understand
d. I wouldn't feel comfortable to raise the issue in the first place

5. Have issues around race or racism ever been discussed in any of the following formats?

a. Classroom lesson
b. Assembly
c. External speaker
d. Group discussion led by a staff member
e. 1:1 with a staff member
f. Other (please state)
g. No, we have never discussed racism

Future improvements

6. Which of these improvements do you think would improve the situation in our school?

a. A detailed anti-racism policy that is created with the input of all staff, students and parents
b. More staff members from racially minoritised backgrounds
c. Better training for staff on racism and its impact
d. A zero tolerance approach to racist language and behaviour from fellow students
e. More diverse curriculum materials (for example, books written by authors from racially minoritised backgrounds)
f. More events celebrating and learning about different cultures

7. What else do you think could be done at our school in this area?

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Further sources of support



All the organisations listed here are national. You may want to adjust this list to add organisations that are based in your local area.

If you have been affected by any of the issues covered in this survey, please speak to a trusted adult in the school if you feel comfortable doing so. Alternatively, take a look at some of the following resources/organisations:

Safeguarding/incident reporting

- Stop Hate UK - www.stophateuk.org
- True Vision - www.report-it.org.uk/home

Free helplines/email services/chat services

- Barnados - www.helpline.barnardos.org.uk
- Muslim Youth Helpline - www.myh.org.uk / 0808 808 2008
- The Helpline - www.hehelpline.org.uk
- The Mix - www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team / 0808 808 4994
- Childline: www.childline.org.uk/get-support / 0800 1111

After gathering student voice

After gathering opinions from your students, in whichever format you choose to do so, you will need to analyse it and take appropriate action. You should communicate the action you are taking with students at all stages of the process, where it is appropriate to do so.

Some actions you may want to take following your student voice gathering could include:

- Feedback to students on findings and next steps (as long as appropriate and done safely)
- Present and discuss the findings in a staff meeting
- Set up an anti-racism working group with students and staff to start addressing the issues raised
- Use your findings to directly inform and shape your anti-racism policy – we have a resource to help you write this
- Use the findings to help you review the diversity of your curriculum – read a case study of how one school did this
- Consider how to involve the wider school community in this work, including parents/carers – we have a resource to help you do this
- Use the findings to help you review your existing policies and see where they may need amending or adding to – we have a resource to help you do this
- Source potential training opportunities for staff in areas of concern raised in the survey
- Analyse the diversity of your senior leadership and staff, and review your hiring practices in light of this

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