

Good day Ms King, Deputy Headmistresses, staff of St Mary's School, parents, and students.

The purpose of this email is to address the discrimination, lack of support and general issues experienced by the students at St Mary's School Waverley in the past and currently. This email is by no means an attack on the institution but criticisms observed and an invitation for self-reflection, learning and engagement. After you have read this email, I am open to having a conversation to further explore these issues at St Mary's.

I acknowledge and appreciate the school's statement and support on Black Lives Matter. However this is not enough. I also appreciate the efforts made by the Diversity Committee, GIRLS Committee, SRC Committee and the LGBTQ Committee in educating and facilitating uncomfortable conversations. Again, this is not enough. While I commend the resources and avenues made available by the school to further combat issues of prejudice, I believe it is equally important to address the areas in which the school has and still continues to struggle and perpetuate stereotypes and silence students. The examples used in this email are all true stories submitted by past and current students as well as ones I have personally borne witness to during my five years at St Mary's. The fact that students, such as myself and others only stood up and openly talked about these issues now, whether publicly or anonymously demonstrates the silencing and targeting of students while they are still within the school. This silencing and fear of speaking up may be as a result of the school's inaction and protection of racism, homophobia and more which we as students of often marginalised groups witnessed first-hand.

The first issue I would like to address is the racism prevalent within the institution - especially through microaggressions and implied statements. Microaggressions are the "subtle, stunning, often automatic and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of Black people" (Dr Chester Pierce, a Harvard Professor and psychiatrist, 1970). Microaggressions are evident in many aspects of St Mary's life and an unfortunate part of the school life of students of colour. It is important to understand that racism does not have to be covert to be harmful and many of the small "offhand" statements students experienced from both their peers as well as staff have resulted in long-lasting emotional and psychological scars.

A manifestation of these microaggressions and the subtle perpetuation of a white, heteronormative culture at St Mary's (despite the school website stating that pupils are "encouraged to embrace their individuality, and to be open, friendly and confident.") is in stating that the black students in the school are too loud or animated (while their white peers who express similar behaviour are viewed as outgoing and bubbly). Another example is of students of colour not being allowed to wear bracelets with significant cultural meaning, often being reprimanded by staff. This perpetuates the idea that black students and non-black students of colour must assimilate to white culture and leave their culture behind. Furthermore the ascription of intelligence to young black and non-black students presents itself as a significant offense often heard. This is seen when white students and teachers make statements such as "you are so articulate" and "you speak English very well". This sends a message to young non-white children that they are generally not as intelligent as white people and that their ability to manoeuvre language is seen as

extraordinary. While many say this with the intention of complimenting the recipient, it instead comes across as a very thinly-veiled insult. Furthermore, assumptions that a black girl was a boarder, did IsiZulu or was in need of charity were all patronising and hurtful, with these assumptions acting as verbal confirmation of the implicit biases that people hold. When a member of staff says “oh so *you* have money?” as a response to a black student wanting to order food, while the same question was not imposed to her much lighter-skinned counterpart, it is not only a hurtful attack to the student but also a bigger stance on trying to diminish a black student's place in the school, based on the assumed economic status of the child. It is arguable that microaggressions faced at the hands of a member of staff are even worse than those perpetrated by one's peers as students fear retribution in the form of treatment in classrooms or stricter marking or should they find the courage to speak up to another trusted member of staff as suggested in the school's “Confidante of Choice” policy, they are oftentimes written off and the incident is dismissed as “just the way they (the member of staff) are” or “it isn't that serious.” This has detrimental effects on the psyche of a young student as it demonstrates to them that a person's racism can be excused as they just “being” that way (as if racism cannot be unlearned and they will have to resign themselves to this fact) as well as gaslighting the student, resulting in them constantly questioning themselves and their valid experiences.

Moving onto the code of conduct which states that “St Mary's School aims to provide a safe, secure and supportive environment where individuals empathise with each other and offer each other support” , I find this statement to be largely contradictory to the experiences of past and present pupils. When black students stood up and shared their experiences of racism and their feelings, they were often deemed as “angry”, “aggressive” and “confrontational” regardless of their delivery of such (not that this should have any bearing). Black students who spoke up about the injustices they faced within the school were treated as bullies, and the calling out of racism has been equated to the act of bullying. This is not acceptable. It has also been stated that in classes such as LO, topics such as racism are no longer discussed. When black students come out about stories or incidents of racism, believe them. They have no reason to lie, and the perpetrators should be dealt with immediately. An apology is no longer enough. The school being neutral in these instances is in fact an act of siding with the perpetrators and not supporting the victims. Students need to be taught about why what they said was wrong not only by the victims, but supported and amplified by the teachers as well. Students are afraid to speak up about these injustices, which is why we wanted to hold our focus groups without the teachers, and rather amongst ourselves. Not enough teachers supported us when we spoke about these issues. We were silenced, patronised and framed as being aggressive and bullies.

Racial issues are also seen in the sports sphere especially in white dominated sports such as rowing, water polo or swimming. In the instance of the Rowing Club for example, it is seemingly apparent that coaches neglect black athletes or otherwise undermine their skill. The black parents in these spaces are often viewed as not being as invested in the sport as their counterpart stay at home white parents. This is true in most of the sporting spaces in the institution.

The double standards when it came to discipline were also evident. If a white student did something against the rules versus if a black student did the same thing, we

knew that the discipline would be much harsher for the black student. White students got a slap on the wrist whereas black students were faced with harsher and longer lasting consequences. It appeared to us that black students were constantly held to a higher standard than their white peers and that any transgression, real or perceived, would be a threat to our place in the school - this further perpetuated the feeling that we were unwelcome in the school.

Keeping in-line with feelings of otherness in the schools, I request that teachers must pronounce students' names correctly. If a teacher does not know how to pronounce a student's name, they must ask how to pronounce it and they must practice. They should not say "your name is so hard to pronounce" or assign nicknames for their convenience. They must not point out that it is foreign or unfamiliar to them. Names are a crucial part of one's identity and have often and for far too long been watered down to be more palatable in predominantly white institutions.

Furthermore, I request that white teachers cease to use the 'n' word, especially in English classrooms when reading literature out loud. This makes everyone, mostly the black students, extremely uncomfortable because it is general knowledge that white people may not say the 'n' word as it is a slur reclaimed *by* black people *for* black people. This stands, whether it is in lyrics or literature, under no circumstance should a white teacher say the 'n' word. I suggest that a teacher rather, skip the word, as the students are capable enough to read the word and move on. I feel as though a continuation of allowing the word to be said in classrooms may set a dangerous precedent for what is to be said outside the classrooms, especially by non-black students who perceive it to be acceptable.

It is unfair to expect 14 to 17 year old children to unpack systematic racism, explain that to their peers, whilst dealing with the daily occurrence of microaggressions, academic pressures, sports, culturals, home life, and more. The school needs to take more action to educate teachers about matters on systematic racism, microaggressions, white fragility, and so much more. There has to be constant learning, education and a level of uncomfortability in order to do this work. It is not going to be easy but it has to be done and I believe the school has the capabilities to do so, otherwise I would have not written this email. Perhaps put best by Lovelyn Nwadeyi in her open letter (attached) "This is the time to be brave. This is the time to recognise that you, as a white schoolteacher or school leader, you literally do not have all the answers because you do not know what being on the other side of structural and systemic racism looks like. You have no idea. This is the time to seek answers, knowing that you don't know what you don't know and that is okay."

Teachers are supposed to be people whom the students may approach to share their feelings and experiences without fear of judgement or attack. This was not always true at St Mary's. There were, and still are, teachers who attack students. This is also true regarding the boarding houses. In the boarding houses, students are supposed to find comfort in their second home. However, some students, especially black, non-black students of colour, and queer students found it to be hostile environment. Yes, there are teachers with whom we had found comfort and support. However, while the other teachers attacked, some teachers were silent. The silence indicates that you are on the side of the perpetrator and not the victim. I hope

this will encourage teachers to speak up for students, even when the student is not in the room.

Apart from racism, homophobia is another aspect of the St Mary's School experience that is prevalent. This is evident in the targeting of queer students. This is done by the introduction of rules about holding hands and statements made about being able to tell whether a person is queer or not. The implementation of prohibited affection on school property, specifically towards queer students, displays the sexualisation of young queer students. This standard of prohibition in terms of affection was not held when girls brought their boyfriends to hockey fest and were openly affectionate with them. Jokes were made at Matric Valedictory about girls having their first kiss at the social on school property, however, there would be no jokes if it was two girls kissing at the social on school property. It is unfair to prohibit or attack platonic affection such as holding hands and hugging. Our sex education is also very heteronormative and completely disregards safe sex practices for queer relationships. In one sex education discussion, I asked how queer students practice safe sex and my question was ignored and brushed off. It was only when I pushed for an answer in the next session, did we get one example of safe sex in queer relationships. This is an aspect of the sex education that I believe should be explored and discussed further. Just as one is not born choosing their skin colour, one is not born choosing their sexuality or gender identity. Targeting of openly queer students instead of their protection further adds to the long-held idea that St Mary's values homogeneity over individuality and diversity.

The issue of mental health and struggles related thereto is such a far-reaching one, that it would be remiss not to mention it in relation to the school. Mental health is an issue within the school that continues to be swept under the rug, along with the racism and homophobia. It has been alleged by local psychologists and therapists that St Mary's School produces an alarming amount of eating disorders. It is very evident that the St Mary's environment creates a large amount of stress for students and that possibly manifests itself into eating disorders. A dietician was brought to the school, and we were taught about dieting.

Which does have its health benefits, however to teach this to a group of 100 students when a significant number of them are struggling with eating disorders or dysfunctional eating is not a good strategy. Rather, conversations around developing good relationships with food, and possible healthy coping mechanisms for dysfunctional eating would be a better option. This, as well as constant advice from various mental health professionals to not only destigmatise the issue, but to encourage and promote coping mechanisms, as well as a greater emphasis on confidentiality between students and the on-campus mental health professionals is a step in the right direction.

In conclusion, I hope you reflect on all that has been said in this email. I hope you believe everyone who came with their stories and those who will hopefully come forward in the future as they feel they are in an environment which allows them to do so. Once again, we do not have reason to lie about these experiences, as there is so much more to lose than to gain in these difficult conversations. Please be aware that these are only a few stories, and there are many more untold stories of those still afraid to speak up. Public statements, social media posts and apologies are no longer enough. This is a call for changed behaviour, changed perspectives, changed

thinking and real anti - racism as a reliance on non-racialism merely leads to issues caused by race to be swept under the rug. This can be done through self-education. Please do not expect the black children and teachers to teach you all of this. Investigate for yourselves, read books by black authors about the topics brought up in this email, google what you do not understand. If you are comfortable, you are not doing the work. Call each other out on these topics and more and continue to hold both students and staff accountable. I also call for more interaction between the parents' HOPE committee and the students. I hope that it would provide a platform for students to express their experiences at St Mary's in a truthful manner, so that parents may have a better understanding of the St Mary's experience directly from the students themselves. It would also allow parents and students to support each other in bringing forward problems and/or solutions to the school. I request that you also promote diversity evenings for parents, staff and students as there is great value in listening.

Again, this email serves not as an attack, but a call for accountability, learning and real, tangible change. St Mary's cannot rely on the way things were 132 years ago when the school was founded. It cannot rely on the current policies in place as they are as these are tools which aided in our psychological oppression. It can no longer rely on the silence of those too afraid to speak up. We ask that you not only hear us, but that you truly take the time to understand what we are saying.

As said by Martin Luther King Jr. "A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true." We ask that you take a stand.

Please find more stories from St Mary's students that were not included in the email attached.

I have sent this message to all the staff I have the emails for.

Please do share this message with the staff who may have not received this message.

Below is a list of resources I believe will be helpful to the white and non - black staff.

Online:

An Open Letter to White Teachers and Parents - Consider this an Olive Branch:
<https://www.lovelynnwadeyi.com/post/an-open-letter-to-white-teachers-and-parents-consider-this-an-olive-branch>

The Appropriate way to react after being called a racist:
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBK2kivDMqC/>

Making White: Constructing Race in a South African High School:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/3202188?seq=18#metadata_info_tab_contents

Microraggressions:

https://www.instagram.com/p/CA_JZxBIAMz/

Black Lives Matter at School Resource Toolkit:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ou2lkNO_1ijCJDfmasbAG8mx_7hvv1cHKmobhtcVLAK/edit

Recognizing and Dismantling Your Anti-

Blackness:<https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2020/06/01/recognizing-and-dismantling-your-anti-blackness/?ss=diversity#6bbf20164472>

Me and Tanya's instagram live discussing racism in St Mary's / white majority schools in general: Part 1: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CA-4ChTDVc2/>

Part 2: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CA-DeADymS/>

Books:

So You Want To Talk About Race by Ijeoma Olou

Coconut by Kopano Matlwa

White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide by Carol Anderson

How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi

White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism by Robin DiAngelo

Documentaries, Films, and Shows:

The People v The Rainbow Nation, available on Youtube

13th (Documentary available on youtube and Netflix)

Dear White People (Netflix)

When they see us (Netflix)

The Hate U Give (Hulu film and book by Angie Thomas)