

Pilot Project Short Report

Children, Discrimination and Rights Education: listening to children to learn about their needs regarding discrimination and rights education in Western Australia.



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Please note that this guide can be provided in alternate formats if requested.

1 Introduction

An essential part of how the Equal Opportunity Commission promotes the recognition, acceptance and equality of persons within the community, as well as the elimination of discrimination, is informing and educating the Western Australian community about the Equal Opportunity Act (1984) and its provisions. A core element of this task is the provision of information, education and training, which is largely performed by the Commission's Strategy and Engagement Team (SET).

Working within the Commission's Strategic Plan (July 2022 – June 2024), the SET turned its attention to delivering Strategic Objective Four of the plan. Objective four states the Commission will "Develop programs that raise awareness of discrimination and promote anti-discrimination for school-aged children by engaging with educational institutions." In response to this, in mid-2022, the SET began exploring options to include children in the way it informed and educated people about the Act. The team decided to approach this task by placing the voices of children at the centre of its considerations. Therefore, it decided to research children's knowledge and experience of discrimination and rights education by listening to children about their understanding of these concepts. It was decided the best way to achieve this was to develop a research project and to begin with a pilot research project. The SET was fortunate to have the assistance of Ms Patience Makambwa, Edith Cowan University Social Work intern, who did the initial background research, developed the questions and lead most of the sessions at the schools. The project involves 30 students from four schools; two schools belong to the government education system, one school belongs to the Catholic education system and one school is an independent school.

This report presents the ideas the students offered in response to the pilot project's questionnaire, and it provides the key findings interpreted from their responses. A more substantial draft report is also available that explains, analyses and discusses the students' ideas and the findings in more detail. The more substantial report will inform the development of the next, larger stage of the research project.

The section on key ideas uses tables to present the student's key responses to the questionnaire. The tables use categories to group together the same or similar ideas multiple students offered in response to each question. The categories also capture numerous ideas that have been expressed together in a single response. For example, when a student responded to Q. 1 by stating, "Everyone has human rights and you should feel protected by them", their response was recorded under two categories: "Everyone has human rights" and "Protection". Each table, therefore, presents the shared ideas (categories) students provided as well as indicating the number of students that contributed to that category. Finally, a quotation is provided for each category to illustrate its meaning.



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WA Commissioner for Equal Opportunity

2 Key Ideas

Key Ideas

Table 1: What are human rights?

Category	Quotation	Quantity
Everyone has human rights	"Human rights are things that all people have."	17
Protection	"Everyone has human rights and you should feel protected by them."	12
Equality	"... no matter where or who you are, you have them."	11
Necessities	"Human rights are the basic rights every human deserves and needs to live."	9
Behaviours / Actions	"... human rights are what people can and cannot do."	6
Expression / Voice	"... when you have your own voice."	3

Table 2: What is discrimination?

Category	Quotation	Quantity
Negative behaviours ¹	"Not letting a human do something ..."	25
About difference / attribute ²	"Discrimination is an unfair way of pointing out that people are different."	23
Exclusion	"... when you aren't getting included on something because of who you are."	11
Loss of rights		2

¹ The category of "negative behaviours" indicates the use of terms by students in their answer that would be reasonably understood as behaviour that would be negatively received by another person. This category indicates terms such as: abuse, bullying, being hurtful, putting down, being rude and unfair treatment.

² The category of "about difference / attribute" indicates any time that a student included "different" or "difference" in their answer, as well as mentioning an attribute commonly used to illustrate difference between people. This includes attributes such as race, religion, appearance, disability, mental health, intellectual ability, skin colour, sex/gender, sexuality.

Table 3: What do you think are two or three examples of discrimination? ⁽³⁾

Example (ground) ⁽⁴⁾	% Students	% EOC Enquiries	% EOC Complaints
Race	29 (96.6%)	10.9%	14.3%
Sex (Gender)	10 (33.3%)	3%	6%
Disability (Impairment)	8 (26.6%)	22.9%	24.5%
Appearance	6 (20%)	NA	NA
Religion	4 (13.3%)	2.9%	7.5%
Sexuality (Sexual orientation)	3 (10%)	0.6%	2.7%
Age	3 (10%)	4.5%	8.9%

Table 4: Closed response questions ⁽⁵⁾

	Yes	No	Other
Have you experienced discrimination?	9	14	1 (unsure)
Did you report it to anyone? ⁽⁶⁾	4	5	2 (reported it but did not experience it)

³ The shading colours used in the table are gold, silver and bronze to indicate the order of the top three examples or grounds chosen by the students in comparison to the enquires and complaints received by the EOC in the Financial Year 21/22.

⁴ Each of the following descriptions was provided by individual students and is included in the table under the attribute in brackets: an Aboriginal Australian refused employment (race); an Asian boy not allowed to use equipment at the park (race); being small (appearance); a slightly overweight girl excluded by a friendship group (appearance); a boy with a disability excluded from a game (disability).

Table 5: How would you like to learn about discrimination?

Category	Quotation	Quantity
Learning how to act or respond	"I would like to learn about discrimination in a way that teaches us what it is and how to stop it." (H) "How to make the world a place without discrimination." (NP)	14
From other people (including people with lived experience)	"... have people come into classes or programs to talk about discrimination, human rights and children rights." (NF)	8
School		5
Website (online programme)		3
Research (my own research and participating in research projects)		2
Pamphlet, magazine or book		1
TV ads		1

5 The Yes and No columns present the action taken by students who had experienced discrimination.

3 Findings

The research provides valuable knowledge regarding what children in Years 6 and 7 know about discrimination and rights, as well as what more they want and need to learn about discrimination and rights. The findings also illuminate elements in the research that can be improved for inclusion in the more extensive second stage of the research project. Here, I offer the most compelling findings of the pilot project.

The students' explanations of the meaning of 'human rights' tell us about the knowledge they possess about this topic. While over half the students demonstrate an ability to correctly explain the essential meaning of human rights, some explanations demonstrate a need for further learning that would enable them to explain the meaning more precisely. For instance, some comments exemplify the way people's understanding of human rights contains erroneous or flawed ideas. This comment by one student is an example of this, "Rights are being able to do what you want to, when you want to and how long you want to do it. Your rights should not stop other people's rights" While this statement contains ideas that hold some truth, the ideas need to be expressed more precisely because they are expressed in a way that can be interpreted to mean that human rights give people permission to do whatever they want. This indicates a need for children to learn three things: 1) how human rights are defined in formal terms; 2) how to critique erroneous ideas that are often attached to human rights in the public domain; and 3) how to think critically about how human rights function in theory and practice.

The students demonstrate a strong knowledge about the meaning of discrimination. For example, most students define discrimination as negative and unfair treatment by some people directed at other people in response to difference and personal attributes. This ability indicates the potential to extend children's knowledge about the meaning of discrimination, how it functions in societies and their ability to reflect on their own behaviour and treatment of other people, especially regarding discrimination.

The examples of discrimination the students provide reveal that the attributes they recognise most are race, sex and disability. In addition to this, they associated discrimination with how people are treated due to their appearance; this is referred to as the ground of 'physical features' in some legal jurisdictions, excluding WA. One very valuable contribution this set of responses offers is that it informs the generation of new questions for inclusion in the next research stage. Some potential questions are: Do most children place race, sex and disability as their top three examples of discrimination? If so, how do they explain their reason for doing this? Do students explain this in a way that reflects any correlation between their choices and the fact that race and disability sit within the top three most common complaints received by the EOC? Why do students rate age so low on their list of examples? How do students define 'physical features'? What do their explanations reveal regarding their lived experience of discrimination? What does this tell us about children's learning needs regarding their rights in relation to physical features?

The students' responses about their personal experience of discrimination and of reporting it highlight the need for a more careful examination about the place of lived experience in educating children about discrimination and rights. This includes examining how students have experienced being the target of discrimination, witnessing discrimination and reporting discrimination. These topics are closely related to each other and should be developed along with what students tell us about how they want to learn about

discrimination.

The students offer some substantial ideas when asked how they want to learn about discrimination. They clearly express that they want to learn what discrimination is, how to respond to it and how to fix it. They want their learning to include people who are well-informed about discrimination, including people who have lived experienced of discrimination. Finally, they want to learn by talking about discrimination in a way that allows them to learn freely without judgement or ridicule.

Placing children and their voices at the centre of our considerations about how to educate children about the Act has been informative and rewarding. Listening to children about their understanding and experiences of discrimination and rights, and how they want to learn more about them, tells us that we move into the next stage of our research with solid expectations that the children we aim to include possess a reasonable amount of foundational knowledge about the meaning of rights and discrimination, in theory, and a keen interest and capacity to develop this knowledge in ways that are critical, reflective and respectful of people's lived experience. As we move forward, we feel confident our future participants will share with us, one of our essential reasons for educating the people of WA, which is expressed by one of the participants in this pilot project, "I would like to learn about discrimination in a way that teaches us what it is, and how to stop it"

