

# Youth Challenge Stereotypes

by [Jenelle](#)

'There are Jews living in Australia?!' 'Christians and Catholics are actually different?!' These were some of the exclamations a group of year 10 students from five Melbourne schools had before participating in an 18-month intercultural program [[Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 2](#): Melbourne Interfaith and Intercultural Cluster].

The program opened many of the students' eyes to how other people lived and what they believed. It aimed to bring together students from diverse backgrounds that otherwise would not have been given the chance to meet.

Through the program Kelsey Turner, 16, realised that she was sheltered from other faiths and beliefs because her entire education was Catholic both at primary school and high school.

'At first we thought they (students from other schools) would have a certain view because of stereotypes but, this was not true... We now have an understanding that we are all similar and we all like the same things,' Kelsey said.

Over the 18 months students visited each others' schools, participated in discussions and formed solid friendships.

The program climaxed at the Day of Understanding held on 18 February 2008 at the Convention Centre in Melbourne. Year 10 students spoke with power and purpose in front of more than 700 people; they had devoted many Sunday and Saturdays to rehearsals and planning and can be credited with the contents of the showbags each student received on entry.

## **'A new generation would grow up differently'**

The program was so powerful that the students recommend it should be part of a Federal curriculum.

'If they started it at a school level, a new generation would grow up differently; more tolerant and understanding... People would grow up being more aware and more able to accept everyone. It would fade out intolerance,' participant Nadine Atia, 15, said.

'Year 10 is the best year to do it. Year seven to nine is all about your friends, year 11 and 12 is academic, but year 10 is about finding yourself; I want to know who I am.'

Both Kelsey and Nadine are part of the student executive board. Kelsey attends St Monica's Catholic College in Epping, and Nadine goes to Australian International Academy, Coburg. Other schools that participated were The King of David School, Armadale; Thornbury High School, Thornbury; and Siena College, Camberwell.

## **Their own work**

The year 10 students helped create the program and organise the Day of Understanding.

'The teachers did all the nitty gritty stuff, organising the buses to the excursion and the dates; we came up with the big ideas. We wanted to make it interesting. It was more appealing when we organised it,' Nadine said.

Areti Louzis, 16, from Thornbury High School, believed it was more of a learning experience than anything else.

'I learnt that what we believe is basically the same, it is about breaking down the cultural differences.'

The Day of Understanding was devoted to celebrating cultural diversity and community engagement. From my point of view it was more about a celebration of the friendships that emerged and the life experiences participants had gained.

The executive student board and all the students who participated should be credited for successfully organising and planning the 18-month program and the conference. It demonstrates the power of young people and the changing Australian landscape.

To sum up, in the words of a year 10 speaker on The Day of Understanding: 'A good citizen is about respect... Australia is a land of diversity, multiculturalism and hope.'

That's a powerful lesson that should be learnt by all Australians.

*This article was written by a roving reporter as part of the Victorian Government's [youthcentral](#) website initiative.*