**Transcript of video, ‘Intercultural Experiences at School’**

Interviewees: Mohamed Semra and Abdi Haji Ali

*Note: The views expressed are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect the views of the VCAA.*

Mohamed: My name is Mohamed and I am currently studying a double degree – a bachelor of commerce and bachelor of international relations. My family originated from Sudan, and we came here in search of a better life. Something I treasure about my Sudanese heritage is the culture. Sudanese heritage is community-based, and I like going to events and seeing the dances, and seeing the different people, and the way they make the food. It makes you reminisce.

Abdi: Hi, my name’s Abdi, I’m currently in my first year of my Bachelor’s in electrical engineering. What I treasure about my Somali heritage is, I guess it could be the food or the clothing but I guess mainly the unity. Everyone supports each other through hardships and in their time of need.

Mohamed: [Reads question]: **‘When you were at school, what differences did you notice between yourself and other students? For example, the size of the family, family activities or birthday celebrations?’** Well, personally, a major difference I saw between myself and other students was the way we were being received by teachers. For example, if I handed in an essay, the teacher, I wouldn’t say all teachers, but in some cases, they would believe that I copied it or it wasn’t my work or I needed help.

Abdi: For sure, when you come to school and then people are talking about how many siblings they have. People are saying 2 or 3, and then you come up there being an outlier and saying 9. I have 9 siblings. It’s a bit of a shock to both yourself and them.

Abdi: [Reads question]: **‘Have you ever experienced open racism at school?’** I’ve been in countless racist incidents from Year 7, spreading all the way to Year 12. And every single time it happens, you just somehow feel surprised. That someone could actually stoop that low and say those things. For example, me and one of my friends were in one of these classrooms and afterwards one of the kids said something in relation to my friend being ... treating him as equivalent to his dog, ‘Get out of here,’ and stuff like that. He’s like, ‘Look, I’m not going to get out of here until you apologise.’ And once the teacher came to address the issue, she didn’t care about what the problem was or whether or not to resolve the problem. She insisted on telling my friend to leave. Once he left, she added another phrase. ‘I’m going to show zero tolerance to you and your little gang.’ So, it’s just a bit surprising.

Mohamed: And it’s small phrases like that, they really get to you. Every single year, our teacher would sort our classroom into levels of reading ability. One thing I always took pride in was my reading. I believe I’m a really good reader. Every year, she would sort us out, and there would be beginners, middle and difficult books. So, for some reason, I always ended up at the lowest level. I was like, ‘Last year when I was in a different class I was in the higher level.’ And then just really having to keep proving yourself and keep showing people that I’m not like everyone else. I’m not like the stereotype that you have in your mind.

Abdi: That always occurs. Just because you happen to be this colour, when you do something that’s pretty good, it’s a surprise to them.

Mohamed: And I don’t think people know that they’re being racist or that they’re making you feel bad. So, let’s just say I was walking with my friends. And let’s say there were 4 or 5 of us. Everyone will assume something’s going to happen. ‘They’re walking in a group of 4.’ But walking right beside us will be a group of 15 or 20 footballers and they’re all white. No-one will expect anything because it’s the norm, it’s normal. But when people see a group of us walking, it’s like, ‘Oh, something’s going to happen.’

Abdi: [Reads question]: **‘Did you ever have an experience where you were allowed to openly discuss issues around race?’**

Mohamed: I think, so speaking to my siblings about it was really beneficial and also, there was a big chance when we did get to speak about the experiences we’ve had, and that was when me and Abdi spoke to all the teachers at our school. We had a summit and spoke to them about ways that they could better communicate with people that are economically, socially and geographically different to them.

Abdi: [Reads question]: **‘Was primary school any different to secondary school in regard to your experience with racism?’**

Mohamed: In primary school, no one really came and said to you, ‘Oh, I don’t like you because you’re black.’ But then when you go to Year 7, Year 8, that’s when people have a point to prove. So that’s when people start ... fighting and stuff like that. So Year 7 was the year that I used to get in trouble a lot.

Mohamed: [Reads question]: **‘What messages do you receive from the media about African–Australians?’** I cannot name one person, one of my friends ... that are in a gang or are out doing things that the media says they’re doing. Most of the friends I know, they’re basketball players. And a few of them now are in America, competing in college basketball and some have also played in the NBA. But we don’t really see stories like that. And there’s also other friends who have opened up businesses, who have done what society might see as helpful.

Abdi: There’s all these other people who are doing good. Trying to better the community. Trying to create unity and you have all these people trying to create a divide. Trying to make us isolate from each other and make us think the worst of each other. Sometimes I’m on the train and I’m like, ‘Okay, i just want to sit down,’ and then as I’m about to sit down, the person who’s sitting in that other chair’s looking at me with their eyes open like that. So I’m like, ‘I’m trying to not make you scared, so I’ll just stand up. You don’t even know me but you’re scared of me. Don’t worry, I’m not going to sit here.’

Abdi: [Reads question]: **‘What do you think being Australian means? Do you fit the image of the ordinary Australian or have you created your own image?’**

Abdi: I don’t necessarily know what it means to be Australian but I’ve been brought up in this country. I feel like I probably created my own image, mixed with what I’ve experienced from school, high school and external environments as well at home. Wouldn’t you agree?

Mohamed: Yeah, I agree.

Abdi: To mix both worlds, yeah?

Mohamed: Yeah. Because I think it’s very hard to have one notion of what it means to be Australian.

*[End of video interview]*

**BONUS MATERIAL – TRANSCRIPT OF FULL INTERVIEWS**

*Abdi and Mohamed were interviewed at length by VCAA, but not all of what they said made it into the video ‘Intercultural experiences at school’. The transcript below covers the full interviews.*

**Abdi Haji Ali**

*What is your name and what are you currently studying?*

Hi, my name’s Abdi, I’m currently in my first year of my Bachelor’s in electrical engineering.

*What is something you treasure about your Somali heritage?*

I guess it could be the food or the clothing but I guess mainly the unity. Everyone supports each other through hardships and in their time of need. You know a lot of people that we need to help each other. I’ve been in situations, you know, where something’s not going too well with the family and the family’s always there to help with the burden and always assist each other.

*Tell us about one challenge and one positive experience your family has had since coming to Australia.*

There’s been multiple challenges but one of the main ones would be trying to assimilate into this different culture that they’ve never seen before and in an environment where they don’t even speak the same language there’s going to be a lot of barriers and a lot of challenges, especially for their kids who are trying to communicate with their teachers and their principals, sports teachers etc.

There are some positive experiences, like when there’s a lot of family around. Some people are quite welcoming and there’s people who have very similar stories to you and you can empathise with them and share each other’s stories. There’s a lot of people who are very open and willing to help us – there was a situation while I was at my primary school and my mum was reverse parking and she just got her licence and she was struggling to get the car out, and a pedestrian came and hopped in the car and helped my mum out, regardless of her skin tone, when he happened to be white, and he was very welcoming and helpful.

*What are your plans for the future?*

There’s a lot of things I want to achieve. Mainly to do a lot more youth work, to try and step forward into helping the community to the best of my abilities because that’s the stuff that I really enjoy. It makes me feel whole when I do things like that.

**Mohamed Semra**

*What is your name and what are you currently studying?*

My name is Mohamed and I am in my first year of a double degree, a bachelor of commerce and bachelor of international relations.

*What is something you treasure about your Sudanese heritage?*

The culture. Sudanese heritage is community-based, and I like going to events and seeing the dances, and seeing the different people, and the way they make the food. I think it really makes you reminisce about Sudan.

*Tell us about one challenge and one positive experience your family has had since coming to Australia.*

A major challenge that my family has experienced since coming to Australia is juggling between tradition and progression.

I feel like there’s a language barrier between my mother and myself, so I am able to speak to my school, or speak to different people, whereas my mother isn’t. I think that detaches her from the Australian society, and she feels comfortable speaking her language, because there is this language barrier.

A positive experience for myself and my family in Australia has been the education and the opportunities.

*What helpful guidance have you received from a mentor or role model?*

Helpful guidance I received from my mentor is to always be analytical of situations. Certain situations are not one-dimensional, and if seen from a different perspective, I think a common outcome can be achieved. It was received from my older brother, and was also reinforced by mentors at school.

*What are your plans for the future?*

I’m currently studying international relations and also doing a bachelor of commerce, and I would like that to lead to eventually working for the Department of Foreign Affairs, perhaps as a diplomat.

Mohamed: [Reads question]: **‘When you were at school, what differences did you notice between yourself and other students? For example, the size of the family, family activities or birthday celebrations?’** Well, personally, a major difference I saw between myself and other students was the way we were being received by teachers. For example, if I handed in an essay, the teacher, I wouldn’t say all teachers, but in some cases, they would believe that I copied it or it wasn’t my work or I needed help. ... So, in that regard, there would be a difference.

Abdi: For sure, when you come to school and then people are talking about how many siblings they have. People are saying 2 or 3, and then you come up there being an outlier and saying 9. I have 9 siblings. It’s a bit of a shock to both yourself and them. When they used to call our names in a school announcement, instead of saying individually our names, it would take too long – they used to say ‘the Haji Ali family’.

Abdi: You can talk about birthdays as well. Birthdays in your household I guess wouldn’t be a big deal, yeah?

Mohamed: We don’t really celebrate birthdays.

Abdi: It’s like any day that comes and goes, right?

Mohamed: Yeah.

Abdi: You would complain, ‘Well, why don’t we celebrate birthdays? That kid has a birthday.’

Mohamed: Our friends are all doing it, yeah, yeah.

Abdi: Our parents said, ‘Why should you celebrate another day that’s closer to your death?’

Mohamed: Okay.

Abdi: [Reads question]: **‘Have you ever experienced open racism at school? If so, what happened and how well did the school address the problem?’** Okay. I could go on and on and on about this. I’ve been in countless racist incidents from Year 7, spreading all the way to year 12. And every single time it happens, you just somehow feel surprised. That someone could actually stoop that low and say those things. For example, me and one of my friends were in one of these classrooms and afterwards one of the kids said something in relation to my friend being ... treating him as equivalent to his dog, ‘Get out of here,’ and stuff like that. He’s like, ‘Look, I’m not going to get out of here until you apologise.’ And once the teacher came to address the issue, she didn’t care about what the problem was or whether or not to resolve the problem. She insisted on telling my friend to leave. Once he left, she added another phrase. ‘I’m going to show zero tolerance to you and your little gang.’ So, it’s just a bit surprising. They say things like that. Once they’re all angered up, their true colours come out, I guess.

Mohamed: Small phrases like that really get to you. I had a situation back in primary school. It was something that really went from Prep till Year 5. Every single year, our teacher would sort our classroom into levels of reading ability. One thing I always took pride in was my reading. I believe I’m a really good reader. Every year, she would sort us out, and there would be beginners, middle and difficult books. So, for some reason, I always ended up at the lowest level. I was like, ‘Last year when I was in a different class I was in the higher level.’ And then just really having to keep proving yourself and keep showing people that I’m not like everyone else. I’m not like the stereotype that you have in your mind.

Abdi: Exactly, brother. Always like that. Always occurs, just because you happen to be this colour, when you do something that’s pretty good, it’s a surprise to them. It shouldn’t be a surprise. If I was a white kid doing this, you wouldn’t be surprised about it. But just because I happen to be a black kid doing it, it was, ‘Whoa, I didn’t know you were that smart.’ Or, ‘I didn’t know you were that good.’ It can sometimes make you a bit annoyed, I guess.

Mohamed: [Reads question]: **‘Have you ever experienced subtle racism at school? For example, unequal treatment or being denied privileges that were offered to others? If so, what happened and how well did the school address the problem?’** I think we experienced some of this racism every day, at our school. And I don’t think people know that they’re being racist or they’re making you feel bad. I think it’s something that hasn’t been addressed and [people] don’t really know how to approach the situation. So, for example, let’s just say I was walking with my friends. And let’s say there were 4 of 5 of us. Everyone will assume or something’s going to happen: ‘They’re walking in a group of 4.’ But right across the stadium or walking right beside us will be a group of 15 or 20 footballers and they’re all white. No-one will expect anything because it’s the norm, it’s normal. But when people see a group of us walking, it’s like, ‘Oh, something’s going to happen.’ They didn’t know how to address it and because they didn’t know how to address it, they don’t address it. And I think that’s what we have really been experiencing. We tell a teacher someone’s being racist and the teacher doesn’t really know how to respond because they don’t know the right way to make both parties happy. I think, it’s when you just allow it all and you don’t support me, I can’t really connect with you.

Mohamed: When we had African mentors at school I think that made the biggest difference in the sense that there was better communication between students and teachers. I think that was the thing that was really distancing us – we didn’t know how to approach the teachers. Because they didn’t really know how to understand us. But when there were mentors who were Somalian and could speak our language and communicate with our parents, that really made us ... If I had a situation at school, I could approach them because I knew they have might have experienced this situation before. They will understand and sympathise. I think that was the moment I saw the culture of the school start to change.

Abdi: Yeah.

Mohamed: When there were African teachers and other teachers seeing those mentors around and being asked some questions or ‘How do we,’ let’s just say, ‘speak to one of the boys,’ and stuff like that. It’s all about understanding and respect at the end of the day.

Abdi: Yeah, the second the mentor stepped into the picture, I could feel a lot of things slowly start to change, especially the culture of the school. I remember we were in a bit of a racist situation that happened out in the yard and we went up to the mentors to speak to them about it and with the teacher that said stuff to us, we had the teacher apologise. The teacher came and apologised for not necessarily understanding what she was implying was a bit racist. Some people don’t even understand they’re being racist. You’re not even consciously aware that you’re doing the wrong or right thing. So, when you tell the mentors, the mentors speak to them about it and have the teacher come and apologise. I guess you feel a little bit of a sense of relief.

Abdi: [Reads question]: **‘Did you ever have an experience where you were allowed to openly discuss issues around race? If so, was it at home, at school, with friends?’**

Mohamed: I speak about implicit and explicit racism a lot, inside my household because most of my siblings we all go to same school and we come back, we’ll have a discussion about: ‘Oh what did the teacher say to you today?’ Or, ‘Was there anyone in the yard that was giving you hardship because you’re different?’ So, speaking to my siblings about it was really beneficial and also, there was a big chance when we did get to speak about the experiences we’ve had and that was when me and Abdi here, we spoke to all the teachers at our school. We had a summit and we spoke to them about ways that they could better communicate with people that are economically, socially and geographically different to them.

Abdi: Yeah, I can also talk about at home. Me and my siblings could spend hours arguing and debating about what was on the front of the papers or what was on the news that day. We look at it and sometimes it’s ludicrous. So, I guess we do have a bit of a laugh about that now and then, but when you see the true ignorance of people, it is shocking sometimes.

Mohamed: Every day, we’ll speak about it with our friends because we’re all around the same age, we’re all around the same environment and have experienced similar situations. But moving forward, it’s a lot better, more impactful, to speak about it with people that are outside your friendship group, because that educates them and it gives you a chance to speak your mind.

Abdi: Yeah, all of us have an African background and are in an environment where we’re always defensive about our race and thinking, what is that person going to say this time or what is this person going to do?

Mohamed: [Reads question]: **‘Some people say that we should treat everybody the same, regardless of their cultural background. Do you agree?’**

Abdi: For sure. I feel like everyone should definitely be treated equally but we live in a society where not everyone’s equal, or not treated the same. You could have someone who’s Caucasian or white applying for a certain job and you could have a person who has the name Mohamed or whatever applying for that job, and a lot of people have spoken about this but they don’t get as much response as the person who’s Caucasian.

Mohamed: True.

Abdi: There is this implied discrimination. It’s not something that people can see straight away. It’s hidden and it’s slight and it’s hard to pick up on things that are implicit.

Mohamed: I think the benefit of being different is that you have something to teach. So, something I really like is learning about the different cultures and learning about different people because if everyone was the same, life would be boring. Me and Abdi are both African but we live in two different countries, two different cultures and that’s the beauty of difference.

Abdi: [Reads question]: **‘Was primary school any different to secondary school with regard to experiences of racism?’** When I was in primary school, I used to live in an area where there was a lot of housing commission and a lot of people who were brought back from the war. So, the school I went to was a very diverse multi-cultural school where I practically knew everyone who was in my neighbourhood who went to the same school with me. So, I feel like there was slight or minimal racism at primary school, but I guess I couldn’t pick up on it seeing as I was so young at that time and still naïve – as you get older you could tell when someone was being racist to you or someone was trying to discriminate against you. You can see it straight away.

Mohamed: I think in primary school, no one really said, ‘I don’t like you because you’re black.’ Not openly. But then when you go to Year 7, Year 8, I feel like that’s when people have a point to prove. That’s when everyone’s trying to find themselves. So that’s when people start fighting and stuff like that.

Mohamed: I remember in Year 6 I had a lot of African friends in my classroom but then I went to Year 7 and I was the only black guy in the class and I didn’t know anyone else. So Year 7 was the year that I used to get in trouble a lot. I got suspended three times in two weeks, because I felt I had to always speak the loudest or I always had to call out. I always had to show my face somewhere or else I might disappear. It put a tension on me. And when you grow up, you start realising that what you were seeking was acceptance.

Mohamed: [Reads question]: **‘What messages do you receive from the media about African Australians? How do these messages make you feel?’** I cannot name one person, one of my friends, that is in a gang or is doing things the media says they’re doing. And I think when they’re spread these stories about African gangs, it gives the implication that we’re all somehow violent. I think the media needs to–

Abdi: Create a unity.

Mohamed: Yeah, by sharing stories of people who are doing good. Most of my friends are basketball players, and a few of them now are in America, competing in college basketball and some have also played in the NBA. But we don’t see stories like that [in the media]. And there’s other friends who have opened up businesses, who have done what society might see as helpful.

Abdi: Sometimes when I see these messages I think, ‘Here’s another story that is over exaggerated.’ There’s also a double standard, where if you’re Muslim and you do something wrong it’s because of your religion, not because you’re, say, mentally ill. When you see that stuff it just gets to you sometimes. There’s all these other people who are doing good, trying to better the community, trying to create unity, but you have other people trying to create a divide. Trying to make us isolate from each other and make us think the worst of each other. And that’s only going to create more and more of a divide. And that’s not what we’re trying to do.

Mohamed: And it’s fear-mongering as well. To be honest I have just become used to it. I don’t even pay attention. I don’t read the news anymore, if it has anything to do with Africans, because I already know the storyline on ‘African gangs.’ So, you just try and stay away from it. If you can help, you help, and you try to do the best for yourself, for your community. You can’t control other people.

Abdi: Sometimes I’m on the train and I’m like, ‘Okay, i just want to sit down,’ and then as I’m about to sit down, the person who’s sitting in that other chair’s looking at me with their eyes open like that. I’m thinking, ‘I’m trying to not make you scared, so I’ll just stand up. You don’t even know me but you’re scared of me. Don’t worry, I’m not going to sit here. I’ll stand up.’ It’s pretty funny – it’s happened a few times lately.

Mohamed: Yeah.

Abdi: I don’t want to scare them. [Laughs]

Mohamed: I get that exact same feeling.

Abdi: [Reads question]: **‘What do you think being Australian means? Do you fit the image of an ordinary Australian or have you created your own image?’** We’re still trying to figure that out, I guess. I don’t necessarily know what it means to be Australian but I’ve been brought up in this country, raised in this country. I feel like I probably created my own image, mixed with what I’ve experienced from school, high school and external environments as well at home. So, I’ve probably mashed up my own image, trying to balance out the Australian way of life as well as my home life. Wouldn’t you agree?

Mohamed: Yeah, I agree.

Abdi: To mix both worlds, yeah?

Mohamed: Yeah, it’s mixed. I think it’s very hard to have one notion of what it means to be Australian. When I’m at school, there’s one image of being Australian, then I go back home and there’s another. It’s just balancing between the two and creating your own. When you speak of Australian values, I think it means being nice, not doing things to other people that you wouldn’t want done to you. When I was in primary school, there was a language barrier between my mum and the school. So, I used to translate for my mum at parent teacher interviews. And then, me being me, I didn’t translate everything, so mum said, ‘I don’t think I‘m getting the full version of what the teacher’s trying to tell me!’ [Laughs] I think that it makes you grow up quicker, having to juggle between those two worlds. You take on more responsibility than you would if you weren’t from a different country. Your parents have to have the responsibility placed on your shoulders instead of theirs.

Abdi: I’ve been balancing these worlds for so long, I do it unconsciously. If I’m at home I know the way to act and if I’m outside with different people, I know the way to act. And I’m used to it now. It would be weird, let’s say, if I were to bring some of my white friends to my house while my mum’s there. When you walk inside an African house, there’s the smell of food and it’s different, so, if I bring my white friend, they might go, ‘What’s that funny smell?’ Sometimes I would go to a white friend’s house and I would be overly respectful and they’d say, ‘Hey, relax bro. You’re being too respectful.’