

Article

School Students' Intercultural Partnerships Contest Discrimination: A Case Study of Intersectional Social Change

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Abstract

Social inclusion of ethno-cultural minorities is a global concern which an acknowledged backlash against multiculturalism challenges. In Australia, some politicians and sections of the media have fuelled this backlash against refugee and minority culture young people by portraying them as involved in public violence. This article explores intersectional youth engagement and social change action. A school-based intercultural understanding initiative in a regional Northern NSW government primary school demonstrates how building intersectional connections and engaging in social change action can address ethno-cultural prejudice and discrimination within the school and wider community. The case study highlights a social change initiative where Indigenous Australian and Yazidi primary school students, their families, and school staff go out On Country together to progress intersectional intercultural understanding, networking, reciprocity, and solidarity. This initiative aimed to promote intersectional social inclusiveness while respecting and supporting diversity. The Together For Humanity Foundation, a non-profit provider of holistic schools-based intercultural understanding programmes, provided the resources to support the school's partnership initiative. Drawing on Lundy and Cuevas-Parra's intersectional framework, this article analyses the outcomes of the project from the perspectives of students and teachers.

Keywords: intersectionality; intercultural understanding; social inclusion; school students; social justice; anti-discrimination

1. Introduction

Worldwide, approximately 123.2 million people are currently forcibly displaced due to conflict, persecution, violence, or human rights violations (OECD, 2025). Displacement, combined with rising politicisation and anti-immigration framing of refugees, particularly in countries like Australia, shapes negative public attitudes toward refugees and undermines efforts to build inclusive multicultural societies (Hangartner, 2024). Australia has a policy of settling refugees in regional and rural areas. Some studies, however, find there is greater resistance to refugee inclusion in some rural and regional communities compared to metropolitan areas (Boese & Phillips, 2021).

This article presents a case study of a social change initiative undertaken at a government primary school located in regional Northern NSW. The initiative involved Yazidi and Indigenous students and their families going out On Country together to progress intersectional intercultural understanding, networking, and solidarity. Initially inspired by the primary school students, going on Anaiwan Country¹ came to constitute a key element



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of the school's Intercultural Understanding Partnership (ICUP) with the philanthropic foundation, Together For Humanity (TFH) (see below). The going On Country initiative sought to promote sustained social inclusion and belonging and prevent cultural and racial discrimination across transitions such as high school and in community spaces.

This article draws on Lundy's (2007) intersectional multi-dimensional framework, further developed by Cuevas-Parra (2023). This framework offers a practical foundation for ensuring children's perspectives are meaningfully considered and acted upon. Lundy's original framework outlines four interconnected non-linear domains: space (opportunities for children to express their views); voice (promoting their capacity to articulate those views); audience (ensuring their views are heard); and influence (enabling their views to inform action and decision-making). Emphasising childhood as a social construction influenced by social relations and specific contexts, Cuevas-Parra (2023) integrated two further interconnected dimensions into Lundy's framework: 'intersecting identities' and "enabling environments". These emphasise how social structures and inequalities are shaped, for example, by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic factors, and gender as well as social relations specific to time and place, and both constrain and enable children's participation. This expanded intersectional framework foregrounds that advancing children's participation and activism necessitates addressing the power dynamics and inequalities shaping their opportunities to engage in social change (Cuevas-Parra, 2023).

Together For Humanity is a not-for-profit, national educational foundation that since 2002 addresses intercultural understanding as well as focusing on student belonging and countering discrimination in Australian schools. Through collaborative programmes like its Intercultural Understanding Program (ICUP) (Together for Humanity Foundation, 2025a), TFH forms multifaceted partnerships with schools that are aimed at developing a whole-of-school approach to enable culturally inclusive environments and hence to strengthen student cohorts. The issues addressed include racism, religious and cultural discrimination, belonging, social inclusion, and community engagement (Gale et al., 2021). The organisation provides consultation with intercultural educators and offers funding through an inclusive, evidence-based capacity-building model (Together for Humanity Foundation, 2025b). Importantly, TFH's funding is designed to be responsive to each school's priorities and local community contexts, ensuring funding and support comes in the forms needed.

Here, we briefly outline the historical contexts of both the Yazidi² and Indigenous Australian peoples' experiences, alongside relevant Australian policy responses. Each will be discussed in turn.

Yazidis have been persecuted for their religious and cultural beliefs for around 400 years, with earlier roots dating back over a thousand years; they have endured a long history of war, massacres, enslavements, and forced conversions (Açikyildiz, 2014). Yazidi persecution has continued into the present day with a 2014 ISIS-instigated genocide against the Yazidis in northern Iraq. A 2015 UNHCR report points to these actions as a deliberate intent to destroy the Yazidis as a group (Khoudeida, 2025). An estimated 10,000 to 12,000 Yazidis were kidnapped or murdered, including women and girls sold into sexual slavery (Cook et al., 2022; Healey et al., 2022). Particularly since the genocide by ISIS in 2014, Australia, along with other European countries such as Germany, has accepted Yazidi refugees, primarily coming from the Sinjar region in Northern Iraq and nearby affected areas in Syria (Yazda, n.d.). Over 5500 Yazidi refugees have been accepted in Australia through its Offshore Humanitarian Program; their settlement is supported by the Humanitarian Settlement Program. The majority of Yazidis, as noted, are settled in designated regional areas, in particular across New South Wales (NSW), e.g., Coffs Harbour and Armidale, and in Queensland, e.g., Toowoomba. This policy aims to revitalise regional

communities, strengthen social cohesion, and provide refugees with a more affordable lifestyle than in cities. After two years, refugees may relocate to anywhere in Australia ([Refugee Council of Australia, 2024](#)).

The Yazidi experience illustrates how minority groups may endure colonisation not only through direct external rule but also through ongoing oppression from dominant states and powers. Both Yazidi and Indigenous Australian peoples have been dispossessed of land and subject to colonisation and genocide ([Khoudeida, 2025](#); [Curthoys & Docker, 2001](#)).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia represent the oldest continuous living civilisation on earth, with more than 60,000 years of unbroken connection to their ancestral lands in Australia. Prior to colonisation, Indigenous Australians lived in heterogeneous societies, each with distinct languages and cultural practices. These are characterised by intricate kinship systems, rich knowledge traditions, and a custodial relationship with the land, which is mutual, interdependent, and profoundly respectful. These characteristics, centred on relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility, anchor not only social identity and community resilience but are foundational to life and well-being ([Usher et al., 2021](#)).

However, from 1788 onward, this remarkable continuity was disrupted with the establishment of a British penal colony and colonisation bringing violent conflict, loss of lands, introduction of diseases, genocidal campaigns including massacres, and forced removals of children ([Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024](#)). Systemic structural violence became institutionalised through policies such as *terra nullius*, a legal fiction that denied Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders sovereignty and justified dispossession ([Reynolds, 2003](#)). Consequently, Indigenous Australians experience intergenerational trauma and systemic disadvantage including disproportionate rates of incarceration, poorer health outcomes, and significantly higher mortality rates than non-Indigenous Australians; they are less likely to complete secondary education and have ongoing land dispossession and erosion of cultural practices and languages ([Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024](#)). Yet, despite these injustices, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to resist and assert their self-determination through movements for land rights, legal recognition, cultural revitalisation, and political sovereignty ([Moreton-Robinson, 2015](#)). This persistence underscores Indigenous Australians' resilience to enduring colonial legacies and it calls for critical recognition crucial for addressing historical wrongs, promoting equity and decolonisation within Australia's national conscience and policy frameworks ([Briskman, 2023](#)).

2. Literature Review

Intercultural understanding (ICU), cultural identity, and social justice action in schools is deemed so important to Australia that it is embedded as a capability across the school curriculum. Definitions of ICU construct it as "closely related to acceptance of cultural diversity, anti-racism and effective cross-cultural conflict resolution" ([Walton et al., 2013](#), p. 181) and as recognising "racial equality and social justice as important structural conditions for inclusion and recognition" ([Elias & Mansouri, 2023](#), p. 8).

Abstract knowledge of similarities and differences between cultures, and even critical examination of dominant cultures, is deemed insufficient to develop intercultural competency. In addition, students should develop practical skills, through consistent, meaningful, positive interaction with other cultures ([Elias & Mansouri, 2023](#)). Recognising cultural identity is therefore a central component of ICU. It is also significantly linked to whether an individual will take social justice action.

[MacIntosh et al. \(2020\)](#) surveyed over 2000 college student athletes about their attitudes towards social justice activism. They found that females were more likely than males, and

students of colour were more likely than White students to intend to engage in activism. MacIntosh et al. (2020) suggest that the higher intention to act by less privileged groups may be due to their personal experience of discrimination, while privileged groups can be blind to the injustice experienced by oppressed others. However, for justice to be realised, this needs to be overcome. They argue (2020, p. 6), “Given the central role of allies in social justice work, it is not sufficient for only student-athletes who hold marginalised identities to be engaged in social justice work.”

Social justice actions are defined and measured in varied ways in the research literature. Hagar et al. (2024), who looked at 70 studies on the factors affecting people taking action for social justice, described it as: “equitable access to resources, protection of human rights, equitable outcomes, and participation in decision-making processes for individuals and groups who are marginalised due to identity (e.g., gender, sexual orientation) and/or structural oppression (e.g., poverty, racism)” (p. 192). They argue that social justice actions “can include . . . leadership practices, community development, community organizing, coalition development . . . empowerment . . . critical education, development of critical perspectives, and personal expression” (p. 192). Students who participate in intercultural social justice actions accrue benefits including “improving social, emotional, and cultural competence among youth; prejudice reduction; and the creation of equitable educational spaces informed in multicultural and social justice worldviews” (Pica-Smith & Poynton, 2015, p. 82).

Kelaher et al. (2018) found that students with minority group ethnicities experienced greater improvements in their sense of autonomy, therefore ameliorating some of the individual impacts of racism. However, these benefits are contingent on the implementation of comprehensive evidence-based programmes rather than approaches such as multicultural days sharing different foods that have been characterised in the literature as “lazy multiculturalism” (Watkins & Noble, 2019), “holidays and heroes”, and “spring rolls in the tuck shop” (Keddie, 2012).

Such approaches have been criticised as counter-productive for their potential to reproduce stereotypes by ignoring intra-community complexity (Keddie, 2012) and failing to acknowledge or challenge racism (Watkins & Noble, 2019). Hancock et al. (2021, p. 7) note that they may also do more harm than good because they serve to reinforce stereotypes that privileged students may already hold about marginalised communities having “no socioeconomic capital” and needing to be “saved” (p. 7). Such top-down action projects presume to know what challenges a community is facing, what they need to meet those challenges, and how to measure success.

2.1. Factors Which Facilitate and Hinder Involvement

Factors which can facilitate intercultural interaction include the involvement of the whole school and interventions which take into account students’ skill and the school’s racial demographics (Greco et al., 2010).

MacIntosh et al.’s (2020) college student athlete study looked at the factors influencing them to engage in social justice action. Apart from marginalised groups being more likely to act, they found that people who had positive attitudes toward the action, who believed that others also viewed it positively, and who had confidence in their ability to perform it and high intentions of doing so were more likely to undertake it.

Hagar et al. (2024) also identified factors which made it more likely that people would engage in social justice action. These include the following: increased knowledge and awareness of structural injustice and positionality; personal exposure to injustice—own or observed; affective or emotional reactions to the exposure; pro-social justice attitudes, beliefs, and/or values; identity salience of a social identity, social issue, or action identity;

critical reflection, interpretation, and meaning-making, both individually and through discussion with others; motivation and commitment to action; interpersonal and/or community support for action; practical, logistical, and/or contextual support for action; and opportunity to practice and develop skills to increase self-efficacy and outcome expectations.

The factors that Hagar et al. (2024) found inhibited individuals from taking social justice action were attitudes that run counter to social justice, perceived lack of outcomes/impact, lack of external resources (e.g., support, training, opportunity), and organisational or structural issues. Personal hinderances included personal change and adjustment, indecision, fear, feeling overwhelmed or uncomfortable, strain on relationships, and issues related to time, money, transportation, energy, and competing commitments. However, they argue that facilitating factors are interactive, with the presence of one or more not necessarily leading to action. Further, many factors assume an individual has contact with a broader social network. They conclude that the process of taking social justice action is “a dynamic and interactive process that occurs in relationship rather than in isolation” (p. 213).

2.2. Best Practice

One of the most widely acknowledged methods of encouraging social justice actions, as in developing ICU capacities, is through the building of authentic, high quality, intersectional relationships which challenge prejudice (Broido & Reason, 2005; Palmer et al., 2017; Walton et al., 2013).

Schools are settings in which culturally diverse groups naturally come together, although the degree to which this occurs varies widely with geography and between public, Catholic, and independent schools (Ho, 2011). Intergroup contact, which can occur within a school or between schools with diverse populations, has been found to reduce bias, the effects of which “typically generalize to the entire outgroup” (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, p. 751).

The literature, based on Allport’s (1954) theory of intergroup contact, discusses the need for it to occur under four optimal conditions. These conditions are equality between groups, shared goals, working co-operatively, and authoritative support (Walton et al., 2015, p. 218). In learning personal information about others through this contact, prejudices are said to be challenged by a recognition of common humanity.

However, Ho (2011, p. 617) argues that interventions to encourage ICU in schools need not aim to create a sense of “harmony” that erases difference; rather, robust micropublics can include tensions and conflict without fragmenting. Conflict and hostility can coexist with a mutual recognition of and respect for the other’s legitimate presence in a shared social space.

The recognition of the potential for conflict is important given that contact between groups has also been found in some circumstances to exacerbate prejudice (Jung, 2012; Müller, 2012). Müller (2012, p. 434) argues that Dutch programmes based on intergroup contact theory were designed in a way which placed the burden of proving their common humanity to the prejudiced White majority on minority groups. She also argues that a lack of attention to structural inequality limits the potential for transformative change: juxtaposing superficial difference with deeper equality and sameness can also be seen to exclude the possibility of any real or consequential differences between groups. More importantly, it also denies the possibility of any real conflicts of interest between different groups. Müller (2012, p. 428) argues that people who benefit from inequality can simultaneously hold “deep-seated commitments to in-group privilege” alongside “superficial positive attitudes about certain aspects of subordinate groups”.

Using the examples of black and evangelical Protestants, Jung (2012, p. 116) argues that for people whose social identity is strongly tied to a particular group, contact with those of other faiths, such as Muslims, “may reinforce commitment to their own belief system and aversion to other groups.” He argues that this is particularly the case when “groups are competitively interdependent and their relation is a win-lose, zero-sum competitive one [and] actions that bring about positive outcomes for one group generate negative consequences for the other” (p. 124).

The framework that McCandless et al. (2022) use to evaluate ICU interventions acknowledges the potential for both conflict and superficial engagement. They assess programmes based on their conception of cultural others as neighbours or strangers and the actions taken as superficial or transformative. They urge aspiration to an orientation of neighbours working jointly on transformative action. As an example, they describe TFH’s Difference Differently program, which includes modules aligned with the Australian curriculum aimed at teachers, students, and the general public (Walton et al., 2015). They endorse the inclusion of material that addresses issues facing cultural minority groups and challenges stereotypes of them. They also support the programme’s provision of face-to-face workshops and its co-ordination of interactions between diverse school communities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The authors are researchers from Western Sydney University (WSU) and were engaged by TFH as an independent evaluation team. We drew data for the case study from the broader study using mixed methods pre-and post-programme delivery of the “Intercultural Understanding Partnership” programmes, which assessed ICUP school-based initiatives resourced by TFH. We used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of a small, diverse cohort. IPA qualitative methodology focuses on examining individual meaning-making and lived experience well-suited to small, purposive samples as it facilitates exploration of how people make sense of complex experiences within their social worlds. Drawing on Smith et al. (2022), IPA’s phenomenological and hermeneutic focus enabled the researchers to consider participants’ own meaning-making while also interpreting how group dynamics, power, and context shaped participants’ shared and divergent accounts of going On Country. This phenomenological evaluation examined a sample case from the broader research, through the perspectives of participants, focusing on how their social action project addressed issues of ICU and discrimination.

3.2. Recruitment and Sampling

Schools from NSW, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, and Victoria participated in TFH ICUPs. At the time, TFH funded 26 grants with 29 schools involved in the broader study. Participation was voluntary, drawn from a sample of these schools, and was not conditional on the schools receiving funding. Nine schools were invited to participate in the independent evaluation and agreed; however, one of these schools closed before the evaluation was completed.

3.3. Case Study

Developing a case study from the broader study dataset involved selecting one cohort for in-depth analysis (Yin, 2014), allowing for a nuanced understanding of the case (Greenhalgh, 2025). Through detailed examination, case studies highlight underlying patterns and contextual factors that may be generalised theoretically rather than statistically, contributing unique insights to the current knowledge base. This method offers methodological flexibility and practical relevance, making it suitable for applied research seeking

to understand complex issues holistically (Hyett et al., 2014). Within this context, a case study was selected to provide a detailed examination of the dynamics of this intersectional social change initiative of going On Country. This initiative involved an intersectional collaboration of Indigenous Australian and Yazidi students and their families as well as school staff including the Indigenous Education officer. Twenty Yazidi students and families and twenty Indigenous Australian students and families, i.e., 40 people, attended. It was designed as an initial event, with the explicit intention of it recurring three to four times annually.

3.4. Case Study Setting

A public school in Northern, NSW, with nearly half the student cohort identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander positions the school significantly above the state average for Indigenous student enrolment in NSW public schools. The 35% EAL/D figure indicates high multicultural representation, aligned with regional community diversity: see Table 1 for school demographics. Student background data in the MySchool dataset (ACARA) situate the school within a lower-to-mid socio-educational advantage (ICSEA) band, reflecting its focus on equity and inclusive teaching practices (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2024).

Table 1. School demographics.

Category	Data Summary
Total Enrolment	Approximately 186–216 students
School Type	Government, coeducational, kindergarten to year 6
Location	Northern NSW; classified inner regional
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students	48% of total enrolment
Students with English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D)	35%, representing 10 different countries of origin

3.5. Focus Group Participants

The case study explored the experiences of a sample of six students and of three teachers from one school who had participated in the On Country programme; see Table 2 for participant demographics. Drawing on their reflections on the meanings they drew from their experiences and to reflect on what they had learned, both participant groups were asked whether, and how, the program fostered valuing and respect for difference, a sense of belonging, and inclusive relationships. Participants were also asked to reflect on ways the programmes supported children and adults to develop critical and creative thinking about diversity and social inclusion in their school communities.

Table 2. Participant demographics.

Demographics	Teachers (n = 3)	Students (n = 6)
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	Yes (1), No (2)	Yes (3), No (3)
Age Range (years)	25–34 (1) 45–54 (1) 55+ (1)	11–12 (6)
Birthplace	Australia (3), Overseas (0)	Australia (3), Overseas (3)
Employment Status at Current School	Full-time (2), Part-time (1)	—
Faith or Religion	Christian (1), No religion (2)	Yazidi (3), No religion (3)
Gender	Female (1), Male (2)	Female (6)
Language Other than English Spoken at Home	Yes (1), No (2)	Yes (4), No (2)
Time Employed at Current School	1–3 years (2), 8–15 years (1)	—
Year at school	—	Year 5–6 (6)

3.6. Data Collection

Focus groups are a valuable qualitative method for gathering interactive data from both children and adults. For children, focus groups provide a supportive, conversational space that encourages participation through peer interaction and helps researchers access their authentic views, emotions, and social understandings in safe, age-appropriate ways (Breen, 2006). For adult participants, such as teachers, focus groups facilitate reflective dialogue about professional experiences and shared challenges. They allow participants to build on each other's perspectives and insights that might not surface through individual interviews (Salkind, 2017). Guest et al. (2013) argue that focus groups excel for small, hard-to-reach intersectional groups (e.g., Indigenous and migrant students) by leveraging collective sensemaking. Participants co-construct nuanced insights on overlapping oppressions. Evidence from qualitative health research shows that focus groups yield rich thematic saturation with 6–10 participants, avoiding over-recruitment strain on vulnerable cohorts.

Both focus groups were conducted online via Zoom due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions on in-person meetings at schools. Participants joined from a suitable room at their school, and researchers spent time at the outset building rapport and orienting them to the interview protocol. Each focus group took approximately one hour.

3.7. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is used to understand how the participants interpret and make meaning within their social and environmental contexts (Naeem & Ozuem, 2023) and is well-suited to small, purposive samples (Polkinghorne, 1989). According to Polkinghorne (1989), IPA research traditionally involves between five and ten participants who have encountered similar phenomena to capture commonalities in experience. Thematic analysis provides an inductive framework for shared meanings and contextual differences among participants, supporting rigorous examination of programme efficacy within qualitative evaluations (Flick, 2020). This involved identifying themes, patterns, categories, and case examples through detailed examination of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework was used to analyse the data. This involved an iterative process of data familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Data source triangulation, using pre- and post-focus groups with students and teachers, enhanced the comprehensiveness of the evaluation.

3.8. Ethical Considerations and Consent

Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics and NSW SERAP Department of Education Ethics Committees granted ethics approval for this evaluation. Before participating in focus groups, all participants were required to sign a consent/assent form after reading or being read the participant information sheet. The consent/assent form outlined the activities involved, the expected time commitment, the confidentiality agreement, and the opportunity to withdraw at any time. Students were supported by a parent or guardian who also signed the consent form after discussion with the participant.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Building an Intersectional Coalition

Children and young people want to make a difference in their communities and society but their opportunities to create positive social change through social action, Wimborne (2020) observes, are limited. In this initiative, Indigenous Australian and newly arrived Yazidi students developed cross-cultural friendships within their school and extended these into personal domains. We first asked what enabled the student's friendships to develop

into something more, i.e., into the intersectional, collaborative, social justice initiative of going On Country. The school's Indigenous Educator reflected: "You know what kids are like, they make plans without consulting the parents. When I'm seeing that they want to bring kids from different culture and backgrounds to my house, there's something working there. There's relationships".

The Indigenous Educator observes that this intersectional, cross-cultural initiative of going On Country began with the primary school children. In initiating relationships and forming their own friendships, children made their own assessments and choices separate to adults. From the outset, the student's need and quest for genuine relationships and connection drove their effective agency irrespective of socio-cultural divides. This need and agency operated together with the school children's willingness to explore and accept and welcome newness and difference regardless of social differences that would be likely to influence adults. Grassroots action by the school students was the starting point of what became an intersectional coalition—it was not "top-down" from those with traditional power and influence in the established social hierarchy but arose "from below".

The school adopted an active listening approach. It enabled safe inclusive spaces which supported students to express themselves, giving them an audience with those in positions of power, then allowed their perspectives to shape outcomes (Lundy, 2007). This recognition generated what students and their school together envisioned: a cross-cultural, going On Country initiative, which they co-developed via what became an intersectional coalition for social change.

This required resources. Funding presents a major barrier to the scaling-up potential of social change initiatives, particularly for children and youth who are often seen as "inexperienced" and less capable than adults (O'Flynn et al., 2021). This may be seen as ironic, not just in terms of children's networks that adults can underrate, but in terms of children's connectivity as digital natives and inheritors of the world, the challenges of which many may already know they will need to take responsibility for.

Moreover, for many children, ageism aggravates experiences of systemic discrimination, for example, based on culture and/or ethnicity (O'Flynn et al., 2021). Consequently, for children with lived experience of racism, colonialism, and other forms of injustice to engage in and take active roles in social change actions, they must tackle the hurdles of multiple intersecting oppressions (Alma Economics, 2021).

The school addressed the shared challenges of funding and "scaling-up" by connecting with TFH, which provided necessary funding resources and structural support. It thereby enabled capacity building with the students and their communities creating avenues for their engagement in social change actions (Wimborne, 2020). The Indigenous Educator observed:

The TFH ICUP gives us more structure on things that we can layout. I think it's just gone to another level. There's more conversation, it's more in your face, it's more out there. I think that ICUP program has set the scene for a lot of that conversation to happen. Rather than just a classroom discussion, it's a whole-school approach.

A "whole-school" approach underpinned the going On Country initiative. Particularly with primary school students, teachers are crucial in guiding and scaffolding social change action processes (Wimborne, 2020). The school's partnership with TFH promoted ongoing conversations about the school community's cultural diversity and strongly endorsed students leading the process of learning from one another's cultures. A teacher describes the whole-school activities undertaken:

We've learned about different cultures in the school through their flags. We've done 'stories from home' where some of the kids and I have been putting it onto Book Creator and making that available to the classes. We've had TFH (intercultural understanding) professional learning for teachers. We had 'creating chances' sports interaction. That went for one year.

Supportive families are also crucial, as children's involvement not only depends on family support but supportive families also reinforce intercultural values at home, creating consistency across contexts and strengthening children's confidence and trust in navigating intersectional identities. Families and friends participating alongside children in the transmission of cultural knowledge and values strengthen intersectional collective capacity for change (Gerzon-Kessler, 2024).

However, activist spaces are not "hermetically sealed"; oppressive relationships and practices from colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal frames can emerge and continue to circulate (Gorski & Erakat, 2019). Students and their families are situated within these broader structural frames and may express them in intercultural contexts. The Indigenous Educator explained how one parent voiced "stereotypical fears" about the Yazidi community: "I challenged him. I said, 'Do you know any Yazidi person? Have you ever sat down and had a conversation with a Yazidi person? These are the guys escaping the bombings and shootings'". He dealt with this challenge through an open-ended conversation in which he suggested that the Indigenous and Yazidi students and families might have much to share, while promoting the school's growing intersectional culture and its potential for change via work with younger generations: "in my role I can actually get out and have one-on-one yarns with families and parents. We work with the kids. . .it's the school culture we've created".

Through these processes and sometimes robust exchanges, an intersectional, intergenerational coalition built the going On Country initiative. The coalition initiative comprised Yazidi and Indigenous students, their families, two teachers, the Indigenous Educator from the Anaiwan Nation, and TFH. This coalition centred the viewpoints and experiences of those most impacted by intersecting inequalities, the Indigenous and Yazidi students and their families, whose voices, often marginalised in institutional and wider community contexts, were prioritised. Such an approach, Moskal and Chu (2023) point out, addresses hierarchical power structures by involving multiple young people and adults collectively and democratically in change efforts. Drawing on intersectional notions of power sharing and recognition of lived experience, the initiative was based in establishing an enabling environment that recognised the significance of land for both Indigenous Australians and Yazidi people as a site of meaning and strengths (see further below) (Cuevas-Parra, 2023; Lundy, 2007).

4.2. Intersectionality on Country: Belonging and Reciprocity Across Generations and Cultures

"The exchange of language, food and dancing was wonderful and all amongst the granite boulders, stringy barks and peppermint gums". (Teacher)

Participants from the Anaiwan Nation, custodians of the land in this area of NSW, Welcomed the Yazidi students and their families to Country. This Welcome provided a context of legitimacy, connection, inclusion, and recognition of difference, while also situating the Yazidis as belonging in this shared space of Country (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2022). Reflecting on the meaning of this, one Indigenous student said: "The Yazidi girls said that they felt really welcome when we done the Welcome to Country out there and the smoking ceremony. And for us, when you get Welcomed, you belong".

The traditional custodians shared the cultural significance of the smoking ceremony with the Yazidis, including its meaning and practice as a form of spiritual protection. An Indigenous student explained, “the smoking ceremony is to blow away bad spirits, then we sing a song-they will go, they are not welcome in the camp”, and another reflected on its collective nature: “everybody joined in the smoking ceremony, we all walked around the fire”. The On Country space is thus made safe and inclusive, promoting openness and providing opportunity for Yazidi and Indigenous students and adults to share their experiences and perspectives (Cuevas-Parra, 2023; Lundy, 2007).

Each group displayed their flags On Country. A teacher observed, “each explained their flags. There was discussion about how similar they were with a sun in the centre.” As well as recognising this connection in likeness, students also appreciated the reciprocity; as one Indigenous student noted, “the Yazidi people talked about what their flag represented”.

The students underscored the fun they had informally, playing games and building relationships in ways that nurtured social inclusion. An Indigenous student explained: “And then we did some Yazidi dance, and we ate some Yazidi food. And we made some things together”.

A highlight of the shared games, which they enjoyed, was cray-bobbing, an attempt to catch crayfish in the creek. A Yazidi student shared: “We had some string and some yabby (bait) and were putting it in the water and we didn’t get anything because it was winter”.

Though no crayfish were caught, this activity became a collective experience. A teacher reported: “The kids revelled in the bush environment. The bush walk to the creek for yabbies was very special. They (the kids) helped bring the adults together and be active in the experience”.

The exchange between the Yazidi and Indigenous people was not unidirectional but reciprocal: both communities contributed and learned from one another. The Indigenous Educator reflected:

They brought food, we brought food, they danced, we danced. So we were just passing this knowledge back to each other. I think I’ve become so much richer in cultural understanding, particularly from the Yazidi mob’s point of view. It’s opened up my mind and my heart to another level of understanding and appreciation.

Food shared around the campfire symbolised both cultural distinctiveness and mutuality, and was central to reciprocity, as one teacher commented: “black fella’s stew on the fire” was exchanged with “dolmades and biryani”. The teacher further observed:

Both groups were keen to communicate with each other. The beautiful aunties made such an effort to talk and bring the shy Yazidi women into the circle, while the Yazidis brought food, and lots of it, as their way of showing appreciation of the Anaiwan hospitality. The kids spoke Yazidi and Aboriginal and were a great help in encouraging everyone to speak.

Intersectional forms of learning occurred, with children and adults engaging collaboratively across culture and language, including learning words from each other’s languages. The Indigenous Educator recounted:

With the Yazidi kids, now if I teach them the Anaiwan language, they want to teach me the Yazidi words for certain things. So there’s a real bounce off. I’m really glad to be part of this TFH ICUP because it’s putting the talk into action and I can see that with the daily interaction with kids. And them greeting and speaking my language that hasn’t been spoken here for a long time. It’s very uplifting and empowering.

The connections formed, across cultures, reflect a deep understanding of shared humanity. An Indigenous student reflected:

There were some Yazidi girls in my class. . . we would play with them, with soccer. They sat with me at lunch and talked about stuff and used our words. . . when I came to school I made a friend. And that was H (Yazidi) and we always are friends. And me and H will be friends even if we are in different classrooms, different high schools.

The student's empathy toward peers and their commitment to sustaining friendships across classrooms and schools is illustrative of how intersectional awareness promoted inclusive relationships.

In sum, the immediate receptive environment that made this coalition for participatory social change possible (Lundy, 2007) included the following known elements: the school's adoption of and commitment to an active, genuine listening approach around developing intersectionality; the leadership of people like the Indigenous Educator and involved teachers to hear and support what was at the heart of the children's bridge-building; school support of students' initiatives to develop an intersectional culture via tangible symbols and flexible and multimedia digital methods. Additionally, there was TFH's support of the school's educators in the resources it provided; student's supportive families—their willingness to listen and engage with ICU, to uphold its values at home, and to embrace rather than avoid intergenerational learning; and firstly and finally the students who inspired the going On Country social change initiative and sustained it.

The children's agency is seen in the examples above, and in their connecting adults from Indigenous and Yazidi communities, as adults acknowledged. In the Lundy framework, augmented by Cuevas-Parra, "space" and "voice" act as prerequisites for "audience" and "influence" (Cuevas-Parra, 2023). However, one of Cuevas-Parra's (2023) revisions of Lundy's framework is to prevent child protection eclipsing children's empowerment and decision-making. Cuevas-Parra uses the concept of "agency" more prominently rather than the term "voice", highlighting children as lively social actors engaging in transformative actions within their communities. While "voice" is important to children's participation, Cuevas-Parra (2023) focuses on "agency" to capture a broader, more dynamic understanding of children's intersectional participation. The present initiative corresponds with that, in that the student's agency preceded their being accorded space and voice.

4.3. Stories on Country of Intersecting Oppressions, and Responses of Solidarity

Going On Country created space around the campfire where both groups shared their experiences of racism, genocide, colonialism, and forced displacement. Their sharing also highlighted their communal strengths. One student noted, "we have a lot of shared experiences", revealing students' capacity to build bridges across differences. A teacher reflected on the significance of this sharing:

This was an incredibly special event. It was remarkable just how many stories and experiences these two cultural groups have in common. Both experienced violence, genocide and dispossession at the hands of colonisers or aggressors. This was something that both groups were keen to communicate.

Each group's particular social justice concerns illustrate the interconnected nature of oppressions (Crenshaw, 1989). Both experienced having family members stolen: Yazidis by ISIS, Indigenous Australian children through the Stolen Generations. The students recounted systemic losses of family and community through genocide and forced removal: they revealed their awareness of how systemic factors such as racism, colonialism, and war impact lives. A Yazidi student shared: "I will always remember my dad and my sister. Because they are not here, they are still with ISIS because they got kidnapped and we still don't know what happened to them."

Relaying their experiences deepens insights through comparison and recognition of shared pain through trauma, grief, complicated loss, and uncertainty. In this safe space, Yazidi and Indigenous families and students experience solidarity in expressing, processing, and taking charge of their narratives. Fraser (1990) describes such spaces as “subaltern counterpublics” where social groups, with experiences of marginalisation in the public sphere, can come together and develop counter-discourses which resist dominant hegemonic constructions. Such sharing through storytelling and dialogue promotes and foreshadows an intersectional approach to wider social change. As the Indigenous Educator explained:

I want other people to be educated—those who aren’t that much aware of their story (Yazidi) and where they’ve come from and what they’ve had to go through and endure to come to our country and start a new life. Just teach the kids being kind. Create good people for our community at the end of the day.

Both groups know how systemic oppression inhibits well-being and racism negatively impacts youth outcomes (Moskal & Chu, 2023). Stoecklin reminds us that children and young people’s right to be heard enables them to actively realise their other rights (Stoecklin, 2019). Bringing Indigenous and Yazidi families together for the going On Country initiative supports not only a more comprehensive understanding of shared stories of belonging, oppression, and struggle but also promotes more inclusive and effective responses (CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, 2023): it counters isolation and systemic exclusion. Hence, a teacher commented: “I witnessed the beginnings of genuine understanding, empathy, and the formation of a strong connection between them (the Yazidi and Indigenous families and students)”.

Students’ reflections on their time together On Country also highlighted the growth of intersectional solidarity. One Yazidi student stated: “It doesn’t matter what colour people’s skin is or their cultures or their food or anything, it’s just that they are kind to you and that’s all that matters”. Another Yazidi student observed:

Some people just accept people, like where you come from not just your colour. But some people don’t care and they think where you come from and your skin colour is different. We should be friends with other people... they are just the same but (have) different languages.

The students revealed intercultural empathy. As one Indigenous student noted, “everyone makes fun of (Ixxx), but we still make her feel comfortable and tell her not to feel sad” (Ixxx is an African refugee). Students’ empathy toward peers, and their commitment to sustaining friendships across cultures, reflect an understanding of, and response to, shared humanity.

Both group’s experiences and shared realities of genocide, displacement, and systemic racism are intertwined with and imprinted by overlapping identities and social locations such as ethnicity, culture, refugee status, and Indigenous heritage (Crenshaw, 1989; Cuevas-Parra, 2023). These intersections, often sources of oppression, can also create opportunities for solidarity. In a safe space for sharing there are healing possibilities. Going On Country revealed how experiences, shared and communicated, can become a foundation for intersectional solidarity and social change actions (Cuevas-Parra, 2023).

Networking itself can be viewed as social change action. Intersectionality enacted through networking becomes a living practice that structures everyday relationships and collective acts, exemplifying what Abhayawickrama et al. (2024, p. 26) call “bold intersectionality”: where people with overlapping experiences of marginalisation take leading roles and assert the value of their cultural world views. Foregrounding their intersectional (including intergenerational) connectedness and solidarity thereby challenges individualistic, neoliberal, and Western orientations and resists marginalisation (Abhayawickrama et al.,

2024). Yazidi and Indigenous families and students engaged in sharing and generating knowledge of cultures, histories, cultural renewal, and shared concerns. This produces understandings that challenge racial injustice, colonisation, and systemic exclusion and promotes alternate ways of living (Abhayawickrama et al., 2024). Within these networks, Indigenous and Yazidi students took leading roles; they embodied intersectionality in practice. The Indigenous Educator observed: “My daughter’s got about six Yazidi friends, that probably would not have happened if she hadn’t been involved in the Intercultural Understanding Partnership. (There is) the relationship between parents that I see”.

Again, as noted above, the students’ recognition of common humanity was stronger than any social divisions that might be operating. Their innate keenness to bridge such barriers meant that what they saw and discerned was their group equality (not just individual) via their shared experience, and the parity of their experience of inequality.

The process of exchange is both a means and a goal in this social change action, reflecting how the boundaries between issues and the methods to address them can be blurred (CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, 2023). The formation of such networks promotes intersectional, cross-cultural collaboration, creating pathways for engagement, pooling resources, diminishing pressures, as well as helping sustain momentum and building critical consciousness for change (CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, 2023; Lardier et al., 2019).

4.4. What Next? Sustaining Intercultural Initiatives Through Intersectionality

The second day the kids didn’t want to leave, they were talking about “can we get some tents and stay and camp the night”. (In the school) we have a bronze, a silver, a gold and platinum awards. If anyone achieves a platinum award they normally go to a movie or have pizza or ice cream or something really nice. But the kids have made a choice whoever gets it now will go out On Country. And the kids are literally trying to bust their guts to get a platinum so they can be part of the day. (Indigenous Educator)

Intersectional, intercultural connectedness along with connection to land has therefore become the students’ most prized award. The Indigenous Educator connected this to a long-term plan to take cultural groups On Country, as an ICU and education space:

there are definitely plans of having more of those days out (On Country). . . for those that don’t know, it’s a block of land that we actually fundraised and bought back for ourselves. It’s a bit ironic that we’ve got to do that to buy our own land back. . . (we want) to take a lot of people out there, non-Aboriginal people, to teach our local language, the culture, the local history. School is a great environment to do that. Get them out On Country, around a campfire and have some really deep meaningful conversations without hatred and without racism.

The Indigenous Educator’s comment of having to buy (stolen) land back here alludes to the whole history of colonisation, yet while remembering that, he graciously holds out the hope of “really deep meaningful conversations without hatred and without racism”.

Indigenous Australians’ understandings of kinship, belonging, reciprocity, and Country are the deep currents that guide going On Country social change actions, and their timeless and universal respect underwrites sustainability. As the Indigenous Educator explained:

Kinship is people, it’s land, it’s river, it’s creek, it’s everything that exists. . . that’s a big conversation with our people. When you are welcomed you become part of that. With culture we love everything on our country, if we love it, it will love us back. If we respect it, it will respect us back. A message I try to give the kids (is) you are no higher than or no better than anyone else, and vice versa. Those values have been sustained in this country, over 60,000 years. Whether the

kids are Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, it's about treating each other as equal and respecting each other.

Yazidis are not just welcomed as visitors—they belong, they call or are planning to call this land “home”—yet in doing so they remain paradoxically in exile from their homeland. This raises the question—what does it mean to have lost Country/country?—in the one instance to be restored to it, and in the other, to be permanently separated from it. Processes of loss, grief, restoration, adoption, and belonging are at work here which very deeply link these groups. The Indigenous Educator continues: “Whether the kids are Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, it's about treating each other as equal and respecting each other”.

Yazidi students experienced this inclusion: “We talked about how similar our things were,” one reflected, highlighting recognition of shared perspectives and understandings across difference. Another stated that what she remembered most from going On Country was ““when Fxxx (Yazidi interpreter) said that they treat us as family””.

Intersectional exchange also promotes sustainability when diverse cultural knowledge and practices are embedded in ongoing community relationships beyond school. For example, Indigenous and Yazidi students described learning from each other's languages and traditions. One Indigenous student said, “I talk to the Yazidis and ask how to say different stuff in their language and use their language, you can find about that by asking them. . .and they ask about ours”.

The Indigenous educator explained how this extends across community spaces and is now part of everyday lived experience: “I see that roll out in the community, at sporting events on weekends. . . it goes beyond the school environment.”

Sustainability is also supported through the continuity of ICU and respect across school transitions and cohorts. One teacher described how older Yazidi and Indigenous students mentor younger ones through the after-hours sporting programmes, providing “familiar faces” as they move into high school. Teachers explicitly linked this to combatting anti-racism and discrimination. One stated, “If we can make them good mates, appreciate each other and respect each other here at primary school, when they go to the big school. . . if racism raises its head, they'll stand up for each other and say, ‘this is my friend.’”

Finally, the TFH-ICU partnership also promotes sustainability through adopting a “whole-of-school approach” which aims to embed ICU within school culture. Examples include the following: classes exploring diverse students' cultures weekly through a flag roster; “stories from home” created and shared; teachers undertaking TFH professional learning about ICU; the school bringing diverse cultural groups together via the “creating chances” sports initiative; and families being regularly invited to school bar-b-ques and breakfasts. These all aim to ensure that ICU is woven through the school's fabric and so becomes self-sustaining. As the Indigenous Educator observed, “it's the school culture that we've created”.

Sustainability is understood not only as the continuation of going On Country events or other ICUP initiatives but also as social practices embedded in everyday relationships and actions so that the roots of intersectional ICU are carried forward.

5. Conclusions

This case study shows how systemic changes happen through intersectional social inclusion. Students in partnership with adults promoted a culture of social inclusion within the school community which has extended into the wider community. Subverting society's traditional intercultural barriers, they challenged traditional assumptions about what civil society is. They changed how civil society looks, becoming its new faces, while expanding the very idea of civil society and how it works. Moreover, the intersectionality described above drives the potential sustainability of those systemic social changes.

Organisations like TFH, grounded in the principles of promoting ICU to eliminate racism and prejudice, are critical to supporting the Yazidi and Aboriginal students and their school community in their ICU change initiatives to strengthen intercultural connections and to establish solidarity and widened social networks. TFH's education for intercultural understanding emerges as a form of social change action.

The social change action here takes place On Country. What this research shows is intersectionality creating a living way of being and relating that enables ICU and promotes connectedness, respect, reciprocity, and honouring of diverse cultures and shared knowledges. On Country, both these groups belong and find belonging with each other. Building such solidarity On Country leads to changing the face of the community and shows signs that point towards sustainability.

The systemic changes achieved through this TFH–ICU intersectional partnership, which foreground connectedness and solidarity, also challenge individualistic and racist cultural narratives and practices.

A limitation of this research is that although the spontaneous feedback from students was positive, the number of students interviewed was small, and there was a lack of systematic inclusion of all participating children's perspectives.

Nevertheless, the findings provide insight into the importance of providing students with opportunities for direct civic engagement and fostering a sense of belongingness to facilitate ethnic group identity, critical awareness, and sociopolitical agency. Constructing the students as social and political participants allows the realisation that they are capable of social change agency when given the opportunity. They are not confined to the opportunities that adults provide them, nor are they limited to "voice" or to words alone, using the formats that are potentially more comfortable to adults. While needing support, the primary school students also retained "agency" as well as being self-directing actors who use many methods and modalities to initiate and transmit ICU and empathy, to embody their intersectional participation, and to demonstrate that they are intersectional social change agents.

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Notes

- ¹ Anaiwan people are the traditional custodians of the land in this area of regional NSW.
- ² Note: Variants of spelling include Yazidi, Yezidi, or Ezdayi. The term Yazidi is widely used in the academic literature and we follow this convention (see [Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2022](#)).

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