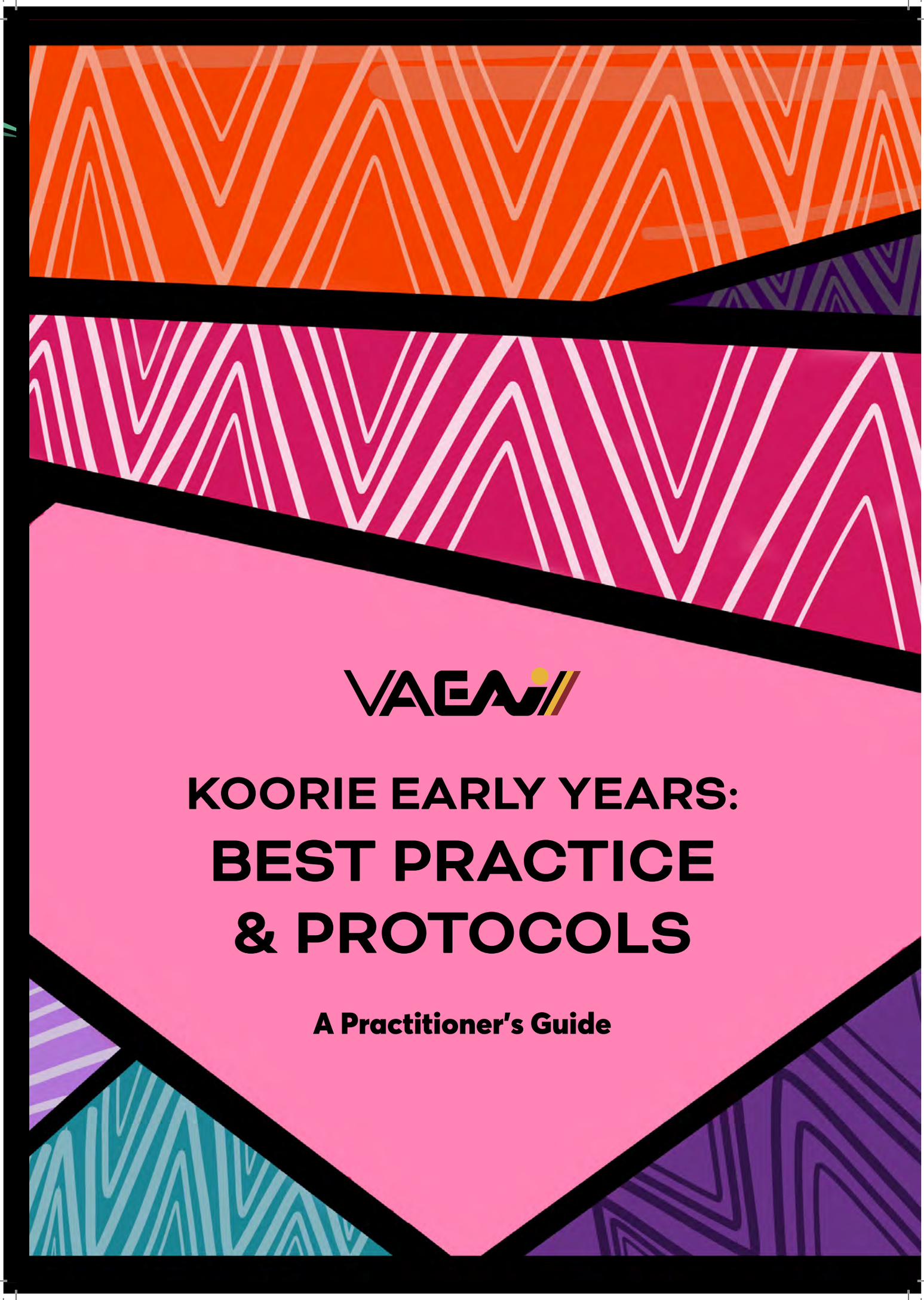

KOORIE EARLY YEARS:
BEST PRACTICE & PROTOCOLS

A Practitioner's Guide

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VAEAI Koorie Early Years: Best Practice and Protocols - A Practitioner's Guide.

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In developing this guide VAEAI has been supported by the Australian Government, National Indigenous Advisory Agency (NIAA).



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Anjee-Lee Bamblett is a proud Ngarigo and Gurang Gurang woman born and living on Wurundjeri land.

A proud mother of four boys, Anjee-Lee works full time in Aboriginal education. Anjee-Lee has a passion for visual art. Her designs are often themed about family, health and women & children's wellbeing.

Anjee-Lee's art has been recognised in numerous awards including the Cancer Council art awards, the Yoorrook Justice Commission logo competition, and the Victorian Court House art competition.

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FOREWORD



Working in the early childhood space for many years, I know that this is a sector full of people who are passionate about what they do. The early years are a special time in a child's life, when they are beginning to learn about themselves and the world.

As early years practitioners, we do this important work because we believe that all children deserve a start in life that makes them feel safe, secure and respected.

Early childhood practitioners are set a task – to respond with sensitivity and flexibility to the diverse social and cultural needs of the children in their centre. It is a challenge, but one that more and more practitioners are rising to.

This is very pleasing to see.

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) is the peak Koorie community organisation for Education and Training in Victoria from early childhood through to higher education. We have a birth-to-death philosophy of education. You are never too old, or too young, to learn.

As part of our work in the early years, VAEAI provides support to early education services, advising on ways in which they can improve their centres to be culturally inclusive and celebrate the history and culture of First Nations peoples.

As President of VAEAI, I am impressed with the enormous growth of interest from early childhood educators wanting to expand their knowledge of First Nations history and contemporary culture.

Many of these educators were denied the opportunity to learn about First Nations in their own education. Because of the mass silencing that occurred in the past, educators are often uncertain of where to begin. They might even feel a bit apprehensive. But they are full of good will and curiosity, which is the best starting point.

What we hear a lot at VAEAI is:

I want to teach Koorie history and culture, but:

I'm not sure where to start;

I'm not sure who to consult;

I don't want to say the wrong thing or offend someone.

These are valid concerns. They are concerns that come from a place of respect, of wanting to do the right thing. To respond to these concerns, VAEAI has put together this protocols document.

This document gives an overview of the structure of Koorie education in Victoria. It tells you about the organisations, policies, and practices that make up that structure. The document is designed to work alongside the range of early years resources that VAEAI has produced.

To all early childhood practitioners who are on this path, I commend your efforts. This is a time of exciting change. What we do now will have a positive impact on this generation, and those in the future.

Geraldine Atkinson

VAEAI President



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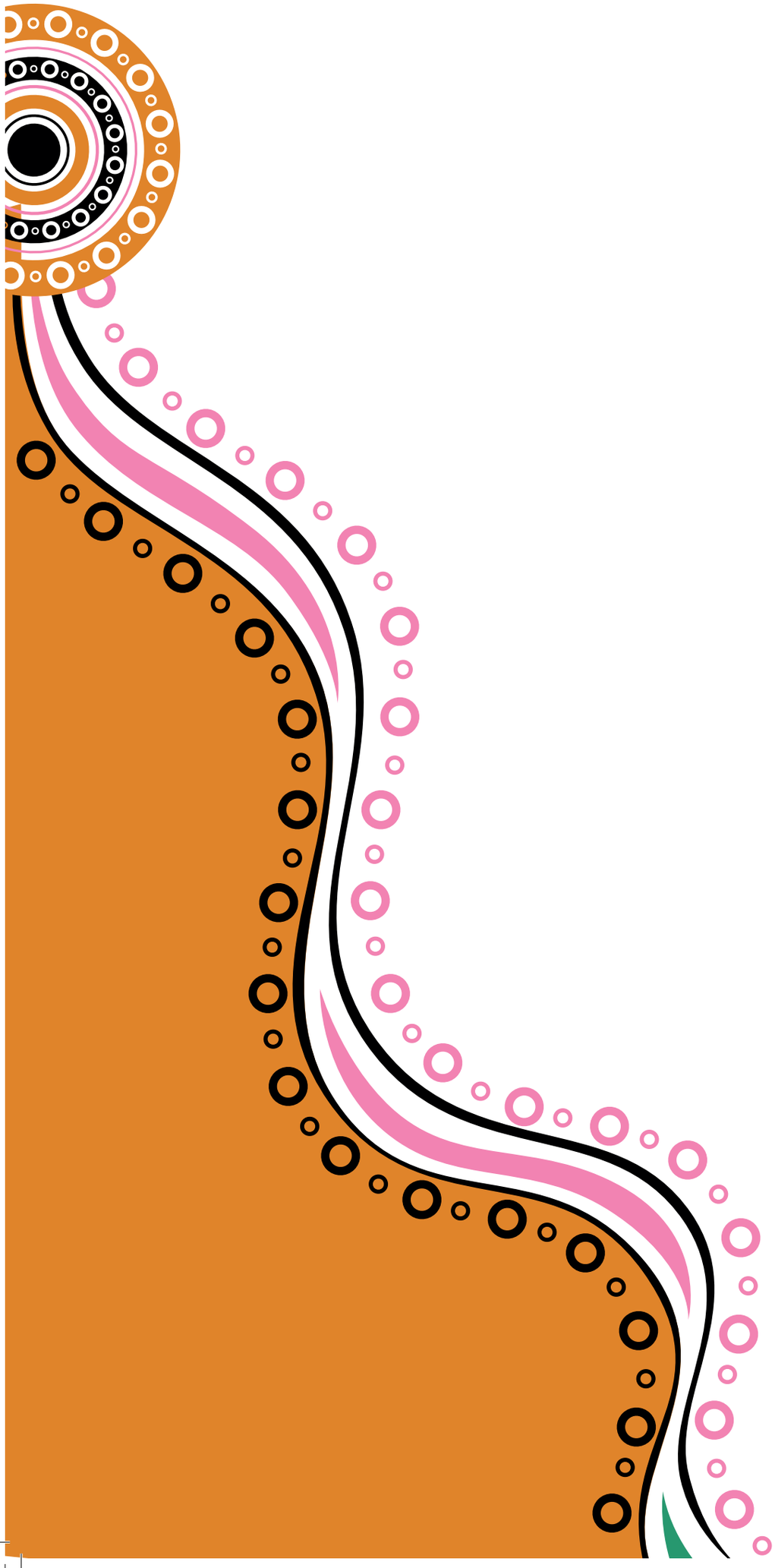


INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated has produced this guide, **VAEAI Koorie Early Years: Best Practice and Protocols - A Practitioner's Guide**, in response to requests from early childhood educators on appropriate protocols for centres to follow when seeking to provide a welcoming educational environment for Victoria's Koorie communities.

This document provides guidance on how best to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives in early childhood services and increase inclusion of Koorie families through respectful use of protocols and local Koorie structures and community.

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation focused on advocating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities by providing advice from Koorie communities to Government on Koorie education and training priorities.

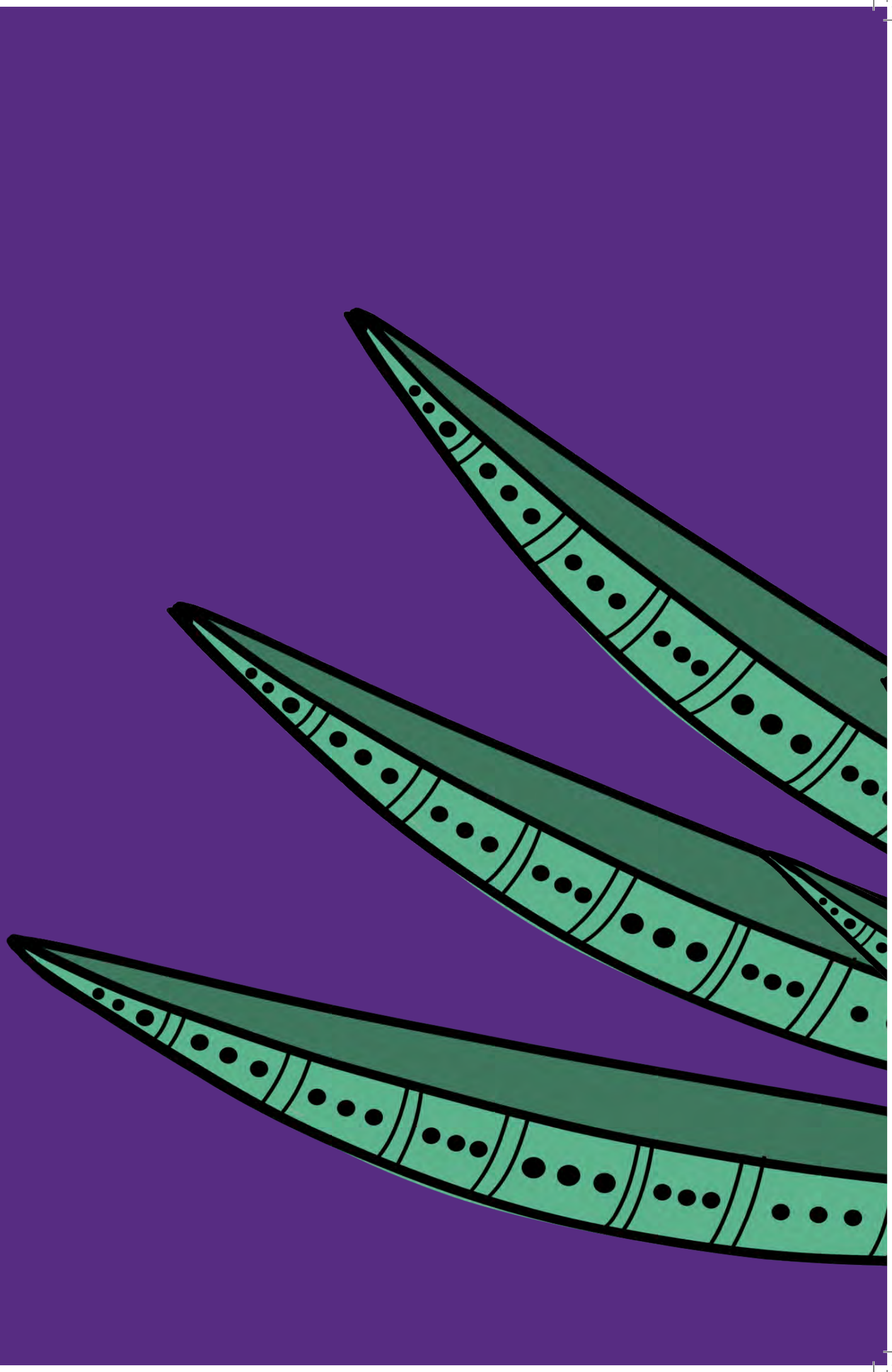
The Koorie community has an invaluable role in contributing to education today and into the future by imparting unique cultural knowledge and heritage to the broader community. Valuing Koorie culture and heritage in the Victorian education sector is an important step in the processes of reconciliation and self-determination.

This guide has been discussed and authorised by VAEAI and representatives from Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECG's), the vehicles through which Koorie parents, carers and community members have a voice in education in Victoria. They represent local Koorie community perspectives and have Statewide coverage.

The protocols described in this guide outline the foundational principles, procedures and behaviours requested of the early childhood education sector in Victoria in order to demonstrate respect to Koorie communities in Victoria.

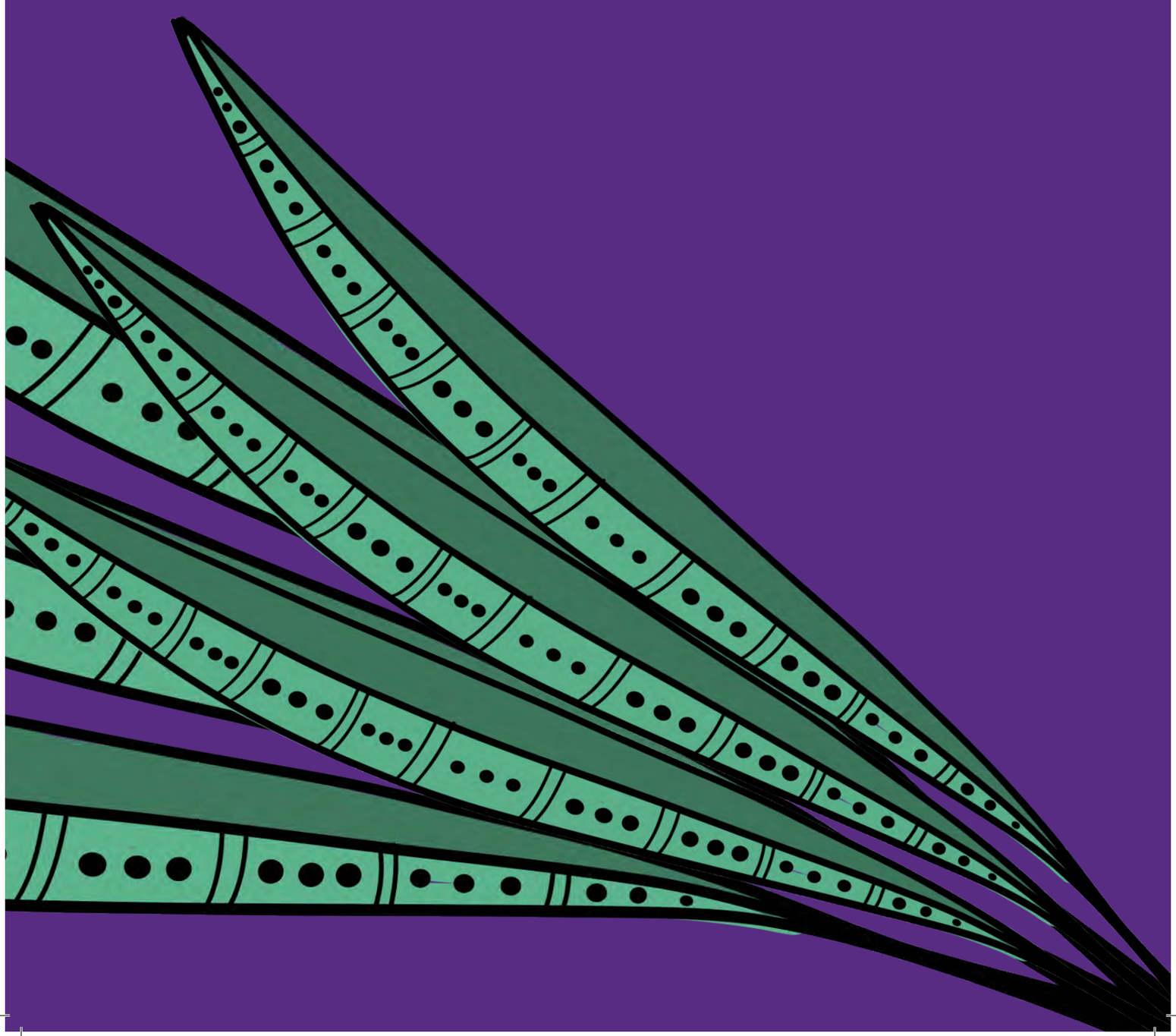
These protocols don't override the discrete cultural values and practices in local Koorie communities. It is important that the protocols are discussed and refined in the context of building relationships and a working partnership between VAEAI's LAECGs and local early childhood centres, in order to develop appropriate local practices for sound school- community partnerships of the various kinds required for positive and progressive school practice.

These protocols include knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture, respect and valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, reflection, research, and relationship building.



SECTION ONE

CONSULTATIVE STRUCTURES FOR KOORIE EDUCATION IN VICTORIA



VAEAI

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation. VAEAI was established in 1976 as a peak state advocacy and advisory body for Koorie education and training.

We advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities in education matters, from early childhood through to post-compulsory. We provide advice to government on the education and training needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

VAEAI Early Years Unit

VAEAI's early years unit provides independent Koorie community advice to local, state and national government departments and agencies. The early years unit also supports and advises services that provide early childhood education for Koorie children.

VAEAP's concept of "school ready" is a confident Koorie child who has gained the learning skills to enter primary school prepared. We also want Koorie children to be secure in and proud of their cultural identity.

VAEAI Early Years Engagement Program (EYEP)

VAEAI's Early Years Engagement Program (EYEP) strengthens, supports, and embeds First Nations perspectives into early childhood services to improve cultural safety and inclusion for Koorie children.

Managed by VAEAI, the program uses eight facilitators across Victoria to connect services with local Aboriginal communities, providing resources and professional development to educators to boost engagement, access, and positive outcomes.

Key functions of the EYEP and VAEAI's Early Years unit include:

- *Building Capacity*: Facilitators work with educators and Early Years Networks to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into curriculum and service design.
- *Strengthening Community Connections*: Linking early childhood services with local Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (ACCOs) and Traditional Elders.
- *Enhancing Cultural Safety*: Promoting welcoming environments for Koorie children and families, increasing access, and ensuring positive experiences.
- *Professional Development*: Delivering training to educators to confidently embed cultural knowledge and perspectives in their teaching.
- *Strategic Support*: Aligning with the Marrung Education Plan and providing advice on Koorie education needs.

IMPORTANT TO NOTE

LAECG members volunteer their time because they are dedicated to improving outcomes in Koorie education. They are not paid for their community work.

LAECGs

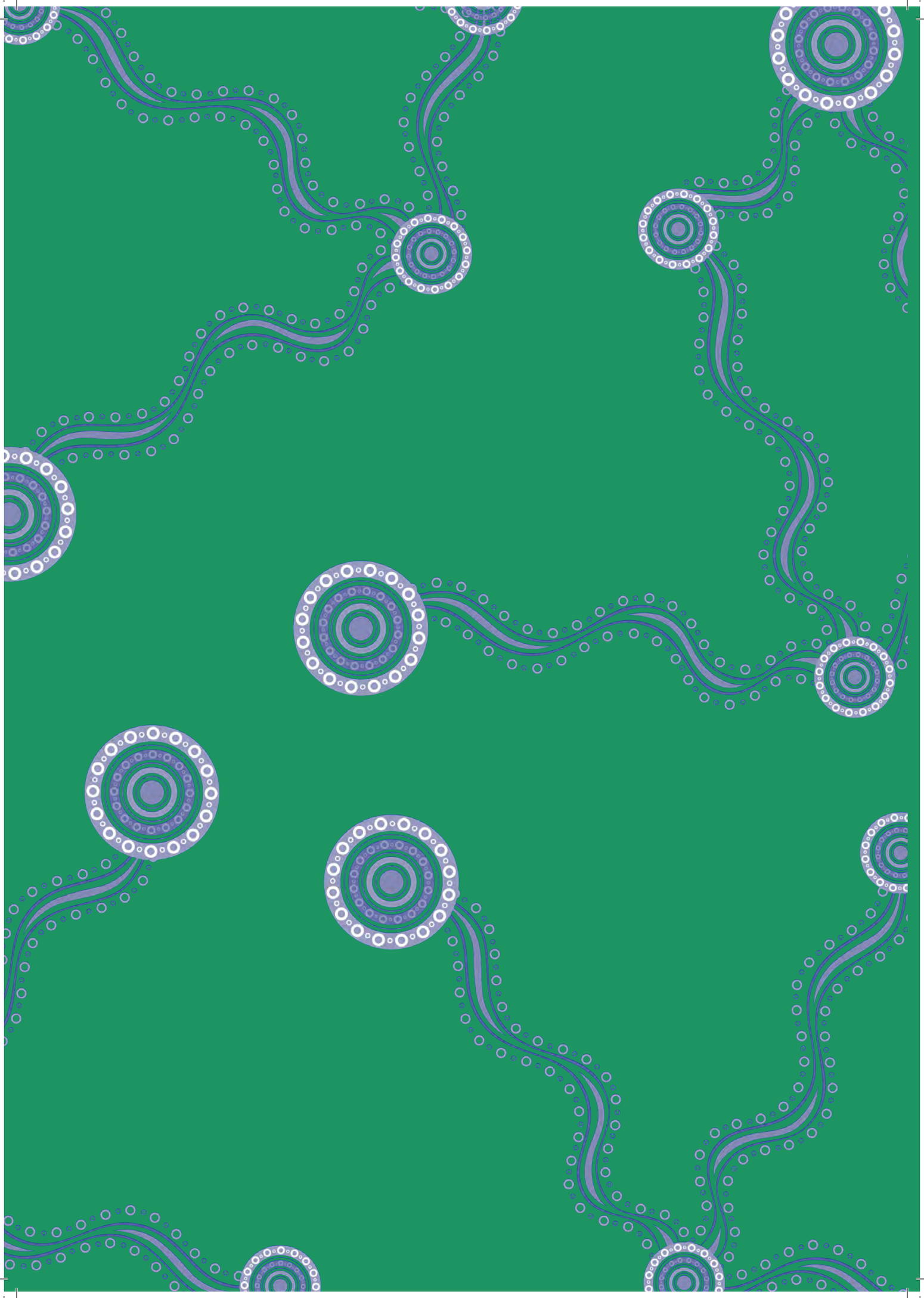
Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECGs) are VAEAI's key constituents and the 'backbone' of the organisation. All representation by VAEAI on behalf of the Victorian Koorie community must be guided by information and perspectives gathered from the 32 LAECGs located across the state.

LAECGs are the strength of VAEAI's unique structure.

At the local level LAECGs are an important link between their local community, educational institutions, organisations, services and government departments. Since 1978, LAECGs have grown from 5 LAECGs to 32 across the state. Membership to LAECGs comprises local Aboriginal community members who have an interest and commitment to Koorie education and bring knowledge and experience to Koorie education issues across all sectors.

The principle of VAEAI is self-determination through local community control. LAECGs are the foundation of this principle. VAEAI is committed to ensuring that Koorie communities in Victoria have a strong voice both on the ground and in the development and implementation of all key education policies. VAEAI's structure allows a process of continuous consultation with the Victorian Koorie communities. VAEAI's strength lies in this structure, and is how VAEAI advocates for the Koorie community.





VICTORIAN STATE GOVERNMENT KOORIE EDUCATION WORFORCE

The Department of Education Koorie Education Workforce assist early years services and schools by providing guidance to enhance cultural inclusion practices, and to support the engagement, attendance, wellbeing and achievement of Koorie learners.

Koorie Education Managers (KEMs)

In Victoria there are four Koorie Education Managers, one in each region. KEMs lead the implementation of Koorie Education priorities and provide programmatic and cross portfolio oversight and expertise in their region supporting learners from 0-18 years.

Koorie Education Coordinators (KECs)

Koorie Education Coordinators lead consistent area-based coordination and provision of support to early years services and schools from the regional Koorie Education Workforce through multi-disciplinary area teams. Early years' service providers, schools, parents and community can obtain assistance with Koorie cultural inclusion, Koorie education guidance and support through their region by contacting the KEC with enquiries.

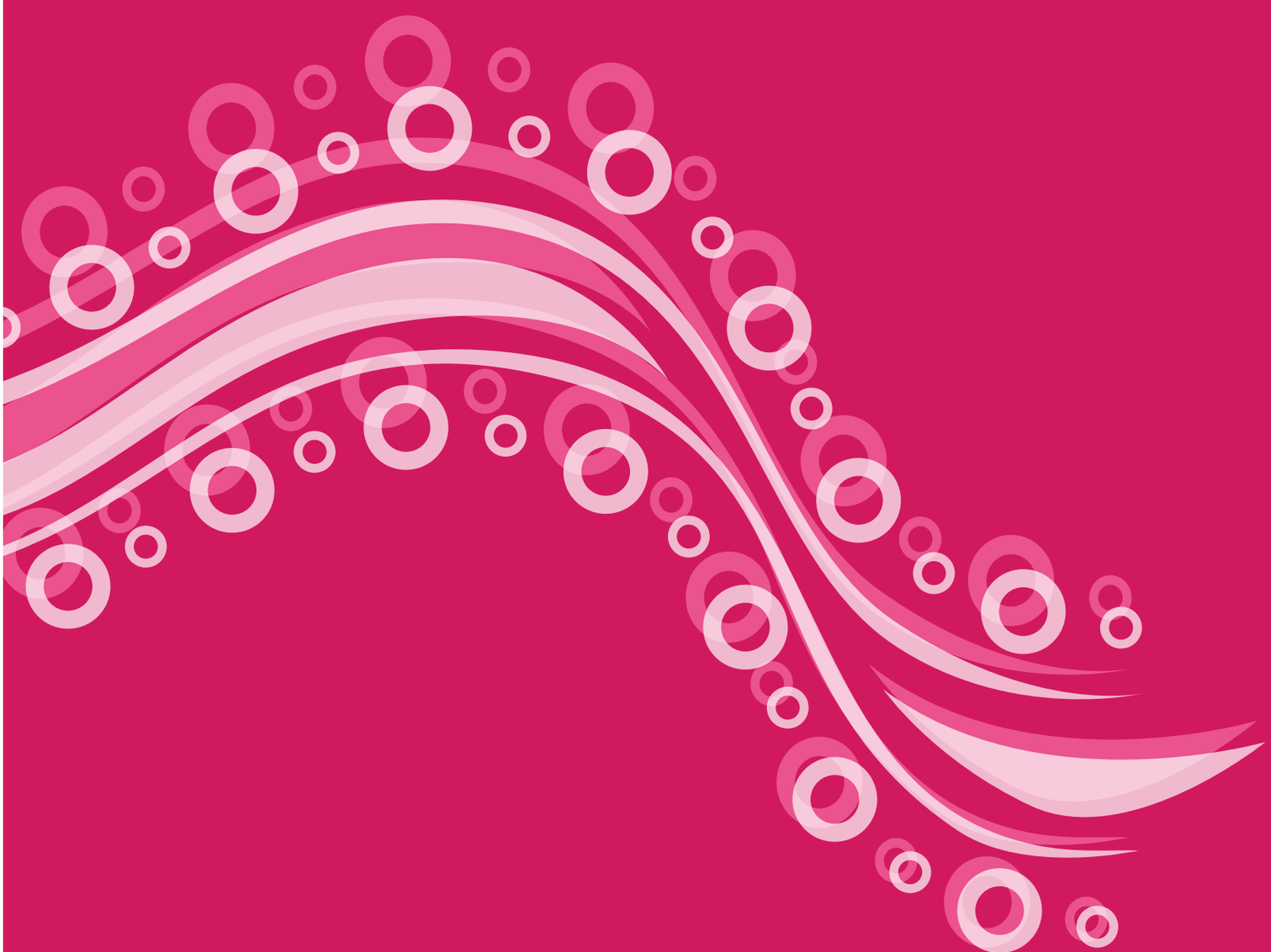
Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESOs)

KESOs are area-based professionals who are members of the local Aboriginal community with an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and the histories. KESOs provide advice to schools about culturally inclusive learning environments, and the co-ordination of services to facilitate improved engagement of Koorie children and young people.



SECTION TWO

GUIDING POLICIES AND FRAMEWORKS



Victorian State Government Policies in Early Childhood

Best Start Best Life Reforms

The Victorian Government has committed to expanding kindergarten programs across the state. This means that:

Free Kinder:
Free Kinder is available for Victorian 3- and 4-year-old children at participating services in both standalone (sessional) services and long day care (childcare) settings.

Pre-Prep:
Four-Year-Old Kindergarten will transition to Pre-Prep. Services will offer between 16 and 30 hours each week of Pre-Prep. Pre-Prep is available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children for between 16 and 25 hours per week from 2026, and between 16 and 30 hours from 2028.

Early Start Kindergarten and Three-Year-Old Kindergarten:
The Victorian Government is continuing to roll out funded kindergarten for all 3 year olds. During the roll-out, there will be no change to Early Start Kindergarten. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children across Victoria can continue to access Early Start Kindergarten, and receive 15 hours of free or low cost kindergarten per week.

Early learning centres:
The Victorian Government is opening 50 new early learning centres in areas that need them most - making childcare and kinder easier to access. The first 4 centres opened in January 2025. These centres are operated by Early Learning Victoria, a Victorian government organisation.

Kindergarten infrastructure:
The Best Start, Best Life reforms will also mean significant investment in infrastructure across the state, including new kindergartens on or near school sites. Substantial grants are available to build, expand and maintain kindergarten services. More information is available in the Building Blocks: Best Start, Best Life Kindergarten Infrastructure Strategy

Kindergarten workforce:
There is increased investment to attract, upskill and retain quality early childhood teachers and educators - scholarships, incentives, traineeships and career advancement programs are available to support our skilled workforce.

To find out more about these reforms visit:
www.vic.gov.au/best-start-best-life-reforms

Transition Learning and Development Statements

It's a kindergarten funding requirement that every child transitioning to school has a Transition Learning and Development Statement.

These statements have an option for the kindergarten educator to indicate if the child is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

A copy of each child's completed Transition Learning and Development Statement should always be provided to the child's family. The family should be given an opportunity to opt out of the Transition Learning and Development Statement being shared with the school. If a child's family does not want relevant information shared with the child's school via the Transition Learning and Development Statement, they are encouraged to discuss this with the child's early childhood educator.

For more information see:
www.vic.gov.au/transition-learning-and-development-statements

Understanding Victoria's Child Safe Standards

In Victoria there are Child Safe Standards which commenced in 2016. The Standards were further enhanced in 2022-23. These Standards place a high priority on respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity.

This includes Standard 1: Services establish a culturally safe environment in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal children are respected and valued.

Early childhood services must comply with all the following elements of this Standard:

- A child's ability to express their culture and enjoy their cultural rights is encouraged and actively supported (1.1)
- Strategies are embedded within the organisation which equip all members to acknowledge and appreciate the strengths of Aboriginal culture and understand its importance to the wellbeing and safety of Aboriginal children and young people (1.2)
- Measures are adopted by the organisation to ensure racism within the organisation is identified, confronted and not tolerated. Any instances of racism are addressed with appropriate consequences (1.3)
- The organisation actively supports and facilitates participation and inclusion within it by Aboriginal children, young people and their families (1.4)
- All of the organisation's policies, procedures, systems and processes together create a culturally safe and inclusive environment and meet the needs of Aboriginal children, young people and their families (1.5)

To find out more, see the Child Safe Standards information sheet:
ccyp.vic.gov.au/assets/resources/New-CSS/Child-Safe-Standards-Information-Sheet-30.01.23.docx

Victorian Early Years Learning Development Framework

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) advances all children's learning and development from birth to eight years. It does this by supporting all early childhood professionals to work together and with families to achieve common outcomes for all children.

Built into this framework is regard for the importance of Equity and Diversity. The VEYLDF states that children learn best when early childhood professionals:

- promote cultural awareness in all children, including greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being;
- support children to develop a sense of place, identity and a connection to the land.

It identifies five Early Years Learning and Development Outcomes for all children:

- Children have a strong sense of identity
- Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Children are confident and involved learners
- Children are effective communicators

The framework provides examples of when children demonstrate that they have achieved the outcomes.

For more information see:
www.vic.gov.au/victorian-early-years-learning-development-framework-veyldf#the-veyldf-framework

Koorie Specific Education Policies in Victoria

Victoria's Commitment to Koorie Education

Aboriginal people of Victoria are recognised by the Victorian Government as 'descendants of Australia's First people, with their diverse spiritual, social, cultural and economic relationship with their traditional lands and waters'.

The *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* makes explicit reference to Indigenous culture in two parts – in the preamble, and then in the context of the right to culture:

[Section 19]

Aboriginal persons hold distinct cultural rights and must not be denied the right, with other members of their community -

a) to enjoy their identity and culture; and

b) to maintain and use their language; and

c) to maintain their kinship ties; and

d) to maintain their distinctive spiritual, material and economic relationship with the land and waters and other resources.

Koorie

Koorie is a term for Aboriginal people, whose traditional lands and waters exist within the boundaries that today frame the state of Victoria. They are often collectively called Koorie peoples or Koories (sometimes spelt 'Koori').

Other terms that are used for Australian Indigenous people include 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous', First Nations Peoples', or for Indigenous people traditionally from the Torres Strait region 'Torres Strait Islander' to 'Islander'. When referring to Australia's First Peoples, upper case or capital 'A' and capital 'I' are used for Aboriginal and Indigenous Australians respectively.

The best way to find out which terms to use when referring to the local community is to listen to Koorie community members themselves, and hear what term they use to describe themselves culturally.



Country

Country refers to the traditional lands of a particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island language or cultural group.

This is commonly seen and heard in phrases such as 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgement of Country', "I grew up on Country", "We're taking students and families back to Country for language and culture workshops".

Sometimes the name of the clan or nation may differ from the language they speak.

When talking about Country, people may also talk about Nation/s. Nations refers to a larger grouping or federation of clan groups, often combining a cluster of geographically, socially, politically and/or linguistically linked groups.

Koorie Education in the Early Childhood Context

Family and community are valuable sources of cultural knowledge and skills for all early childhood professionals in developing cultural competence. Early childhood settings that promote Aboriginal culture and perspectives support Aboriginal children's sense of identity and belonging, as well as promoting a culture of understanding and respect towards cultural diversity for all children.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children identity encompasses connection to Country, family and kinship structures. Of course Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have differing degrees of access to cultural knowledge, like all children, and much will depend on their specific context and history.

Children's personal, family and cultural histories shape their learning and development, and children learn best when early childhood professionals respect their diversity and provide them with support, opportunities and experiences. Early childhood professionals should promote cultural awareness in all children, including greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being.





The Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016 – 2026

The *Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan* 2016-2026 was launched by the Victorian Department of Education and Training. Unlike Aboriginal education strategies and plans before it, Marrung encompasses Early Years, Schooling, VET and Higher Education, and places the Koorie Community at the core of its implementation. Marrung was co-developed by DE with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation.

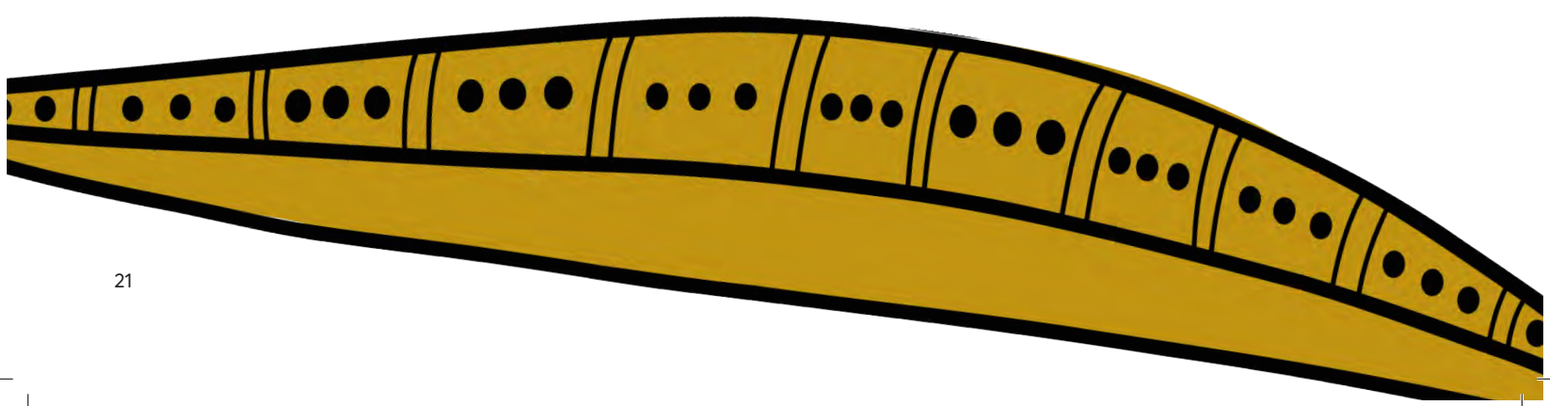
Marrung requires all services to embed Koorie aspirations and outcomes as core business, including early childhood services, schools and training providers. Marrung requires all services to embed Koorie aspirations and outcomes as core business, including early childhood services, schools and training providers.

'Marrung' is the Wemba Wemba word for the Murray Cypress pine tree, representing branches of education and knowledge.

We thank the Wemba Wemba people for allowing the use of their language in the naming of this plan.

"The Victorian Government, through the Department of Education and Training, has worked with the Victorian Koorie community to develop Marrung. The Government has listened and has heard. Marrung sets out a 10 year vision and identifies the significant actions its achievement. From this plan there will be some ground-breaking change."

Geraldine Atkinson, VAEAI President



Commonwealth commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education

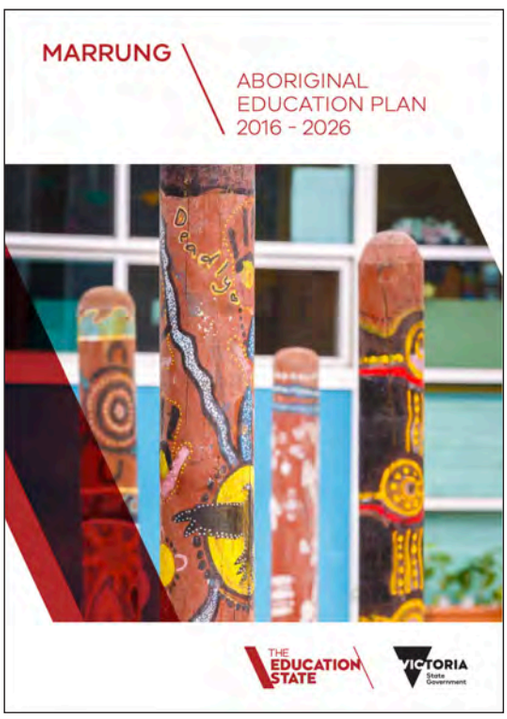
Within Australia, recent developments in education at the national level, like the state level, call for greater involvement of First Peoples in education.

The Australian Curriculum requires that schools incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders histories and cultures as one of three cross-curriculum priorities to be embedded across all subject areas.

To supplement the Australian Curriculum, the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has outlined new Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST), which include requirements for both the teaching of Koorie students as well as teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content to all students. The APST requires that all teachers possess specific training and experience in:

Focus area 1.4: Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: Demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of the impact of culture, cultural identity and linguistic background on the education of students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Focus area 2.4: Understand and respect Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians: Demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.





Pre-service and In-service Teacher Training Requirements

Under the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, all pre-service and in-service teachers (schools and early childhood teachers) are required to demonstrate detailed competencies in both the teaching of Koorie students, and of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content to all students/children.

All in-service teachers and other practising education staff are asked to undertake professional development (PD) to ensure they have the skills and confidence to:

- teach Koorie students/children in a culturally-sensitive, appropriate way;
- demonstrate, through example, the importance of the school environment being culturally inclusive and appropriate for Koorie students/children and families;
- incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and perspectives in their teachings.

Early Childhood Education Centres, Schools and teachers can seek information on PD options from the Learning and Teaching Division, DE, or the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT).

The Victorian Department of Education's School Readiness Funding supports educators to build their cultural capability to support Koorie families and children, such as by accessing VAEAI's Professional Development program. To find out more visit: https://www.vic.gov.au/school-readiness-funding

All pre-service teachers currently studying at university are asked to develop the skills necessary to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies in the classroom (school and kindergarten), and specifically, to learn to teach Koorie students/children in an effective, appropriate, culturally-sensitive way.

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SECTION THREE

VALUES AND PROTOCOLS

Core Values

Protocols are nothing without the values that underpin them. We recommend that all early childhood centres begin with the following philosophy:

> **Every Koorie child in Victoria is precious. We honour Koorie children enrolled in our centre, and we make a commitment that starts in early childhood and continues throughout life.**

Core value: nurture and aspiration

For early years services to:

- nurture each and every Koorie child as they grow to become custodians and protectors of their unique heritage, and contribute this special heritage to the whole Victorian community
- provide education and development services that are holistic and meet the child's interests and their families aspirations for success.

Core value: ethical research

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the traditional owners of Australia and have the oldest living culture in the world. It is a dynamic culture that is based on a strong spirituality through the 'Dreamtime or Dreaming.'

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture is underpinned by a cohesive kinship structure, many different nations with their own languages and a complex social system.

In order to have a knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and Torres Islander cultures you need to conduct research and speak to your LAECG.

You can also conduct your own research to build up your knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture. There are many resources that have been written that are a positive portrayal of Aboriginal people and their cultures.

Here are some tips to build your awareness:

- **Recognise that Koorie children have a strong cultural background.**

  Do this by finding out contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Ask yourself the following questions: where are Aboriginal people living today? What is their culture? Do they still identify strongly as a people? What are issues that impact on communities today?

- **Recognise that Koorie identity is not based on the colour of a child's skin.**

  Identity is very important for Aboriginal children. There is a common stereotype that is perpetuated by the wider community through the media that Aboriginal people have to be a certain colour to identify as Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander. This is not true and can be very hurtful. Don't use terms such as 'part Aboriginal' as this is based on the outdated, scientifically inaccurate and racist terminology. Terms like this come from the past when Aboriginal people were defined in terms of their 'blood quantum,' (e.g terms like 'full-blood' and 'half-caste.')

- **Use local Aboriginal words when possible**

  You can check with the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) to make sure you have permission and that you're using the right words.

Core value: Reflection

As an educator, make time for personal reflection. We all have attitudes about different cultures and sometimes these attitudes are not positive and many are not based on fact. Our attitudes impact on the way we teach children from different cultural groups. Attitudinal change is not easy to achieve but it starts with reflection.

Examine stereotypes (if any) you have about Aboriginal people and think about where these attitudes come from. Question whether they come from the media, family, other people's opinions, or books. Change any stereotypes you have.

Challenge yourself to change attitudes you may have that are not based on fact. Do this by finding out the truth and dissecting any beliefs that are not factual.

Core value: Respecting Koorie culture

Respect for Koorie culture comes by valuing it. Understand that Koorie culture is the culture of this land and as such is of great value because it teaches about how to look after country and how to value country. Country is very important to culture, therefore acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the country where the centre is located.

Core Values Continued

Core value: Relationship Building

It takes time to build relationships with the families who attend your centre. With Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, there can be suspicion and mistrust of education institutions based on past experiences and history.

Invite parents to come into the centre. Make them feel that their children will receive the same love and support from the staff at the centre that they give them. This will most likely be the first time their child will be away from their family since birth, so make sure you are sensitive to this.

Introductory protocols are important. Be prepared to spend time sharing personal background information about yourself. Realise that relationships take time to develop.

Be patient when asking questions. Look, listen and learn, as it may take time for some community people to become involved. Some people may work towards giving their opinions by initially talking about other issues or stories.

Do not expect every Koorie person (including children at your service) to know about or want to talk publicly about Koorie cultures, families, histories or issues. Some Koorie people might not openly express an opinion. They may choose to talk indirectly about an issue if they do not agree with the previous speaker. And not all Koorie people will share the same opinions and feelings. Different opinions should be acknowledged and valued.

The use of silence should not be misunderstood. It is important that this silence is respected and not interrupted unnecessarily.

There are different types of knowledge – for example, spiritual knowledge and scientific knowledge – and these may conflict. Educators should be sensitive to these differences when talking to a Koorie person about issues and experiences.

Do not force a point of view

Use language that respects the integrity |and beliefs of the person or group with whom you're meeting. Be prepared to |accept that some questions you have may remain unanswered.

Family obligations and funerals affect many people in Koorie and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and may impact on previous obligations made to an education setting (kinder/school). Immediate and extended family obligations will always take first priority.

Remember that different families have different values and cultural beliefs, even if they are from the same community. Consult with a variety of people from the local community.

Be positive about the children

Aboriginal parents want to hear positive messages about their children. If you have any concerns to raise, do this while also concentrating on the positive outcomes of the child. Tell the parents how the children's day was and how happy they were so the parents feel comfortable to bring them back.

Any engagement between an Early Years centre and the Koorie community in Victoria should be guided by the following principles.



Protocols for engagement between Koorie communities and centres

Respectful communication

In Victoria, Elders and other respected people from Koorie communities are often heard referred to as Aunty or Uncle. These titles are a respectful recognition of an Elder or respected person's role in their community. At the same time, Aunty or Uncle is also used for relatives who are direct aunties or uncles.

Aunty or Uncle is also used informally across Koorie extended families to show respect for generational seniority, for example:

- extension of the Aunty or Uncle title sometimes to cousins who are of an older generation, or in other roles commanding intergenerational respect within the community,
- Koorie childcare workers being called aunty or uncle by the children in their care.

Aunty or Uncle is also used by some non-Aboriginal people to show respect which is used a little differently because they are not Koorie community members. However, it is recommended that a non-Indigenous person should refrain from using the Aunty or Uncle title in one-on-one communication unless the Elder or respected person has invited them to use the Aunty or Uncle title, or another Koorie community member has recommended this use of Aunty or Uncle.

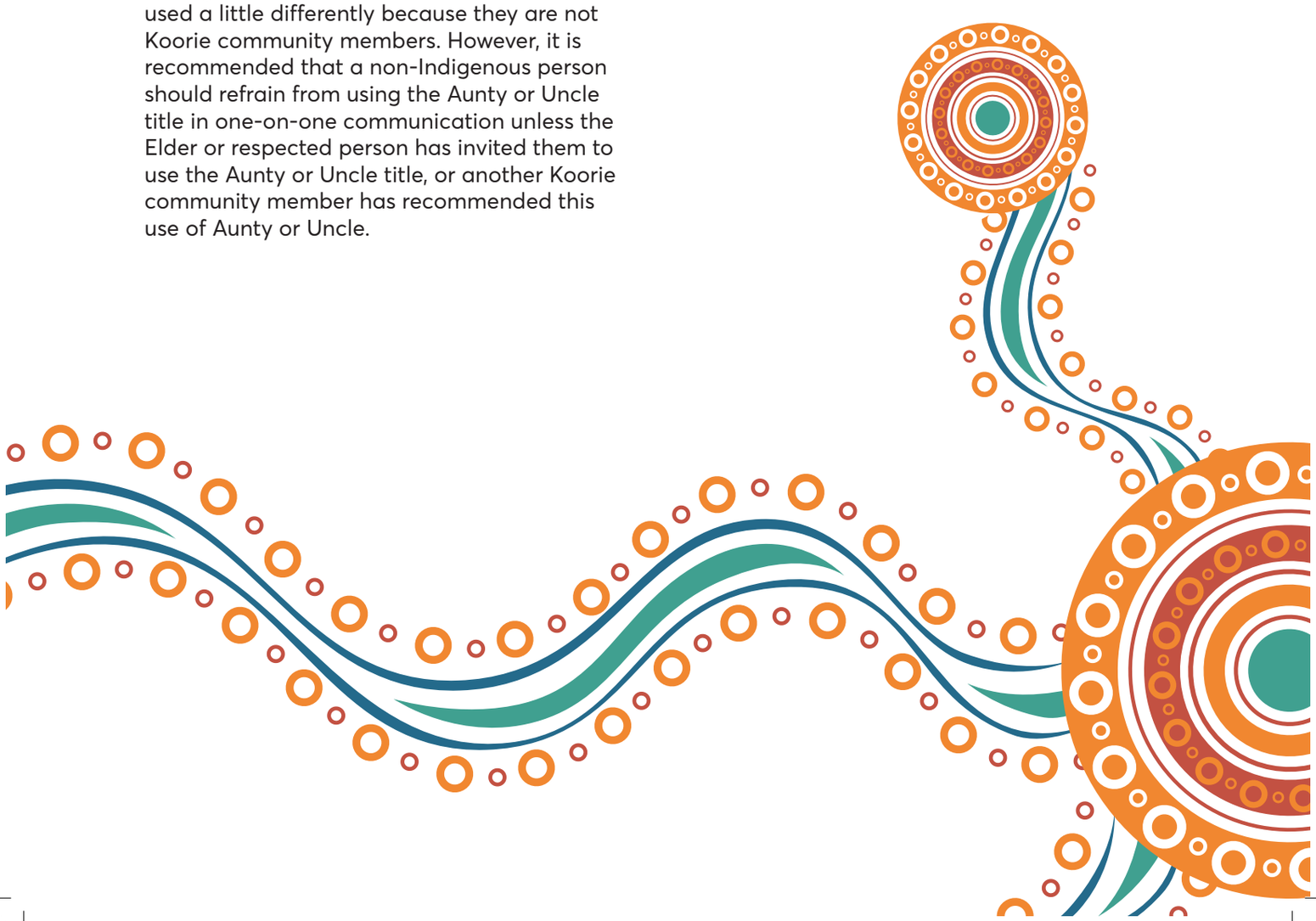
Respectful partnerships between Koorie communities and centres

There are two main types of partnerships between our Koorie communities and centres:

- Partnerships for the successful education of each Koorie child;
- partnerships for embedding and delivering learning about local Koorie histories and heritage, culture and perspectives across the Victorian Curriculum, for all Victorian children.

Both types of partnership, to be delivered respectfully and appropriately, must be guided by the Koorie community.

Partnerships require clear roles between the centre and local Koorie community and the appropriate, precise defining of roles of members of the community and centre staff.



Protocols for engagement between Koorie communities and centres

Local Protocols for engaging with VAEAI and LAECGS

Local and state level protocols for the delivery of education and training services have been developed in VAEAI partnering with the Koorie community through Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECGs).

LAECGs:

- Are made up of local Koorie community members who volunteer their time because they want to see better outcomes for our people through education and training;
- are recognised as the primary source of advice on education and training matters at the local level;
- participate as equal partners in the planning, development, operation, monitoring and evaluation of local education programs containing Koorie content.

Central and Regional DET staff will ensure that they work together with VAEAI and its LAECGs to implement the partnership. Any provision of education services involving Koorie children or Koorie curriculum should be done in consultation with the appropriate LAECG/s in the region.

In locations where there is no active LAECG, or the LAECG is unavailable to assist, schools and education providers are encouraged to seek advice and assistance from VAEAI.

Protocol for people approaching services to Offer Services to Koorie Families

From time-to-time staff in early childhood centres may be approached by organisations or individuals wanting to access Koorie families directly to promote and engage them in various Indigenous projects or programs, including research projects.

We ask that these approaches be redirected promptly to the local LAECG, and/or VAEAI, who will consider the offered project or program after a presentation is made to them. The VAEAI Secretariat (based in Northcote) is also able to be involved in this process where needed, on behalf of the local Koorie community.

After the LAECG and/or liaise, they can advise the centre on the ethical validity of the proposed project, and where agreed families can be then contacted for them to consider taking up the offer.

VAEAI can help direct early childhood centres to their LAECG where needed, assist directly in regions where there is no LAECG and/or be part of the consultation process where the LAECG is unavailable or unable to assist.

This protocol places an appropriate buffer and screening process for unexpected approaches from centres that may be inappropriate for Koorie families.

Protocol for teaching Koorie content

Local Koorie cultural and historical content should be a priority and used wherever possible and appropriate.

The Koorie community-preferred education model focuses at the local level first. As a starting point, find out whose land or Country the school is situated on. Find out about your local Koorie community. Reach out for advice.

Then build your knowledge by considering regional, state, national and international Indigenous perspectives.

Centres need to appreciate and acknowledge that this local content may not be representative of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the centre.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the centre may come from families who have moved to the area from other parts of the state or country. It is therefore also important to include material about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures and histories from other regions of the state, and parts of the country.

It is best practice to identify where each teaching resource you use comes from, for example 'this is a creation story told by the Gunditjmara people of south-west Victoria' or 'we're about to watch a dance performed by Yolngu women from East Arnhem Land.'

In Victorian schools, protocols for teaching and interacting with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from outside of Victoria do not differ from those for Victorian Koorie students and families.

It is important for schools to acknowledge and respect the distinct Country, culture and history of any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander individual, whether they are from Victoria or elsewhere in Australia.

Building awareness of Eurocentrism

Eurocentrism is seeing the world from a European perspective, denying the perspectives and experiences of non-Europeans. Sometimes these perspectives are so ingrained and dominant that they go unquestioned.

Reconciliation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples requires that schools and teachers commit to be alert to the biases of eurocentrism and the historical inaccuracies this can foster.

Accurate understanding and teaching of Australia's history should be founded upon Australia's complex, ancient Indigenous cultural history, not on recent examples in the last 200 years of Europeans discovering aspects of Australia that have been well known by First Peoples for tens of thousands of years.

For example:

'Lawrence Hargraves discovered gold in New South Wales' – INACCURATE, consider this alternative:

'Lawrence Hargraves was the first European to have his finding of gold, on Wiradjuri land, made public.'

In the first statement, the facts that the 'discovery' was on Wiradjuri land and that

Wiradjuri people knew of gold long before, are left out rendering the teaching

Eurocentric. The second statement is more factually enriched and correct by incorporating an Aboriginal perspective in the teaching.

Building awareness of Koorie English

Koorie English is a dialect of English that has evolved from traditional Aboriginal languages. Because language is culture, it contains the culture of Aboriginal people in various parts of Australia.

It is common in Victoria for some Koorie children to speak amongst their families and communities in Koorie English, which is a distinct Australian English dialect that incorporates Koorie specific phrasing, idioms, forms of address and humour.

There is a resource on the Fuse website (fuse.education.vic.gov.au) called the Koorie English Teacher Guidance Package that gives a very good overview about Koorie English.

Take care with correcting a Koorie child's language. Correction of the child's language, particularly when targeting the idioms of a dialect, makes the child feel that the 'mother tongue' they bring with them to the centre is not a legitimate. This can lead to a child being confused about their language, embarrassed about the way they speak, and not wanting to come to the centre.

It is enough for educators to model Standard Australian English, which will assist the child in the natural process of code-switching (switching between dialects). Children are flexible learners, capable of acquiring different languages and dialects which they then use in a variety of contexts, as appropriate.

In 2012, VAEAI undertook research into the role and importance of Koorie English for Victorian Koorie students, and in particular code-switching. Code-switching refers to a person's ability to move back and forth between two languages or dialects depending on who they are speaking to and in what context. Code-switching is also a skill that people of multi-cultural and bi-lingual backgrounds have long recognised as necessary for success within mainstream education and employment.

Koorie students often attain code-switching skills naturally, as they switch from speaking Koorie English in the home and amongst family and peers, to Standard Australian English (SAE) in the classroom and more formal environments. When this skill is encouraged, Koorie students are able to gain a full grasp of the SAE required for academic achievement, while maintaining a strong cultural identity through the geographical and kinship linkages associated with their home language.



Protocols for involving Koorie Speakers

In light of increased expectations and requirements of schools with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, as outlined in the Australian Curriculum, we can expect a greater role for Koorie community members within their local centres.

Koorie community members are best placed to share cultural knowledge and expertise with centres, and presentations by local Koorie people should be incorporated into centre curriculum and events.

When inviting a local member of the Koorie community to share their knowledge, the centre should:

- Ask the LAECG to nominate a community representative/s, or if an individual has already been recommended advise the LAECG, and ensure the LAECG that the guest speaker will be treated with care and respect;
- arrange to spend time with the guest speaker before the class event, to discuss the plan, especially to check if there are any sensitivity issues, and to build trust;
- discuss any fees and reimbursement costs and plan accordingly arrange any travel and transport requirements for the guest speaker if they need it encourage the guest speaker to bring a family member or friend with them for support, especially if there is any concern about coming to the school alone discuss any assistance needed or difficulties such as wheelchair access or no stairs (low steps);
- provide a welcoming, informal setting for the guest speaker (eg. in a classroom have chairs in a circle);
- ensure students know the title and name of the guest speaker they must use to show respect;
- ensure the guest speaker knows that they do not need to discuss anything, or answer any questions, that they are not comfortable with and should the session become unexpectedly uncomfortable for them then they have free choice to withdraw from it;
- ensure the guest speaker knows that the teacher and school will not condone any student misbehaviour, and should any occur, that the teacher responds immediately.



Acknowledgement and Welcome to Country

Pre-colonisation, Australia was not made up of one country, but rather many Countries and Nations (approximately 200). Each Country or Nation had their own language, lore, traditions, customs, stories, song lines, art, dance, and ecosystems.

For Aboriginal people, the concept of Country goes beyond boundaries that outline a certain area of land. The meaning of Country is more than just connection to the land through ownership. It is the recognition that the land is the 'mother'.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced significant exclusion from Australian society for many years. At the same time, many non-Indigenous Australians have not had the opportunity to learn about, and celebrate, the rich cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people during events is one way of ending this exclusion. It recognises the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first people of this land and promotes awareness of the history and culture of Indigenous people.



How to do an Acknowledgement of Country at your centre

An Acknowledgement of Country can be given by any member of the community, Indigenous and non-indigenous, who wishes to pay their respects to the Traditional Owners of the land on which the event or meeting is taking place.

It is important to try to find out the name of the Aboriginal Nation you wish to acknowledge. You can refer to the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation of Languages Map or get in contact with your local Aboriginal organisation/Co-operative.

In more everyday situations, you could also adapt the language of 'Acknowledgment of Country' to make it something that is understandable and relatable for the children. For example, during circle time the children could acknowledge, say hello to, or thank (for example) the local Traditional Owners, the land, the sky, their teachers, family and their friends.

You can also display an 'Acknowledgement of Country' plaque at the entrance of the centre, and teach the children who the local custodians are, and display information about them (such as local significant sites, stories and/or Elders.)

An example of an Acknowledgement of Country:

"I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of this land, the [insert local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island Nation]. I would like to pay respect to their Elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are here today."



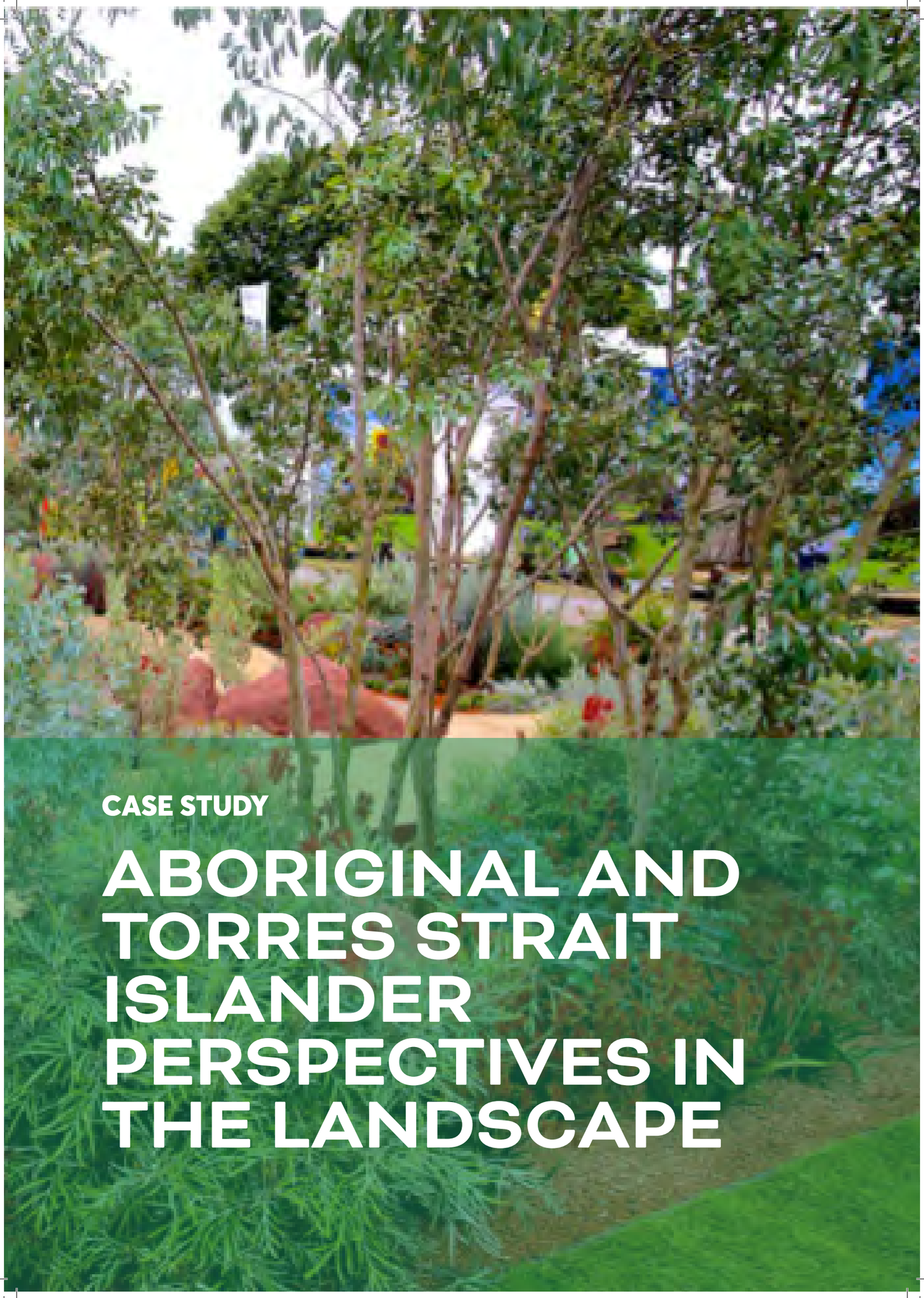
How to have a Welcome to Country at your centre

An official 'Welcome to Country' can only be provided by a member of the Traditional Owner group from the Country where the event is taking place and is performed on ceremonial and other significant occasions to follow traditional protocols and show appropriate respect (as opposed to an Acknowledgement of Country).

The right to welcome people on one's land is an inviolable right. Welcome to Country therefore is a fundamental and traditional practice and should be included wherever possible, particularly in formal occasions to honour First Nations peoples and to demonstrate a genuine respect for Koorie culture.

You could have a formal Welcome to Country at the opening of your centre, your graduation, or at an important event, for example, if you were opening a new Indigenous plant garden. You can invite a local Traditional Owner to come and give a Welcome to Country and do a smoking ceremony.





CASE STUDY

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PERSPECTIVES IN THE LANDSCAPE

Case Study

Many early childhood centres are looking to create spaces that honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. In outdoor areas this can mean incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, design, and visual storytelling, and of course Indigenous plants. Australia has some of the most unique plant life in the world, and Indigenous plant knowledge stretches back tens of thousands of years.

Landscape design provides us with the ability to communicate our ideas in the physical environment while interacting with nature. From the texture of a path, the different colours of wood and steel - options for the 'hardscape' are endless. Then the different options of trees, shrubs and grasses can bring an area to life.

For Early Childhood Practitioners, you may be wondering where to start. Maybe you are asking yourself, how can I assist children to learn and engage with Aboriginal culture in the landscape? Who do I approach? How do I find local plants and stories? These questions might seem a bit daunting, but there are excellent resources already in place to help you.

Firstly, co-designing and involving local Aboriginal people and Traditional owners, through community-controlled organisations such as the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI), is key. Involving them from the start is even more important – it allows their stories and ideas to shape the project and embed their culture into the landscape.

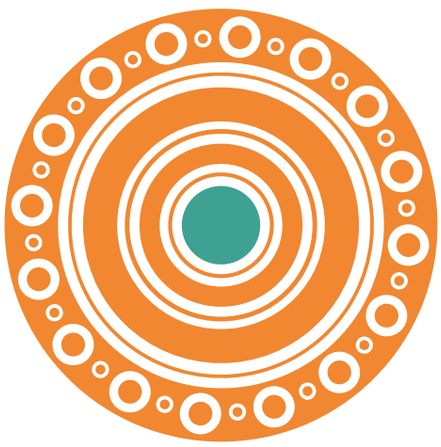
Monero/Ngarigo Gunaikurnai man and landscape designer Charles Solomon says that consulting with your local Aboriginal community from the very beginning prevents a "bolt on approach, where spaces are designed and built and 70% of the way through a project, we realise that we probably should involve Aboriginal people. Avoid this at all costs."

Secondly, make sure you are balancing your ambition with realistic outcomes. Your budget may not allow you to do everything, but pacing, planning, and staging your ideas will give you more success.

Lastly, building a garden – like any construction project – can be stressful. Make sure you access experts where you can, there are people out there who can help you. To gain some inspiration, make sure you visit the Children's Garden at the Royal Botanic Gardens. It's a great balance between sensory experience and learning for children

The Australian Indigenous Design Charter (AIDC) is a great starting place (see link below). It's key to audit your space to identify current gaps and opportunities.

https://indigenousdesigncharter.com.au/australian-indigenous-design-charter/



Landscape design provides us with the ability to communicate our ideas in the physical environment while interacting with nature.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Plant an Indigenous/bush/garden

Teach the children about the plants and traditional ways of using them. Some of the Australian Indigenous plants include the Australian daisy (Brachyscome), Banksia. Banksias), Bird's nest fern (Asplenium australasicum) and Bottlebrush (Callistemon).

Display Aboriginal signage, photos and artwork in your centre

Display the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island flags in the centre, Koorie artwork, photos of significant Koorie leaders such as William Cooper and Sir Pastor Doug Nicholls and photos of contemporary Aboriginal sporting heroes such as Ashleigh Barty and Adam Goodes.

Use Koorie resources in the everyday learning curriculum

Read Koorie stories to all the children. Use Koorie resources in your teaching ie when teaching English, use Koorie books such as 'The Adventures of the Little Black Trackas'. There are repetitive English words in these books that can be used to teach English such as 'can you find', a phrase that is repeated in 'the first book in the series, 'The Adventures of the Little Black Trackas: Yedabila'. These books are based on Aboriginal culture ie: tracking animals.

Dance and movement

Organise for Koorie dancers, artists and musicians to visit your kindergarten to teach the children corroboree, art and Aboriginal music. Decorate the children's faces with body paint and teach them how the paint relates to the dance.

Play Koorie games

Teach the children traditional Koorie games such as string games, Marngrook with a possum skin ball, and hunting games. You can find out more about these games on the internet.

Acknowledge and celebrate significant Koorie cultural events

Encourage the whole centre to celebrate significant Koorie events, such as NAIDOC week, Sorry Day, the Indigenous AFL round, Reconciliation Week, Mabo Day, and, the National Apology to the Stolen Generations.

Ask an Aboriginal Elder or someone from the local Aboriginal community to can come to the centre and explain the significance of these events and to participate in activities with the children.

Develop a Reconciliation Action Plan

Work with your local Koorie community to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). This does not have to be a large document that has many different actions. No matter where your organisation, school or club is at on its reconciliation journey, there is a RAP to suit. Schools and early learning Centres can develop a RAP through Narragunnawali. Workplaces can be supported to develop four types of RAP – Reflect, Innovate, Stretch or Elevate.

PREPARATION FOR SCHOOL

The transition to school can be very difficult for many children. Those from different cultural backgrounds such as Koorie children can face additional challenges.

It is imperative that Early Childhood Centres develop strategies to support the transition to school for Koorie children.

Acknowledge and support engagement with Koorie children's families

Families are very important in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities. It is fundamental to engage with the families, seeking their guidance on how best to support and respond to the needs of their children as they transition to school.

Recognise that this might include a wider group of people beyond the immediate family because of the Aboriginal kinship system.

Support family members to know where their children will attend school. Give the parents opportunity to go to the school prior to their child starting. Invite them to go into the classroom and speak to the teachers before their children attend school.

Communicate with the parents about their child's transition to school. Speak to the parents about the transition whenever and as many times as you can.

