6. Supporting diversity

We acknowledge and pay respect to all the traditional owners of the land we now call Victoria. There were approximately 40 language groups before colonisation that made up the state of Victoria.

Victoria is a multicultural society comprising people from more than 200 nations, speaking more than 200 languages and dialects and following more than 120 faiths.

‘While respecting our differences is necessary in an open, inclusive and vibrant society, it is also vital to acknowledge that we have much in common. We have much to gain, individually and collectively, by working together to build a positive and progressive future that enhances our state as a great place in which to live, work, invest and raise a family.’

All of Us Multicultural Policy for Victoria 2009, Hon John Brumby and James Merlino, MP, p 2

Transition programs that support and celebrate diversity and early childhood professionals who are culturally aware and competent help to support a positive start to school for all children and families. Respecting diversity, helping to foster supportive relationships and encouraging a strong, positive sense of identity are all key practices that will help early childhood services and schools achieve this.

Cultural competency

Educators who are culturally competent respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, seeing and living, celebrate the benefits of diversity and have an ability to understand and honour differences. This is evident in everyday practice when educators demonstrate an ongoing commitment to developing their own cultural competence in a two-way process with families and communities.

Educators view culture and the context of family as central to children’s sense of being and belonging and to success in lifelong learning. Educators also seek to promote children’s cultural competence. Cultural competence is much more than awareness of cultural
differences. It is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures. Cultural competence encompasses:

- being aware of one's own world view
- developing a positive attitude towards cultural differences
- gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views
- developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures.

There are a range of documents that contain advice and information for educators about developing cultural competence amongst children, these include:

- Teaching about cultural diversity - provides advice for teaching about cultural diversity.
- The Keynotes Project - provides information to teachers with the history, principles and perspectives of nine world religions appropriate as background material in classroom programs and discussions.


**Transition for Aboriginal Children**

The information in this section is sourced from the Australian Government Indigenous Portal[^18], Share Our Pride[^19], and the Indigenous Australia website[^20].

Aboriginal cultures are complex and diverse. Aboriginal children, people and communities have a unique contribution to make to Australian society and to their local community. For the purposes of this Resource Kit, the term Aboriginal will be used to represent people from all Indigenous Australian groups.

Land is fundamental to the wellbeing of Aboriginal people. The land is not just soil or rocks or minerals, but a holistic environment that sustains and is sustained by people and culture. It is the core of all spirituality and this relationship and the spirit of ‘country’ is central to the issues that are important to Aboriginal people today. They identify themselves through their land areas, their relationship to others and their language and stories – which may be expressed through ceremony, the arts, family, religion and sports.

Maintaining a connection to family and community is also especially important to Aboriginal people. It is this connection that helps maintain the links to their cultural identity. Reconnecting and remaining a part of a family or kinship group are important issues. Learning the intricate pattern of kinship is part of every Aboriginal child’s education.

[^19]: [www.shareourpride.org.au](http://www.shareourpride.org.au)
[^20]: [www.indigenousaustralia.info](http://www.indigenousaustralia.info)

*Indigenous Australia's website is written by Aboriginal people of Australia*

One Aboriginal early childhood setting used weekly cultural education sessions to strengthen children’s sense of identity and improve their gross motor skills. The children learnt traditional dances and performed in traditional costumes and face painting. Music was provided by a professional didgeridoo player for dances such as 'Walk on', 'Birds and Animals', 'Yam', 'Fishing', 'Boomerang', 'Mother Earth', 'Basket Weaving' and 'Munji Maa'. The children practised and then performed at a number of events, including Elders Christmas Luncheon and the launch of *Dardee Booral: The Victorian Charter of Safety and Wellbeing for Aboriginal Children and Young*. The children’s traditional dance performance was reported as the highlight of the kindergarten’s graduation ceremony.
Many Aboriginal children make a positive transition to school. Aboriginal children and families will have high expectations of their child's learning and development experiences and it is important to recognise that many of the strategies previously identified in this Kit will be relevant to planning effective support for Aboriginal children as they transition into school.

Early childhood services and schools can do additional things to help further support the transition to school for Aboriginal children:

- acknowledge and support engagement with Aboriginal children's families, recognising that this may include a wider group of people than non-Aboriginal cultures may associate with a child
- ask family members to come and stay in the classroom for a little longer at the start of the day
- recognise oral communication is greatly valued and used widely within Aboriginal communities when engaging with Aboriginal children and their families
- plan and organise transition programs for Aboriginal children in partnership with local Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs)
- incorporate resources reflecting Aboriginal culture into local programs and curriculum such as books, music and movement activities or Aboriginal art and flying the Aboriginal flag together with the Australian flag. These make places more welcoming for Aboriginal children and their families and give consistent, inclusive messages straight away to those visiting and attending early childhood services and schools
- get to know local Aboriginal communities, seeking their guidance on how best to support and respond to the needs of their children as they transition to school
- undertake professional development to find out more about Aboriginal culture (see Share Our Pride at www.shareourpride.org.au).

Victoria has specific Koorie support workers in each region who may be useful to link with for Aboriginal communities when planning transition programs:

- Koorie pre-school assistants
- Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs)
- Koorie Education Coordinators.

There are also 32 voluntary Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups across Victoria that can support partnerships between Aboriginal families and educational services. Their role includes:

- providing advice on all education and training matters affecting Koorie students
- monitoring the current trends in education that impact on all Koorie students
- providing an advocate role for Koorie students and their families in respect of education matters
- providing representation to local and regional committees and forums in relation to education and training
- providing representation to all Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. forums.

In a regional pilot focused on addressing the needs of Aboriginal children and families, transition coordinators and two community members were engaged to support children in the early childhood setting and to move with them to school. The presence of a familiar face from the Aboriginal community at kindergarten, and later at school, was reported to help children and families feel more comfortable and adapt to the new school environment and routines.

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31 This title incorporates posts previously known as Koorie educator, Koorie education development officer, and Koorie home school liaison officer.


Wannik, from the Gunai/Kurnai language meaning ‘learning together – journey to our future’ is the DEECD’s new education strategy for Koorie students in Victoria.

Fundamental to Wannik is the fostering of a new culture of high expectations for Aboriginal children and systemic reform across government schools to deliver the best possible education to meet these expectations. It emphasises working in partnership with Aboriginal families and the community to respect, recognise and celebrate Aboriginal cultural identity.

Wannik identifies a number of key strategies for improvement. Those relevant to transition-to-school planning include:

- developing ready-for-school or pre-school Aboriginal programs in collaboration with KESOs in all areas where there are high numbers of Aboriginal families
- requiring all government schools to develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for each Aboriginal child in a partnership between educators, children, their families and Aboriginal support workers, covering key transition points from early childhood settings to school.
- Encouraging schools to use the Transition Learning and Development Statement to inform the development of IEPs for Aboriginal children entering prep.

For more information about Wannik visit www.education.vic.gov.au/wannik

For more information about supporting children from Aboriginal backgrounds who attend catholic schools visit www.ceomelb.catholic.edu.au or for independent schools visit www.ais.vic.edu.au

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

As previously stated, Victoria is a multicultural society comprising people from more than 200 nations, speaking more than 200 languages and dialects and following more than 120 faiths. The diversity and richness this brings communities cannot be underestimated and should not be overlooked. Families from different backgrounds contribute in many meaningful ways to all children’s understanding of the world and they offer new insights on supporting all children to successfully transition to school, as well as their own.

In the Australian context, individuals from a [culturally and linguistically diverse] background are those who identify as having a specific cultural or linguistic affiliation by virtue of their place of birth, ancestry, ethnic origin, religion, preferred language, language(s) spoken at home, or because of their parents’ identification on a similar basis.¹³

Finding ways to develop strong, effective partnerships with families with diverse cultural backgrounds or who speak languages other than English is a very enriching experience.

Engaging with these families provides opportunities for early childhood services and schools to better understand, appreciate and celebrate the experiences of families and their cultures. Understanding the experiences of their families and cultures can help educators link with a child’s experiences to better support continuity of learning and development.

Children and families with diverse cultural backgrounds speaking languages other than English may require support to participate in transition-to-school processes. Educators need to be aware of and be responsive to:

- varying levels of English language fluency
- experiences of trauma or war
- disrupted education for some children
- the pressures of resettlement
- racism and discrimination.

Improving the way children and their families are included in the transition planning processes and ensuring that programs respond to their needs are critical to ensure the start to school is a positive experience.

Given the diversity within and across cultures in Australia, it is important not to make assumptions about families’ backgrounds, cultures or practices, as these can be very different from family to family. Taking time to talk with families directly about their lives and culture is the best way to find out more about families histories and cultural practices.

**Supporting children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds**

Some key strategies that early childhood services and schools might like to consider when communicating and planning support for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds as they transition into school are:

- be open to different notions of ‘family’
- acknowledge that, while some families may share cultural practices, values and beliefs, they all have individual features and characteristics
- work in partnership with other agencies who are involved with the family
• review the environment and resources used in programs regularly and be aware of the messages they convey to families

• talk to families about how they would like to participate and how they view their role as their child transitions to school

• link families with one another and encourage them to support each other and discuss mutual concerns

• make sure transition programs are flexible and encourage children and their families to participate

• provide opportunities for children and their families to give feedback on transition programs and participate in any evaluation exercises to ensure transition programs are relevant and meet their needs.

Communication is one of the most obvious challenges for children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Again, there are a number of things early childhood settings and schools can do to break down communication barriers to better support children and their families. These include:

• using the assistance of interpreters, bilingual staff, aides and translated materials to help families understand and feel comfortable

• displaying information in community languages

• becoming familiar with local agencies that provide language services in the relevant languages

• speaking clearly and repeating information to families who are not fluent in English

• using pictures and photographs to help communicate with families.

A range of services is provided to government schools to support students from language backgrounds other than English. This includes funding for English as a Second Language (ESL) programs.

Some children who speak a language other than English as their main language at home will require additional support in learning English as a second or additional language. If they are enrolled in a government school they are eligible for ESL programs.

Funding is provided to schools with significant numbers of ESL students through the Student Resource Package (SRP). ESL funding is given to schools to staff ESL programs. A targeted specialist ESL program is informed by a good understanding of each child and their learning background including their stage of English language development. Further ESL program information is available on the DEECD - ESL website on the following page: http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/esl/eslschools.htm

Funding may also be provided for Multicultural Education Aides (MEAs). MEAs in schools support ESL programs in several ways:

• facilitate communication between the school and families from language background other than English
provide insights into students' cultural backgrounds and experiences
assist individual or small groups of students in the classroom
assist the teacher with the development of materials.

Schools also have access to Regional ESL Program Officers in each of the nine DEECD regional offices. Regional ESL program officers provide ESL program support and advice to schools and professional learning opportunities for teachers in government schools in the region. For more information phone the DEECD Information and Referral Service for your DEECD Regional Office on 1800 809 834.

To improve support for refugee children, DEECD has developed Strengthening Outcomes - Refugee Students in Government Schools, which contains information for schools and other service providers about the range of resources available to support students from refugee backgrounds in Victorian schools. This document can be downloaded from www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/esl/refugees/default.htm

Children who have recently arrived in Australia may also be eligible for additional support, if they are enrolled in a government school, through the New Arrivals Program. Further information about the New Arrivals Program is available on the DEECD-ESL website on the following page www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/esl/newstudents.htm

The Guidelines for Managing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Schools provide an overview of Government policies and DEECD initiatives in relation to the prevention of discrimination and harassment. These guidelines also include a range of learning materials. More information can be found at www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/multicultural/schoolleaders.htm

Interpreting and translating services are also available free (within guidelines) to government schools. The services ensure that parents and guardians who require an interpreter have access to school information and are better able to communicate with schools. More information on the interpreting and translation services for schools can be found at www.education.vic.gov.au/management/schooloperations/interpret/default.htm

For more information about supporting children with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who attend Catholic schools visit www.ceomelb.catholic.edu.au and for those who attend independent schools visit www.ais.vic.edu.au

It may be necessary to involve an interpreter to work with the family, advocate and/or early childhood professionals. When working with an interpreter, speak slowly and clearly. Try not to say too much in one go so that the interpreter can remember what was said. Focus on engaging with the family, not the interpreter, in face-to-face meeting situations. Ask the family questions to see if they have understood what was meant. Provide opportunities to listen to what families have to say and provide them with the information they may need/want.