

Comment

Public education a force for social cohesion

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Australia has long been regarded as a successful multicultural society, integrating people from many different social and cultural backgrounds. Now, however, the sense of shared community that underpins this success is showing signs of strain. Racism and cultural intolerance have re-emerged as pressing social concerns.

Strengthening public education is one of the most practical ways Australia can build social cohesion and counter racism.

According to the Scanlon Foundation’s Mapping Social Cohesion 2025 report, social cohesion in Australia is at its lowest level since it was first measured, in 2007. The survey also reveals stark differences in attitudes towards immigrants depending on their country of origin.

For example, the report found a high proportion of adults have negative attitudes to immigrants from Asia and Africa. Only 3-4 per cent of adults feel that way towards immigrants from the United Kingdom, Italy and Germany.

Another survey by Reconciliation Australia in 2024 found 54 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders experience racial discrimination in daily life, up from 39 per cent a decade earlier.

Attitudes towards immigrants of certain religious faiths are also deteriorating. The proportion of adults with negative views of Muslims is high at 35 per cent, up from 27 per cent in 2023. Sentiment is also worsening towards people of Hindu, Jewish and Sikh faiths, though to a much lesser extent.

The Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion was established to investigate anti-Semitism and to recommend on how to strengthen social cohesion. It is required to produce an interim report by April 30, and a final report by December 14 this year.

It is timely, therefore, to highlight the critical role of public education in promoting social cohesion and countering all forms of racism and religious intolerance. Public schooling built on the principles of free, secular and non-discriminatory education serves to break down class, ethnic and religious differences. As the prime minister emphasised in his address to the Australian Education Union federal conference, public schools are open to everyone.

Education in general, through national curriculums and locally designed teaching practices, creates inclusive and safe school environments that support the wellbeing and sense of belonging of all students. International institutions such as the United Nations and human rights commissions recognise that schools are important in fostering healthy relationships, tolerance and mutual respect in schools and in society.

And one of the original purposes of public education was to promote social cohesion. Public schools were established in Australia in the 19th century to overcome bitter divisions between Catholics and Protestants. Ever since, the system has been in the frontline of the development of a multicultural society.

Public schools have played an important role in the successful integration of Italian, Greek, Eastern European and other migrants since World War II. Because these schools are free – at least for the most part – secular and non-discriminatory, they are shared learning environments of students from different class, ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

When students grow, play and learn alongside peers from different social and religious backgrounds, they encounter different perspectives and ways of life. These everyday interactions help reduce stereotypes and build positive relationships. Decades of social science research show that regular, meaningful contact between young people from different backgrounds – the common condition of non-selective public schools – reduces prejudice and helps cultivate the habits of respect on which social cohesion depends.

The principle is pure common sense. When students meet one another as equals, work together and share common goals, stereotypes soften, suspicion eases and mutual understanding grows. Diverse school communities create precisely these conditions.

Compared with socially and culturally more homogeneous school settings, they are more likely to foster cross-group friendships, diminish bias and strengthen intergroup trust. Recent experimental studies add weight to this evidence, showing that school-based programs can measurably improve attitudes towards difference, and make students more supportive of diversity beyond the classroom.

A large body of research highlights that ordinary, positive interaction between students from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds is one of the most reliable ways to reduce prejudice and build respect. As a recent peer-reviewed meta-analysis concluded, “intergroup contact provides a reliable means of reducing prejudice, even in the face of group threat and discrimination”. This shows how diverse, inclusive school environments are an educational asset in cultivating the tolerant, cohesive communities Australia urgently needs.

Research undertaken by the Australian National University in public schools in this country confirms that when schools intentionally engage with issues of racism as part of their regular school days, attitudes can change for the better. One recent evaluation of the SOAR (Speaking Out Against Racism) program, a whole-school anti-racism initiative,

found that teachers and students thought it “raised teacher confidence to discuss and address racism, student peer prosocial norms and school climate, students’ racial literacy, awareness of racism, and knowledge and confidence to intervene proactively to address racism at school”.

Strengthening diverse public schooling is therefore not just a question of system design. It is one of the most practical, evidence-based tools we have for confronting intolerance, including anti-Semitism, and reinforcing the social fabric that holds a pluralist democracy together.

It is hard to think of any other social institution that creates such opportunities to bring together large numbers of young people from diverse backgrounds and promote socially coherent communities.

However, this role of public education has been weakened over the past 25 years by the steady expansion of private schooling and increasing social segregation between schools. For example, Australia’s school systems today educate nearly 900,000 more children than they did at the start of the century – a growth of roughly one quarter of the entire school populations. Most of that growth, over half a million students, or 58 per cent, was in private schools.

Recent statistics show that the flow of students from public school to private schools is intensifying. Since 2000, the number of public schools fell by 234, while the number of independent schools increased by 229, and Catholic schools by 63.

Today, there is a growing number of private religious schools – Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist, Lutheran, evangelical and fundamentalist Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Greek Orthodox, Seventh Day Adventist, Plymouth Brethren and Buddhist. Australia’s first Hindu school is planned to open in 2027, and approval has been given for the first Sikh school.

Parents may have many reasons, shaped by their own circumstances and values, for choosing faith-based or independent schools over public schools. Some families prefer to have their children educated according to their faith and avoid heightened societal prejudice against a range of religious and racial groups. At the same time, it is important to recognise the substantial work undertaken by public schools across Australia to create safe, inclusive environments that support the wellbeing of all students.

OECD analysis of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 data shows countries with larger private-school sectors tend to have more socioculturally segregated school systems, meaning students are less likely to encounter peers from different backgrounds in school.

This is the same condition that research consistently links to weaker development of tolerant and inclusive civic attitudes.

Funding policy has also contributed to this trend. Over the past 15 years, government funding per student has increased far more rapidly in private schools than in public schools. This imbalance has accelerated enrolment shifts and increased social segregation between schools. For example, since 2009, funding per student adjusted for inflation has increased 20 per cent for public schools, and more than double that pace for independent and Catholic schools.

Social segregation is likely to increase under the current funding arrangements. At the moment and in coming years, public schools in all jurisdictions except the ACT are significantly underfunded. When public schools remain underfunded, their capacity to bring young people together across social and cultural divides is inevitably weakened.

The royal commission must examine the breakdown of social cohesion in Australia. It will also have to investigate the impact of related economic and social factors. Income inequality is high in Australia and large parts of the population suffer financial, housing, health and educational stress.

Recommending ways to build social cohesion and combat racism is a particularly challenging task for the commission. One thing it can do is to highlight the benefits of public education in building social cohesion, mutual respect and core human values in our society.

Comparative research shows that education systems with comprehensive schooling, democratic classroom climates and strong civic education – for example, those in Finland and other Nordic countries – are associated with higher levels of civic knowledge and stronger support for intercultural understanding, equality and social inclusion among students.

Simply adding more lessons against racism and intolerance to the curriculum is not, on its own, enough. What matters equally is how school systems are organised to serve the true purpose of education. Diverse, well-resourced public schools remain among the most powerful institutions in Australia for bringing young people together across social, cultural and religious divides.

Therefore, governments must accelerate the transition to genuine full funding of all public schools. Having a strong public education system is not only an educational priority. It is an investment in the kind of society Australians want to live in – a nation grounded in mutual respect, democratic values and shared belonging. ●