

Streetwise students tackle discrimination at school

The experience and treatment of refugees is the focus of a series of performance pieces developed by students undertaking year-long Anti Racism Student Initiative Program last year. Eight rural schools in the Queanbeyan School Education Area (SEA) have initiated the Program as a part of their on-going commitment to addressing the causes of racism amongst students.

The Other Side Comic, produced by Street wise Communications, provided an important framework for teachers and an inspiration for students in developing and performing the anti-racism workshops. The comic (reviewed in our last edition) follows the story of Yasmeen, a young refugee from Iraq, trying to fit in with her new Australian friends. Yasmeen tells of her families' persecution, escape, survival, detention and eventual release in Australia in order to counter claims made by her classmates that she could be a terrorist.

As a bright, visual medium with engaging storylines the comic was a dynamic starting point for generating discussion. Students were encouraged to respond to the issues raised in *The Other Side* by formulating their own scripts and scenes and enacting similar scenarios.

Students identified ignorance about refugees as contributing in particular to racism in schools. Year 11 student at Crookwell High School Leigh Cummins said: "I hope that I'm not prejudiced with refugees, particularly since I live in a rural community that's so racially diverse. I think that even though that's the case, there is still racism and arrogance or ignorance, because they haven't been exposed to many different cultures. So I think it's good to be motivated to see 'the other side'."

Monaro High School teacher Mark Friend, one of the teachers involved in the programme, said it was developed "to provoke thought and discussion" about issues in the media. His students have now performed their workshop three times. Audiences are encouraged to interact, to intervene and suggest different ways to respond to issues raised in the play. The aim is to encourage people to move away from their preconceived, and often negative ideas, many people have about refugees.

Students are also encouraged to consider the sources of common misconceptions and attitudes. Friend said that in his class, news media had played a major role in shaping the opinions of students.

Leigh Cummins agrees: "In the workshop we felt our experience of racism stemmed from stereotypes and taking on ideas represented from the media, more through other people's ideas and opinions rather than direct experience of refugees," she said.

Mark Friend said both the comic and the workshops are a fun way of provoking more thought about refugee issues and racism more broadly. The strategy, he said, is to “hide the pill in the danish.”

High School students Leigh Cumins & Jennifer Medway view *The Other Side* at a workshop in Yass, 14 November 2004.

Photo credit: UNHCR/S. Whyte





Students from eight rural schools converge on Yass for an anti-racism workshop 14 November 2004.
Credit: UNHCR/S. Whyte