**TRANSITION TO SCHOOL**

**SUPPORTING RECIPROCAL VISITS**

**(KOORIE FOCUS)**



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DISCLAIMER

Semann & Slattery will bear no responsibility for any loss or inconvenience arising to the client organisation and/or any third party, which may arise through use of the data and/or recommendations from this project and the final report. If you have any question regarding this report, please contact the Directors at [info@semannslattery.com](mailto:info@semannslattery.com)

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# Executive summary

The *2015/2016* *Transition to School: Supporting Reciprocal Visits* project, builds on previous Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) projects, which identified the importance of reciprocal visits and joint professional learning in supporting a positive transition to school for children and families. This includes stronger relationships and more open communication between educators and teachers in prior-to-school settings and in schools. It also includes greater knowledge of and respect for pedagogical practice across educational settings, resulting in increased understanding of the continuity of children’s learning.

The sites of Morwell and Mildura were selected for the current project due to the high numbers of Koorie children and families in these areas (the term Koorie is most used throughout this report, and refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in these geographic areas). The project aimed to complement existing initiatives across the selected sites to enhance transition to school approaches for Koorie children and families, building on the strengths and successes of current transition practices. This report details work undertaken in these sites by the project team between October 2015 and June 2016. The project team included representatives from Semann & Slattery, the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University and the Boon Wurrung Foundation.

Participating prior-to-school services and schools were selected by the DET in close collaboration with local DET representatives. This included Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) and Koorie Preschool Assistants (KPSAs). Initial participant lists provided to the project team included KESOs, KPSAs and selected educators and teachers in prior-to-school settings and schools, as well as a list of other local stakeholders with an interest in the project. Participant lists were amended in the first few visits to include additional people and organisations deemed as being important to include in the project. In one site, this included two long day care programs.

A case study design was employed to gain a detailed understanding of the relationship between participants through reciprocal visits and professional gatherings. The design replicated the methodological approach used in the 2014/2015 *Supporting Reciprocal Visits project* (Semann, Madden, Fleet & De Gioia, 2015). A qualitative methodology was used for data collection, incorporating reflection sheets completed by participants and reflective journals maintained by the project team. The situated learning model of educational change (Fleet, De Gioia, Madden & Semann, 2015) was used as an evaluation framework, incorporating elements of the relational agency framework (Edwards, 2012) used in the earlier project.

Public professional development sessions were an additional feature of the project. Sessions were open to the wider local communities in addition to participating schools and prior-to-school services involved in the Reciprocal Visits project. Three professional development sessions were held in both sites and attended by 159 people, with an average of 25 participants per session. Topic areas were determined in collaboration with project participants and included: (1) Knowing your local community; (2) Cultural safety for Koorie children and families; and (3) Improving numeracy outcomes for young Koorie children. Presenters included members of the project team, project participants, community members and external presenters with relevant expertise. These sessions were additional to the professional learning components of the project that were integrated throughout the Reciprocal Visit initiatives.

A number of findings were identified from an analysis of the data. They are detailed below in relation to the situated learning model of educational change (Fleet et.al., 2015):

CONTEXT

1. Context was a central factor impacting on the project outcomes. Given the project focus of supporting Koorie children and families in transition to school, the inclusion of senior Aboriginal leadership, both in the consultancy team and in local implementation was critical.
2. Long day care programs and out of school hours care programs are sometimes overlooked as important stakeholders supporting children’s transition to school. The inclusion of long day care educators and leaders in this project, however, proved to be invaluable. Educators from long day care settings offering kindergarten programs provided insightful information and a stronger understanding of their role in the community.

COMPONENTS

1. The provision of funding for teacher / educator release was an essential component of the project. This ensured participants’ ongoing involvement throughout the project, which was critical for building trusting relationships over time.
2. The role of the project team as external facilitators was a critical component in navigating the complexities of local contexts and maximising opportunities for ongoing dialogue amongst participants. This was supported through working closely with KESOs and KPSAs, acknowledging their important role in promoting and sustaining project outcomes.

PEOPLE

1. The critical role of leadership was highlighted in many forms and contexts. This was evident in the local transition to school initiatives driven by those in leadership positions, as well as by KESOs and participating teachers and educators who demonstrated leadership qualities and capacities within the project.
2. Establishing and maintaining relationships between the project team, participants and key stakeholders, in order to progress project aims, was vital. This required ongoing communication to ensure roles and responsibilities were clear and to enable sharing of information and promote opportunities for engagement.
3. Additional time allowed for scoping of the community may have assisted the project team to more effectively identify existing networks for potential involvement and gain a better understanding of local contexts.

PROCESS

1. Building trust through a cyclical process supported the sharing of information and solution-focused approaches to local challenges. This required the project team to be mindful of and responsive to participants’ readiness for change.
2. Creating opportunities for reflection and discussion enabled relationships to develop and sensitive issues to come to the forefront. Conversations over time supported increased understanding and greater insights in order to make progress towards project outcomes.
3. Opportunities to come together over a period of time helped to break down silos and raise site-specific concerns. This contributed to a positive shift in the understanding of the roles of teachers and educators during the reciprocal visits.
4. Public joint professional development sessions strengthened relationships both within the Reciprocal Visits project and local community networks. Participants were appreciative of the opportunity to come together for these sessions; topics were seen as having positive impact on thinking and practice.

**Recommendations**

Consideration of this project within the situated learning model of educational change(Fleet et al., 2015) has highlighted that respect is critical in developing and maintaining relationships across all key stakeholders and informs the following recommendations: That

1. Local context is considered when determining the provision of resources and support to enhance pedagogical approaches and practices.
2. External facilitation includes facilitators with the appropriate knowledge bases to support local processes.
3. Initiatives involving Koorie children and families have input and support from senior Aboriginal leaders at all stages of project development and implementation.
4. Initial scoping and ongoing conversations includes school principals to ensure the importance of engagement with the project is understood, including implications for practice in their settings.
5. Initiatives to improve transition processes for Koorie children and their families are designed to be multi-facetted and multi-layered, working in conjunction with local organisations, government and non-government groups and educational sites.
6. Time and opportunities are provided for site leaders to meet together to raise and address issues that may traditionally be silenced or overlooked (e.g. prioritising language groups, finding respectful strategies for relating to disconnected families).
7. Local transition approaches, including reciprocal visits, are documented (e.g. using an action plan) describing action steps, people responsible and timelines, in response to identified priorities and shared goals.
8. Any remaining funds from the project grant are used for activities that relate to the intent of the project, as agreed to by the participating services and schools.

# Introduction

Transition to school is a period of time marked by change in the lives of young children and their families. The process can impact on long term social connections and academic adjustment in the new environment (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). Key stakeholders including children, families, prior-to-school educators, school staff and communities all play a role in assisting in this process. Drawing on the *Transition to school: Position statement* (Educational Transitions and Change Research Group, 2011),

“Opportunities are afforded to children when their cultural heritage and histories are respected, and when they are supported in their approaches to new and challenging situations and interactions.”

Much is being written about the importance of engaging local community perspectives, particularly in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups (e.g. Martin, 2008; Mason-White and Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care [SNAICC], 2013). Working with Koorie families and community organisations requires liaison with respected elders as well as acknowledgment of communication hierarchies and respectful ways of approaching people and processes. This project attempted to acknowledge these relevant protocols, although the limited time available to establish appropriate relationships made this problematic.

Successful transition to school approaches take into account that families and children come from diverse backgrounds bringing with them their personal experiences and expectations of school. The communities in which they live are steeped in histories of dispossession and complex relationships which, if left aside, or excluded from the transition to school discussions, may impact on families and children’s involvement (SNAICC, 2014).

The prior-to-school setting and the school environment play a significant role in the transition to school. In order to understand the potential for continuity of learning, an understanding of each site’s perspective is needed. Reciprocal visits have been used as a vehicle to engage in dialogue and reflect on pedagogy and practices across sectors, enabling a new shared understanding and respect for the role each plays (Smith, Kotsanas, Farrelly & Alexander, 2010).

Building upon a previous Reciprocal Visits project (Semann, Madden, Fleet & De Gioia, 2015), this project considered transition to school within the frame of reciprocal visits and shared professional learning opportunities between prior-to-school educators and prep teachers within a high Koorie population context. Additionally, this project aimed to improve the capacity of educators and teachers to support Koorie children’s connection to Aboriginal culture during and after transition, as well as create stronger relationships around children’s transition to school between teachers, educators, children, their families and communities.

An additional component of this project involved ‘public’ professional development opportunities for the broader community including and beyond those involved in the Reciprocal Visit project. Topic areas were determined in collaboration with project participants and included: (1) Knowing your community, (2) Cultural safety, and (3) Improving numeracy outcomes for young Koorie children. These sessions were very well received.

# Methodology

## Professional gatherings and reciprocal visits

The methodological approach for this project replicated the case study approach used in the 2014/2015 Reciprocal Visits project (Semann et al., 2015). A case study design has been defined as a research method ‘built on empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used’ (Yin, 2009, p.23).

A case study design was employed to gain a detailed understanding of the relationship change between participants through professional gatherings, reciprocal visits and public professional development sessions. The identified towns were defined as case study sites, each of which included the schools and prior-to-school settings, the teachers and educators within each site, Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) and Koorie Preschool Assistants (KPSAs), as well as, in some cases, key community organisations.

Qualitative approaches to data gathering were utilised. A qualitative research approach involves the use of a variety of methods to collect information, including: focus groups, interviews, observations and open-ended questionnaires (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Open-ended questionnaires (also deemed reflection sheets) were provided to the participants at the following times:

1. Commencement of the project (see Appendix 1)
2. During reciprocal visits (See Appendix 2)
3. Completion of each gathering (See Appendix 3)
4. Completion of project (See Appendix 4).

These open-ended questionnaires aimed to enable the project team to capture qualitative data related to the learning and experiences of participants. As reflective tools, they allowed the project team to track and capture changes in thinking and practices that resulted from participation in the project. A final reflection sheet was used in the last gathering in June/ July (See Appendix 4). Finally, videoing was also used as a tool for participants to share their journey through the project and to reflect on the changes that resulted from reciprocal visits and gatherings. These resources were intended to assist the Department, schools and prior-to-school services in reflecting on what professional learning and development opportunities might best support the continual improvement of transition to school approaches.

The project team also kept reflective journals to detail conversations during gatherings and debriefing notes following conversations with participants throughout the project, as is recommended in case study methodology (Yin, 2011). Data collected throughout the project were analysed manually by the project team to identify common themes and patterns. Discourse analysis identifies these themes and patterns raised by participants, so that similarities and differences can be captured across and within group experiences and perspectives. Anomalies were also identified and made a note of for further clarification and discussion amongst the project team. Thus, as is standard in qualitative research, the ‘outliers’ (examples differing from the most common replies/ perceptions) were able to promote divergent thinking and analysis rather than being dismissed.

## Joint professional development

Research undertaken by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) identified joint professional development as one of a number of promising practices supporting positive transition to school approaches (Astbury, 2009). Accordingly, an additional feature of this Reciprocal Visits project was the provision of public professional development sessions open to prior-to-school educators, prep teachers, KESOs, KPSAs and other relevant community services and organisations working with Koorie children and families. The public professional development sessions were in addition to the professional learning that occurred through monthly gatherings and reciprocal visits between the project participants.

Three public professional development sessions were held in both sites over three months. Topic areas were informed by participant responses to initial reflection sheets and conversations in early professional gatherings. Topic areas were:

1. Knowing your local community (March, 2016)
2. Cultural safety for Koorie children and families (April, 2016)
3. Improving numeracy outcomes for young Koorie children (May, 2016).

A number of people facilitated the public professional development sessions. This included members of the project team, project participants, community members, and external presenters with relevant expertise. Promotional flyers were developed for professional development sessions in both sites and distributed widely by the project team and participants. Promotional flyers are attached as Appendix 5.

Table 1 below shows the attendance for each professional development session in both sites.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Location** | **Workshop 1** | **Workshop 2** | **Workshop 3** | **Total** |
| **Mildura** | 30 | 30 | 14 | 74 people |
| **Morwell** | 33 | 25 | 27 | 85 people |

Table 1: Attendance for professional development sessions held in Mildura and Morwell

Qualitative and quantitative data were obtained from the professional development sessions using a reflection sheet that included both closed and open-ended questions (See Appendix 6). Closed questions required a response according to a five level Likert item ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A ‘not applicable’ option was also provided. The aims of the reflection sheet were to: 1) capture participant responses to the professional development sessions with regard to the relevance and potential impact of the topic and content for ongoing practice; and 2) identify additional professional development topic areas to enhance transition to school approaches to better support Koorie children and families.

A total of 159 people attended the professional development sessions across both sites. An overview of each of these sessions, including the service types represented and participants’ responses to the reflection sheets, is included as Appendix 7 and 8.

## Relational agency

As stated in the *2014/2015* *Transition to School: Supporting Reciprocal Visits* project report (Semann, Madden, Fleet & De Gioia, 2015), Edwards and Apostolov (2007) and Edwards (2012) show that relational agency is constructed when multidisciplinary teams work together, resulting in professional partnerships that impact on practice. Professionals are viewed to possess relational agency when they are able to see others’ perspectives, work together to build common knowledge, develop shared goals, and understand and subscribe to strategies to ensure effective implementation to achieve the goals.

This project enabled the development and enhancement of successful partnerships (Edwards, 2005) that extended on participant ‘relational agency’ through the project methodology. This is examined in further detail in Table 2 below.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Phases** | **Methodology** | **Outcome** |
| PHASE 0 - Building a sense of belonging | Developing learning communities | Participants come together to form a cohesive group |
| PHASE 1 - Finding out about each other’s services | Facilitating cycles of meetings with cross-sector participants | Participants shared knowledge of their own environments and situations |
| PHASE 2 - Engaging in a common experience or process | Sharing meanings of transition to school, expectations across sectors for Koorie family and children. Public professional development session: Understanding community | Participants engaged in processes offered and reflected on perspectives of others’ spaces  Understanding of own community and processes for gaining further information |
| PHASE 3 - Building a common focus for the group | Reciprocal visits and sharing of curriculum across sectors | Participants agreed on a shared focus for the reciprocal visits and contributed to follow up discussions post visit |
| PHASE 4 - Building common language | Highlighting of potentially problematic terms for discussion. Public professional development session: Cultural safety | Participants developed greater awareness of the interpretation of language and expectations through visits and facilitated discussions  Increased awareness of cultural safety and working with Koorie children and families |
| PHASE 5 - Aligning one’s own interpretations with that of others | Differing interpretations of focus topics were made explicit for group consideration | Participants became more aware of differing interpretations of pedagogy and practice |
| PHASE 6 - Thinking about one’s own professional expertise and contribution in relation to what others with different disciplinary/ community knowledge and practices bring | Fostering the development of trusting relationships to enable open consideration of diverse approaches and practices | Strengths and differences across sector affiliations were clearly identified by participants through reflection on own practice, discussions and identification of ways to extend cross sector collaborations |
| PHASE 7 - Enhanced professional practice where own contributions are viewed as part of the collectively identified inquiry or need | Foregrounding of common approaches and concerns with children, families and pedagogy across sectors and sites with a particular focus on Koorie children and families | Development of action plans to assist each groups’ reappraisal of current practices in the context of shared priorities, particularly with regard to transition to school for Koorie children and families. Further discussion post project will allow participants to refine key ideas and determine specific action steps |

Table 2: Edward’s (2005) Relational agency framework. Table adapted from Semann, Madden, Fleet & De Gioia (2015)

## Evaluating educational change

Building on the relational agency model, a model for the evaluation of educational change initiatives was instigated from engagement in a previous Reciprocal Visits project (Semann et al., 2015), and subsequently shared with the international community (Fleet, De Gioia, Madden & Semann, 2015). This report provides an opportunity to affirm the relevance of this conceptualisation through application to the evaluation of the current Reciprocal Visits project (Koorie focus).



Figure 1: Situated learning model of educational change(Fleet, De Gioia, Madden & Semann, 2015)

The situated learning model of educational changewas designed as part of a reconceptualisation of evaluating and reporting educational change using the vehicle of the previous Reciprocal Visits project (Semann et al., 2015). This initiative was in response to the Victorian Government’s recognition that aspects of the transition process would benefit from enhanced dialogue between educators and teachers in prior-to-school settings and in schools. Accordingly, the project team facilitated an eight-month multi-site exploration of core concepts, philosophies and practices related to transition to school processes to support Koorie children and families, with a focus on improving continuity of learning for children commencing school. Ethical protocols were followed throughout the collaborative project.

Using a model such as presented in Figure 1 enables the complexity of change initiatives to become more visible. It also foregrounds the range of areas that require consideration and subsequent recommendations for future policy development and project conceptualisation. Recognising Fullan’s (2005, 2007) theories of change leadership and implications from related theorists, potential for an innovative conceptualisation of educational change processes has evolved. Experience in this cross-sector initiative suggests that the intersections of relationship, facilitative infrastructure and “spirals of engagement” (Fleet & Patterson, 2001) are key in educational change. Positioned as a social learning theorist, Wenger-Traynor notes that social or learning theory alone do not account for the evolving conceptualisation he is bringing to the construct of ‘communities of practice’ (which he evolved in collaboration with Lave, 1991) under the rubric of “situated learning” (cited in Omidvar & Kislov, 2014). These provocations can be demonstrated through this evaluation process to have practical applicability for both policy development and pedagogical initiatives.

## Knowledge of change processes

The *Transition to School: Supporting Reciprocal Visits project* is a change initiative looking to promote a positive transition to school experience for children and families, and in particular, for Koorie children and families. A key consideration in managing any change initiative is recognising peoples’ readiness for change. The trans-theoretical model of change (TTM; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984) is a well-validated model of change (Greene & Grant, 2003). The model provides a useful tool for understanding people’s readiness to change and determining an appropriate response to facilitate positive change. The TTM identifies a number of predictable stages that people pass through when initiating change. Beginning with pre-contemplation, where the idea of change has not yet been considered, people progressively move to contemplating and preparing for change, and then to implementing and ultimately maintaining change. Relapse is also a recognised stage within the TTM. Research has found that people typically relapse six to eight times before moving into the maintenance stage (Grant, 2006).

A key characteristic of the TTM is ambivalence. Grant (2006) states that this is most notable in the contemplation stage. People in this stage are typically undecided about making a change, with their motivation fluctuating as they consider the pros and cons of doing so. Research has demonstrated that the pros of change do not outweigh the cons until well into the maintenance stage. Furthermore, peoples’ self-belief that they have the necessary skills to change is low in the contemplation and preparation stages, rising thereafter and highest at maintenance (Grant, 2010).

Research by Peterson (2012) using the TTM in a mentoring program for early childhood educators found that a key requirement of change readiness was for mentees to identify something they wanted to change and actively seek information and support to make the change. Mentors highlighted the importance of building rapport and creating trusting relationships with mentees in the change process. They also reiterated the importance of adjusting expectations, recognising that change takes time and is best achieved in small and achievable action steps.

The TTM was used by the project team throughout the Reciprocal Visits project, most particularly in the early stages of building relationships and determining where project participants were situated within the model. This was considered within the model used to evaluate educational change initiatives and recognises the importance of facilitators’ knowledge of change and change processes.

## 

## Project participants

**Morwell**

Morwell is situated in the Gippsland region of Victoria, approximately 150 km south-east of Melbourne. The town is located within the Latrobe City municipality along with the townships of Moe, Traralgon, Churchill and Newborough. The population of Morwell in 2011 was 13,942. Of this number 6.7% were children aged from birth to four years and 8.2% were children aged five to 11 years. The population is predominately Australian born and English speaking (Latrobe City Council, 2013).

The Gunaikurnai are the Traditional Owners of Gippsland, including the town of Morwell. Of the total Morwell population, 2.8% identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the 2011 Census (ABS, 2015). Within the Latrobe City municipality, Morwell has the highest resident population of people who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Latrobe City Council, 2013).

Participants for the project were established in the first and second gatherings. Over the duration of the project five KESOs/ KPSAs participated. In addition, 16 people participated representing the following schools (n=8) and prior-to-school services (n=8):

* Morwell Primary School
* Morwell Park Primary School
* Tobruk Primary School
* Commercial Road Primary School
* Dala Lidj Woolum Bellum Kindergarten/ Uniting Care Gippsland
* Carinya Early Learning Centre/ Latrobe City Council
* Goodstart Early Learning Centre
* Mid Valley Kinder & Child Care.

Goodstart Early Learning Centre and Mid Valley Kinder & Child Care were not included in the initial participant list provided to the project team. Following the first gathering on 4 December 2015, these prior-to-school services were identified by some prep teachers as potential participants in the project. Accordingly, they were invited to join the project by the project team and commenced attending monthly professional gatherings from February 2016.

Three of the four participating primary schools will merge into one school on a newly built facility from 2017. These schools are Morwell Primary School, Tobruk Street Primary School and Commercial Road Primary School. Construction of the new building is currently underway. For some participants from these schools, the Reciprocal Visits project was seen as a timely opportunity to create a shared understanding and consistent approach to transition to school practices from 2017.

Due to unforeseen issues, the start date for the project was delayed from the original date of October 2015. The first session was rescheduled to 4 December 2015 due to availability of participants and to allow local Department representatives additional time to finalise the participant list. While it was not possible to extend the reporting timeline beyond June, a sixth and final visit was negotiated with the Department. This allowed the project team to ensure the sustainability of the project and to reflect on the progress made to date.

Table 3 below highlights the main focus and related activities for the professional gatherings and public professional development sessions held between December 2015 and May 2016. The anticipated focus and activity for the July 2016 gathering is also included. This demonstrates that the Morwell project team was able to replicate processes used in Tarneit in 2014/2015 to guide conversations in a different setting (Semann, Madden, Fleet & De Gioia, 2015).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Focus** | **Activity** |
| Session 1  04/12/2015 | Setting the scene  Relationship building  Project information | * Introduce project * Signing ethics forms * Collection of baseline data re transition processes * Show Tarneit Transition to School video |
| Session 2  25/02/2016 | What do we know about transition to school?  What you told us you know and want to know | * Repeat introduction for new participants * Sue Dockett video and discussion * Sharing transition practices – reviewing baseline data * Preparing for reciprocal visits prior to next gathering - kindergarten educators visit prep classes * Preparing for presentations on approaches to teaching and learning |
| Session 3  22/03/2016 | Approaches to teaching and learning in prior-to-school settings and in prep | * Presentations from kindergarten educators and prep teachers * Preparing for reciprocal visits prior to next gathering - prep teachers visit kindergarten classes * Preparing for filming * Public professional development session #1: Knowing your local community |
| Session 4  19/04/2016 | Feedback from reciprocal visits  Implications for practice – planning for the future | * Filming for professional learning videos * Development of first stage of action plan * Collect data from interviews with children and families prior to next gathering * Public professional development session #2: Cultural safety for Koorie children and families |
| Session 5  17/05/2016 | Considering all key stakeholders: What about families and children?  Implications for practice – planning for the future | * Filming for professional learning videos * Revisit and revise action plan – informed by sharing perspectives of children and families * Participants reflect on project highlights prior to next gathering * Public professional development session #3: Improving numeracy outcomes for young Koorie children |
| Session 6  12/07/2016 | Bringing it altogether; sustaining the project into the future | * Finalisation of the action plan * Presentation of project highlights |

Table 3: Session outline for Morwell professional gatherings, reciprocal visits and public professional development sessions

**Mildura**

Mildura is situated in north-west Victoria, within the Mildura Rural City municipality, the largest urban centre in the Sunraysia region. The population of Mildura according to 2011 Census data was 50,978. Of this number 6.65% were children aged birth to four years and 6.63% were children aged five to nine years (Mildura Region Economic Profile, 2009; Mildura Development Corporation, 2016).

The Traditional Owners of Mildura are the Latje Latje people, while the broader area of Mildura Rural City Council also includes the Wergaia people. Other tribal groups such as the Ngintait, Ngardad and Jari Jari are mentioned in historical research. Today the land in Mildura is recognised as Latje Latje country and the land in Wentworth is recognised as Barkindji country (Mildura Region Economic Profile, 2009). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population as recorded in the 2006 Census was 2,043. Beyond the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, residents in the region are from a number of countries including the United Kingdom, Italy, New Zealand and Turkey (Mildura Region Economic Profile, 2009). One of the project schools is a site recognised for its work with immigrant and refugee children; both schools have a high proportion of Koorie children and families.

Participants for the project were established in the first three visits, initially through invitation by the DET and local KESO/ KPSAs. Over the duration of the project 5 KESOs/ KPSAs participated. In addition, 18 people participated representing the following: Mildura Rural City Council (n=2), Mallee District Aboriginal Services (n=5), schools (n=8), and prior-to-school services (n=3):

* De Garis Kindergarten
* Pasadena Preschool
* Playgroup Early Learning Centre
* Ranfurly Primary School
* Mildura Primary School.

The Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS) was invited to join the project following the initial visit. This was due to the significant role MDAS plays within the community in providing support, information and advice to Koorie people and their families, most particularly in early years’ services, intensive in-home support, supported playgroups, home-based learning and the Koorie Preschool Assistants program.

Table 4 highlights the main focus and related activities for reciprocal visits, professional gatherings and public professional development sessions held between November 2015 and June 2016.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Focus** | **Activity** |
| Session 1  24/11/2015 | Setting the scene  Relationship building  Research background | * Introducing the project * Signing ethics forms * Collection of baseline data re transition processes preparing for reciprocal visits |
| Session 2  02/02/2016 | What do we know about transition to school?  Language and literacy development in the early years | * Joint visit to Pasadena Preschool * Repeat introduction for new participants * Show Bendigo Transition to School video * Sharing transition practices |
| Session 3  08/03/2016 | Explore key elements of curriculum and environment | * Joint visit to De Garis Kindergarten * Public professional development session #1: Knowing your local community |
| Session 4  21/04/2016 | Participant concerns regarding provision for Koorie children and families in the transition to school | * Joint visit to Ranfurly Primary School * Filming session * Public professional development session #2: Cultural safety for Koorie children and families |
| Session 5  11/05/2016 | ‘Wise practice’ in transition to school | * Joint visit to Mildura Primary School * Participants debrief visits * Project presentation on transition * Public professional development session #3: Improving numeracy outcomes for young Koorie children |
| Session 6:  16/06/2016 | Bringing it altogether; sustaining the project into the future | * Revisit action plans – informed by sharing perspectives of children and families * Participant presentations of project highlights |

Table 4: Session outline for Mildura reciprocal visits, professional gatherings and public professional development sessions

# Findings and discussion

The focus for this project was the fostering of reciprocal visits across the prior-to-school/ school border in order to support the effective transition to school (particularly) for Koorie children and their families. Conceptualised for change initiatives, the situated learning model of educational change (see Figure 1) (Fleet, De Gioia, Madden & Semann, 2015) was deemed useful for consolidating and discussing the findings from this project. The interpretation of the model for this project has been represented below in Figure 2. Each of the identified components is evaluated below.

**Improving the experience of Koorie children & families in the transition to school**

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Figure 2: Situated learning model of educational change: Fostering reciprocal visits to support Koorie children and families entering school (Fleet, De Gioia, Madden & Semann, 2015)

## 

## Each of the components of the model will be considered in turn, noting that cultural knowledge and heritage sit underneath all other factors. As one KPSA stated: *“I’m related in all different ways to people in the community”* and an Elder noted, *“It’s about respect/ codes/ where you fit in…”*

Two factors pertinent to all components of the model were issues of time and relationship building pre-commencement of the project. Clearly time and relationship building is key to working within any community context and both these factors became evident in this project. The initial visit/ gathering was held in November 2015 (Mildura) and December 2015 (Morwell), with the reciprocal visit component beginning in the new year. Reciprocal visits as a component of transition to school are best placed in the middle of the year; for prep teachers going into prior-to-school, and prior-to-school educators understanding the school context. However, the participants who contributed to the project benefited from their involvement. Furthermore, discussions facilitated in one site as part of the action planning process identified the need to consider earlier opportunities for engagement, including reciprocal visits, in the future.

The importance of establishing and maintaining trusting relationships with participants and key stakeholders in order to progress project aims, particularly in Koorie communities, cannot be understated. Project teams would benefit from accessing communities and scoping key stakeholders very early in project development in order to identify existing networks, potential involvement and gain an understanding of the community, and ensure that project activities are well targeted. A clear scoping of the community involving the project team and local DET representatives would also provide an understanding of the previous experiences of participants. These previous experiences impact on project processes. Knowledge of teachers’/ educators’ background, confidence and intercultural knowledge, along with an understanding of where they might perceive themselves in the cycle of change, impacts on transition to school strategies for Koorie children and families. An understanding of teachers’ and educators’ prior experiences would have provided greater context and assisted in how the project unfolded in each of the identified communities.

## The central factor: Context

Context has significant implications for the manner in which the project unfolded in the communities of Mildura and Morwell. This was consistent with the previous Reciprocal Visits project (Semann et al., 2015) that also highlighted that taking context into account was critical to how the project was developed. A significant factor in both of the identified communities was the focus on Koorie children and families in the transition to school. Therefore, in these contexts, the inclusion of senior Aboriginal leadership both in the consultancy team and in local implementation was critical. In addition, in this case, the project team (and local leaders) needed to recognise the diverse perspectives of Aboriginal participants, and local Koorie languages and histories.

The Victorian Department of Education and Training took initial responsibility for making contact in each region and apportioning responsibility for bringing together key stakeholders for each group to the KESOs, with an expectation that participation would evolve as the project unfolded.

In Morwell, the participants were teachers and educators from across schools and prior-to-school settings. Principals did not attend but rather devolved this responsibility to assistant principals and those working directly with prep classes or teachers (in Morwell, there was the added layer of complexity with three of the four schools in the community working towards becoming a merged entity. This provided challenges and opportunities that are highlighted later in this discussion).

In Mildura, the participant configuration looked quite different. The participants were prior-to-school educators, prep coordinators, assistant principals and principals as well as the KESOs and MDAS staff. While there were four prep teachers engaged in parts of the project, communication issues and relief arrangements meant that only transition coordinators were engaged in the first two sessions with no prep teachers available for reciprocal visits. On the other hand, principals were very engaged and their close relationships with KESOs were a definite strength in this area. Another factor for future consideration was the town’s geography, which means that children who attend Mildura schools from ‘across the river’ are resident in NSW, with all the infrastructure complexities that such a boundary creates.

A common theme in the previous Reciprocal Visits project conducted by the project team (see Semann et al., 2015) is the absence of long day care settings and out of school hours care programs. Most long day care services provide kindergarten programs and are working in the community with Koorie children and families. Similarly, out of school hours care programs are active in local communities and a valued supportive education and care service for many families. There are a number of factors impacting on these omissions. This includes misinformation on behalf of the schools about the provision of educational programs in long day care settings and out of school care programs, resulting in a misunderstanding of their value as key stakeholders in supporting children’s transition to school. In one community, where a long day care service was located close by, when asked about the service and any connections, the principal stated that, “*No we don’t deal with them, we work with the local kindergarten.*” When asked why, the reply was “*It was all was too hard, they have too many procedures before we even get in the door*.” When members of the project team spoke with the long day care setting in question, they were eager to make connections with the school as soon as possible, identifying the value for children and families. In both sites, educators from long day care settings proved to be a valuable asset to the professional gatherings and reciprocal visits, providing insightful information and a stronger understanding of their role in the community.

## 

## Components: Funding, facilitators’ time, transition frameworks

As indicated in Figure 1, facilitative infrastructure is a key component of project success. In this case, funding for teaching release was identified as a significant issue for participants. Financial support facilitated release time to enable teachers and educators to participate in the project therefore reducing the burden on schools and prior-to-school settings. Unfortunately, the lack of qualified relief staff in Mildura made it difficult for some teachers to participate, despite the availability of funding for replacement staff. Furthermore, despite multiple efforts by Department representatives and the project team to share information about the project grant, there did not seem to be clear lines of communication about accessing funds. This was evident in a comment by a participant in one community, who asked, “*What are the protocols for funding for releasing teachers? Costs to schools is quite extensive otherwise*.” In this same community, one teacher in attendance at the professional gatherings was noted asking on three separate occasions about the contact for following up with funding, after a request from her principal.

In addition, informed external facilitation proved useful in navigating the complexities of local contexts, and also affirms the findings in the earlier study, noting the importance of knowledge about change processes, transition to school and adult learning. The role of the project team was critical in working with the KESOs and KPSAs to further promote the project. Whilst the team were able (generally) to identify and meet with key stakeholders, this did not automatically result in *buy into* the project.

In terms of infrastructure (represented as components in Figure 2), another important ingredient was the presence or absence of existing ‘transition frameworks’. In other words, some sites regularly used and reflected on Department documents associated with transition, others focussed primarily on the processes around transition statements, while others had evolved sophisticated strategies for liaising across the sector and establishing their ‘frameworks for transition’.

Sustaining the momentum of the project was mentioned in final reflections by several participants (not all data was available at the time of finalising the report). From the community perspective, one participant commented that *“Hopefully [we can] use our playgroup model in other schools to help break down barriers between schools and families.”* A KESO noted that she planned to *“Keep building on these relationships that have been developed.”* Another participant stated that:

*“We would like to invite prep teachers and principals to our kinder network forum in Term 3 or 4 to network with all kinders, LDC [long day care] and schools to discuss the children who will be transitioning into their service and any concerns and strategies they will need to adapt; we will need financial support for catering and venue hire, and help in advertising the network so ALL attend!”*

## People: Building relationships

In order for the Reciprocal Visits approach to achieve its objectives, leadership is key on many levels and can take many forms. The findings of the project draw on leadership in terms of roles and responsibilities rather than only position and title and are considered in several contexts:

**The community:** Strong identification of key Koorie leaders is critical. This also involves community members knowing who these leaders are and feeling confident to seek them out. Ownership and responsibility for networking opportunities ensures sharing of information and avoids overlap. A key organisation or person in this role would be beneficial to lead this effort. In one community, through the professional gatherings it was possible to identify that transition to school was being addressed in three separate forums (including this project). Opportunities to connect with other groups were attempted. It was suggested that sustainability of learning from this project could be situated within one of the remaining two groups, however, it became unclear as to who should take responsibility for this. The role of a key Aboriginal community group was, however, made visible to the team and was central in project liaison and development.

**The school:** The role of the principal is to have knowledge of the Koorie children and families within their school community and identify processes for ensuring their ongoing engagement or strategies to enact and support engagement. A key principal in one of the communities had a fundamental positive impact on project implementation. Here connections to prior-to-school services become critical to ensure awareness of new enrolments in order to support a positive transition to school for Koorie children and families. In the other community, leadership was demonstrated with discussions of transition practices in the new school. In relation to taking leadership of future action, a prep teacher in one school saw an opportunity to work with other prep teachers to develop local transition to school approaches. She said, "W*e can take ownership because we are thinking it through and [we can] bring on board the opinions of [the] three schools here.”* Other schools were evolving a range of processes to engage families and young children while also encouraging professional development opportunities for teachers.

**The** **prior-to-school sector**: The role of the centre director is vital in sharing information about families and children. As identified by one prior-to-school educator in a gathering “*I see my role in supporting Koorie children and families in helping them connect with the school. Sometimes it can be as simple as reminding them to enrol and sometimes it can be a whole lot more … helping them fill out enrolment forms … asking if they have been to a school to check it out … helping them fill in Transition Statements.”* Prior to school educators also demonstrated leadership in this area when talking with school teachers: “*When we have parents in for a yarn about starting school, we could invite [prep teachers] to come and talk about starting school.”*

Aligned with leadership is the notion of transparent communication. Alongside the development of relationships, communication must be prioritised at all stages of project conceptualisation and implementation to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear as well as enabling sharing of information and opportunities for engagement. It became apparent in one site that processes of intergenerational hurt and healing across Koorie communities has profound impacts on early educational experiences. As this intersects with challenges in cross-cultural communication, much attention is needed in this domain on an ongoing basis; it may mean that professional development opportunities are offered to project teams working with Aboriginal communities so that levels of complexity are made apparent and miscommunication and misunderstandings are avoided. There were also structural communication issues that may have been due to a historical perception of silos within the sector, rather than a network of sites and organisations with shared goals. At the simplest level, planned meetings overlapped with other commitments and precluded engagement by some potentially willing participants. Perhaps more ownership of decision-making processes by key project participants (perhaps identified as working groups) would assist these communication issues. In other instances, the silences or what wasn’t said spoke volumes. Some participants spoke of ‘transition to school for families from diverse backgrounds’ rather than focusing on the Koorie community and when questioned specifically about Koorie children and families, responses included, “*I would rather speak more broadly*”, or “*We treat all children as individuals*.” While this was not the case in all sites, a clearer scoping process may have assisted to identity prior knowledge and experience within the prior to school and school sectors that may pose barriers to effective transition approaches and to consider solutions to address them. This might include the provision of professional learning and development opportunities.

The roles of KESOs as the initial contact into the community became more visible and valued by the larger community as the project unfolded. This was true of the reciprocal visits gatherings and the public professional development sessions open to the wider community, through KESOs being able to share their role and expectations for school/ prior-to-school settings. Project activities provided an opportunity for discussion and connection as some participants were meeting KESOs and KPSAs for the first time. One KESO did report, however, that despite notifying a range of schools and kindergartens about the project, several potential sites did not take up the offer to be involved. A senior school person suggested that there needed to be parallel conversations with the principals to ensure that the importance of engagement with transition processes was understood.

KESOs were keen to be involved with the project, offering valuable liaison and information, but also indicated that the project had been a valuable form of professional learning for them, and that they were adapting their practice accordingly. For example, while one KESO felt she had a major role in supporting children and their families, she also reported that she intended to be more aware of which children were starting school and sharing relevant information with everyone involved in the process. She was pleased to be gaining knowledge about the supports available to assist in the transition process, though she felt she was not always knowledgeable about the supports required or available.

Through developing relationships and creating spaces for discussion, the project has been successful in bringing sensitive issues to the forefront. For example, respect for local languages; concern about causing offense in attempts to be culturally respectful, and issues with feeling confident to use Koorie language were all raised by participants. Whilst it was not possible to *solve* all of these concerns, the project enabled conversations to commence in an effort to promote greater understanding and make continued progress towards positive change. Furthermore, it is anticipated that participants will endeavour to continue these conversations to further strengthen current transition to school initiatives and contribute to improved outcomes for Koorie children and families. This is evident in the words of a KESO in one site, who described a highlight of the project as *“seeing the two groups [educators and teachers from prior-to-school settings and schools] coming together and sitting around the table and talking about what is happening in their kindergarten and the school[s].”* She added:

*“I think it has been a really good thing and I hope it continues even after […] this project has finished, but I seem to think it will continue because they seem to be very adamant, the teachers, about how well it has been working.”*

## 

## Processes: Input, professional gatherings, workshops and visits

Having conducted a similar project previously, the project team were able to assess the context and stakeholders to determine the best processes to be used in guiding or directing reciprocal visits. In the 2014/2015 Reciprocal Visits project mentioned previously, the two different geographical locations and educational settings impacted strongly on the ways in which the Reciprocal Visits initiative were enacted in each site, however, both approaches were deemed to be ‘successful’ in terms of project outcomes. Similarly, in this case, the differences in local organisational and educational structures impacted profoundly on the ways that relationships and processes of implementation developed (see Methodology). It seemed that participation had as much to do with pre-existing relationships and infrastructure as it did with project invitations.

Nevertheless, in many cases, there was a strong shift in understanding of the role of the teacher and educator during the reciprocal visits. These conversations were centred around teacher and educator practice in the first instance. Comments from the prior-to-school educators included,

*“It’s not as structured as I thought.” “I was really interested to see that they have inquiry learning happening in their space too.” “There is language we can use around concepts that they do in schools, that would be helpful.”*

School teachers also noted:

*“I have a greater appreciation of their pressures and added workload with accreditation…” “Better understanding of how they plan for children in their setting.” “I can see similarities to what we do in prep.”*

An Early Years Council Officer stated that:

*“I was blown away by Mildura Primary, especially as I saw a play-based setting that is being encouraged by lecturers at uni in [Early Childhood Education]; I want all schools and kinders to see this setting and the importance of play in the early years 0-8, not just in kinder!”*

And a KESO reported that she now knew:

*“How the dynamics of transition of all involved have all jointly worked together with one goal in mind.”*

The project team members were mindful of where people were at in the cycle of change prior to proceeding to action. This recognises that participants can be at different stages in the cycle at different times. A prep teacher in one site noted in a reflection sheet mid-way through the project, *“There has been lots of conversations, but I feel we have a big journey to see each other as valuable in shaping children’s lives”.* While this participant may have been ready to move to action, others were not. Rushing people to articulate goals and formulate an action plan when they are still contemplating change can lead to resistance (Grant, 2006). This understanding was critical in the development of an action plan in the same site, which at the time of writing this report warrants further reflection and discussion prior to identifying potential action steps and timelines.

As indicated in Figure 1 (Situated learning model of educational change), ‘the spirals of engagement’ enabled the revisiting of key processes through varied strategies. Overall, there were continued conversations about ways in which schools and prior-to-school sites could work more closely together to support Koorie children and families. Whilst working towards a plan of action and project sustainability, discussion points were recorded for follow up in relation to identified priorities and needs. These discussion points could be incorporated into specific action steps following future exploration by the networks. They are listed in Appendix 9.

Trust was noted as a key factor in the previous section between participants and the project team; however, it is also of major importance between participants if the project is to succeed in building sustainable relationships and networks. Cyclical processes (site visits, meetings of a range of educators and support personnel, meaningful conversations) build trust, break down silos, and provide a forum to raise site-specific concerns. They also enable sharing of information and solution-oriented approaches to local challenges. At one site, this included community based services and organisations.

The importance of building trusting relationships was noted by a prep teacher who, in describing a personal highlight of participating in the project, said, *“Getting to know the other prep and kinder teachers [and educators] and collaborating with them on a regular basis, has been quite powerful.”* A participating kindergarten educator also highlighted the importance of building trusting relationships with prep teachers and other prior-to-school educators, and the flow-on effect she hoped this would have on families starting school. In describing one of the things she found most valuable having participated in the project, she said:

*“The thing I have really enjoyed the most about being part of this project is the relationships that I have been able to build between our centre and the schools. I think that will help especially first time parents heading off to school. If I’ve already got that relationship established with the school that will help ease the parent’s mind.… I’m hoping that if I’ve got the trust of the school, the parents will then find it easier to transition across from us to the school.”*

## Joint professional development

The provision of public joint professional development sessions was an additional component of the project that complemented the professional gatherings and reciprocal visits, and strengthened connections and networks across the prior-to-school and school sectors, as well as the broader child and family service sector. Professional development sessions were well attended in both sites. Participants included KESOs, KPSAs and educators and teachers in prior-to-school settings and in schools. This included but was not limited to those participating in the Reciprocal Visits project. Other participants included Inclusion Support Facilitators (ISFs), university students, program managers, community workers, health workers, family day care educators, maternal and child health workers and Council staff.

Participants’ interest in and commitment to professional development was evident in their consistent attendance across all sessions and in their willingness to travel to attend the sessions, especially given sessions were held outside normal working hours. For the Morwell sessions, participants travelled from Morwell, Moe, Churchill, Newborough and Traralgon. For the Mildura sessions they ventured from Mildura, Red Cliffs, Nangiloc, Ouyen and Merbein. It was interesting that, in many cases, the topics offered (e.g. cultural safety) were as of much interest to the health and family wellbeing professionals in the area as they were to educators.

Participants were appreciative of the opportunity to come together for professional development, as reflected in their comments on session reflection sheets: *“Thanks for a fun and educational PD”* and *“It was great to have fun and participate.”* Feedback from reflection sheets in both sites also indicated a high level of participant satisfaction with the professional development sessions. Topics were seen as relevant and useful, and as having a positive impact on thinking and practice. More specific feedback from each professional development session in both sites is included as Appendix 7 and 8.

In addition to raising awareness and enhancing knowledge, the public professional development sessions also allowed participants to reconnect with known colleagues and make connections with unfamiliar people. Participants were not asked to comment specifically about networking as a benefit or outcome in the reflection sheets. However, the networking opportunities provided throughout the series of sessions were evident. This opportunity was strengthened given three sessions were provided over three months, with some participants attending all sessions.

In relation to future professional development topics, participants noted a range of topic areas, both associated with and different from the focus of the sessions. Participants were keen to continue to explore the topics of cultural awareness; transition to school; connecting with community; implementing Indigenous culture/ language in the classroom; and local Indigenous history and culture. For some participants, any future opportunity to come together for professional development was valued, as reflected in the following comments: *“Anything would be helpful”; “Any information is helpful for us to gain more knowledge.”*

# Conclusion and recommendations

The processes enacted through this project (including local networking, cross-sector meetings, facilitation of reciprocal visits in various forms, and joint sector professional development opportunities) are complex and their success is dependent on the local context. Importantly, however, they have proven to be effective in raising awareness of issues arising for Koorie children and their families as well as staff working to support them in transition to school. Furthermore, they have supported progress towards more transparent and effective transition to school processes. Nevertheless, this project has highlighted that transparent communication must be prioritised at all stages of project conceptualisation and implementation to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear as well as enabling sharing of information and opportunities for engagement.

Consideration of this project within the situated learning model of educational change (Fleet et al., 2015) has highlighted that respect is critical in developing and maintaining relationships across all key stakeholders, and informs the following recommendations: That

* Local context is considered when determining the provision of resources and support to assist and enhance pedagogical approaches and practices.
* External facilitation includes facilitators with the appropriate knowledge bases to support local processes.
* Initiatives involving Koorie children and families have input and support from senior Aboriginal leaders at all stages of project development and implementation.
* Initial scoping and ongoing conversations includes school principals to ensure the importance of engagement with the project is understood, including implications for practice in their settings.
* Initiatives to improve transition processes for Koorie children and their families are designed to be multi-facetted and multi-layered, working in conjunction with local organisations, government and non-government groups and educational sites.
* Time and opportunities are provided for site leaders to meet together to raise and address issues that may traditionally be silenced or overlooked (e.g. prioritising language groups, finding respectful strategies for relating to disconnected families).
* Local transition approaches, including reciprocal visits, are documented (e.g. using an action plan) describing action steps, people responsible and timelines, in response to identified priorities and shared goals.
* Any remaining funds from the project grant are used for activities that relate to the intent of the project, as agreed to by the participating services and schools.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Initial Reflection Sheet

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**TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: SUPPORTING RECIPROCAL VISITS (KOORIE FOCUS)**

1. Describe your current transition practices.
2. Are there any ways are you currently adapting transition practices for children from a range of backgrounds?  If so, please describe (Please list up to 3)
3. What are your major challenges in developing and/or delivering transition programs for:
4. Children
5. Families
6. Your setting?
7. Do you have particular concerns about the inclusion of diverse families in the transition practices at your site/in your area?
8. What three things do you think are most important for your colleagues to know or understand about your setting?
9. What do you know about the educational setting you do not work in (e.g. prior to school setting or school)?
10. What three things would you like to know more about from the teachers in this setting?
11. What would your ideal transition practice look like?
12. What are the two main things you hope that this project will assist you with?
13. Is there anything else the project team should know/think about?

Please provide the following details:

Name: Name of setting:

Qualification: Email address:

Contact number: Best time to contact (if necessary):

## Appendix 2: Reciprocal Visits Think Sheet



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**RECIPROCAL VISIT PROJECT SITE VISIT THINK SHEET**

Name:

Date of site visit:

Which site were you visiting:

Focus of visit:

What was something you observed relating to the focus of the visit?

What was something you observed which was unexpected?

Generally, what might be the implications for your transition practice?

Specifically, what might change to enhance transitions for Aboriginal children and families?

What would you like to know more about?

## Appendix 3: Professional Gathering Reflection Sheet



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**REFLECTION SHEET**

Name:

Date:

What are one or two critical take away messages from today?

What might you do with this information and how might it be transferred into the workplace?

What questions have been raised that you would like to explore in more detail?

## Appendix 4: Final Reflection Sheet

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**TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: SUPPORTING RECIPROCAL VISITS (KOORIE FOCUS)**

1. Describe your current transition practices.
2. Are there any ways you are currently adapting transition practices for children from a range of backgrounds? If so, please describe (Please list up to 3)
3. What are your major achievements in developing and/or delivering transition programs for:
4. Children
5. Families
6. Your setting?
7. What are your major challenges in developing and/or delivering transition programs for:
8. Children
9. Families
10. Your setting?
11. Do you have particular concerns about the inclusion of diverse families in the transition practices at your site/in your area?
12. What three things do you (still/now) think are most important for your colleagues to know or understand about your setting?
13. What do you (now) know about the educational setting you do not work in (e.g. prior to school setting or school)?
14. What three things would you (still) like to know more about from the teachers in this setting?
15. What would your ideal transition practice look like?
16. What are the two main things this project has assisted you with?
17. What do you see as your priorities for transition to school in 2016 and beyond?
18. How do you think you will sustain and grow the relationships you have developed throughout the project? What might you need to support this?
19. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Please provide the following details:

Name:

Name of setting:

Qualification:

## Appendix 5: Professional Development Promotional Flyers

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

**Supporting positive outcomes for Koorie children in**

**early childhood settings and schools in Mildura**

Come and join us for a series of professional learning opportunities to explore what it takes to support the success of Koorie children in early childhood settings and in schools.

These professional learning programs aim to improve the capacity of educators in early childhood settings and schools to support Koorie children’s connection to Aboriginal culture during and after transition to school, and to create stronger connections and relationships around children’s transition to school between educators, children and their families. The professional learning also provides an opportunity to build connections and support networking across sectors to strengthen transition to school initiatives.

COME TO ONE OR AS MANY WORKSHOPS AS YOU LIKE!

FREE EVENT: Funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training

REGISTER: By phone on 02 9557 1460 or email at admin@semannslattery.com

**Workshop** **1** - ***Knowing your local community***

**Date and time:** Tuesday 8 March 3.30pm - 5.30pm

**Location:** Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS) 120 Madden Ave, Mildura VIC 3500

**Presenters:** Carolyn Briggs, Associate Professor Alma Fleet, Dr Hanan Sukkar

**Overview:** Why is it important to know your local community? Localised knowledge builds capacity for educators and services, and for children and families. It provides educators and services with a greater community presence, and enables educators to access community resources to better meet the needs of children and families. It also means working with greater awareness of local context. Localised knowledge also allows educators to connect families to the full range of people and services available to them, and to make more informed and empowered choices for themselves and their children. This workshop will provide you with the provocation and possibilities of maximizing the impact of your work through building culturally and locally specific knowledge. There will be opportunities to hear success stories from other educators and teachers.

**Workshop 2 - *Cultural safety for Koorie children and families***

**Date and time:** Thursday 21 April 3.30pm - 5.30pm

**Location:** Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS) 120 Madden Ave, Mildura VIC 3500

**Presenters:** Carolyn Briggs, Associate Professor Alma Fleet

**Overview:** The concept of cultural safety may be unfamiliar to some educators and teachers but is central in Koorie communities. Cultural safety is a critical first step in engaging with and empowering Koorie children and families. Cultural safety also ensures programs are welcoming and delivered in a culturally responsive and appropriate manner. This session will explore the elements that contribute to the establishment of cultural safety for children and families, as well as sharing examples of successful initiatives.

**Workshop 3 - *Improving numeracy outcomes for young Aboriginal children***

**Date and time:** Thursday 19 May 3.30pm - 5.30pm

**Location:** Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS) 120 Madden Ave, Mildura VIC 3500

**Presenter:** Associate Professor Marina Papic (Macquarie University)

**Overview:** This workshop provides early childhood educators with ideas on how to enhance young children’s mathematical explorationsand thinking. The session explores the place of mathematics in play, learning environments and intentional teaching and the role of theeducator in these situations. Various numeracy concepts, skills and processes are explored through games and hands on activities thatare embedded within the context of the Early Years Learning Framework. Culturally relevant experiences, resources and pedagogies arediscussed and explored.

**PRESENTERS**

**Elder Carolyn Briggs**

Elder Carolyn Briggs is the 2011 National NAIDOC Award Winner – Elder of the Year. She established Australia’s first Aboriginal child care centre, is Chairperson of the Boonwurrung Foundation, which she set up to help connect Aboriginal youth to their heritage, and is also a member of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples. She has developed Indigenous employment strategies with the State Government and is a former director of La Trobe University's Aboriginal Tertiary Support Unit, Bendigo. As a mediator with the Equal Opportunities Commission, Carolyn was seconded to work with the Federal Attorney-General as head researcher for Victoria on the Muirhead recommendations to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Carolyn was inducted into the 2005 Victorian Honour Roll of Women, and gained entry in the 2012 and 2013 Who's Who of Australian Women. Carolyn has also completed a bachelor degree in language and linguistics in the hope of recording her Boonwurrung language in oral and written form. She is currently completing her doctorate in Philosophy, researching in engaging urban indigenous youth to understand indigenous knowledge.

**Dr Hanan Sukkar**

Dr Hanan Sukkar is a Senior Associate at Semann & Slattery with specialist knowledge on child and family development and support services. Hanan has worked at director level assisting vulnerable families on welfare in the USA and at management level overseeing new migrants in Australia. She has extensive experience working with the Government of Victoria, having worked for the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development focusing on Early Childhood Intervention. Hanan has held academic positions across a range of Australian Universities, and is involved in local, national and international research projects.

**Associate Professor Alma Fleet**

Dr Fleet is an Adjunct Associate at Semann & Slattery and an Honorary Associate Professor at Macquarie University. She has a particular interest in qualitative research methodology, educational change, practitioner enquiry and diverse cultural ways of understanding the world, pedagogy and teaching. She is committed to working with a diverse range of organisations interested in implementing and undertaking a process of change.

Dr Fleet has been involved in a range of research projects at Semann & Slattery including a review of the Aboriginal Youth and Family Strategy for the NSW Government, exploring educational leadership, and a range of community development programs. Her work has been published in a range of national and international journals. She has written for and edited two internationally respected publications jointly with Dr Catherine Patterson and Janet Robertson.

Dr Fleet has taught children in Scotland and America and worked for schools in Australia. She is constantly learning from and enjoying her work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are pursuing higher degrees. Her practical experiences led her to an ongoing interest in issues associated with literacy development and the transition to school, as well as tensions between constraints and opportunities in educational settings.

**Associate Professor Marina Papic**

Associate Professor Marina Papic is the Director of the Children and Families Research Centre at Macquarie University. She is interested in all aspects of early childhood education, learning and development and is committed to maximising opportunities for young children, families and communities, particularly in rural, regional and remote communities of Australia. Marina has worked in the education field for 30 years and has held various executive roles including Head of Department, Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University and Executive Officer Primary of an Independent K-12 College.

Marina was a member of a consortium of early childhood experts contracted to develop the national Early Years Learning Framework and a member of a multi-site team involving eleven universities investigating the mathematical thinking of preschool children in rural, regional and remote Australia. Marina currently leads an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant which works closely with rural and remote communities to enhance access to early childhood education and health as well as promote social inclusion.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

**Supporting positive outcomes for Koorie children in**

**prior to school settings and schools in Morwell**

Come and join us for a series of professional learning opportunities to explore what it takes to support the success of Koorie children in prior to school settings (kindergartens/long day care) and in schools.

These professional learning programs aim to improve the capacity of educators and teachers in prior to school settings and schools to support Koorie children’s connection to Koorie culture during and after transition to school, and to create stronger connections and relationships around children’s transition to school between teachers, educators, children and families. The professional learning also provides an opportunity to build connections and support networking across sectors to strengthen transition to school initiatives.

COME TO ONE OR AS MANY WORKSHOPS AS YOU LIKE!

FREE EVENT: Funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training as part of the Transition to School: Supporting Reciprocal Visits project

REGISTER: By phone on 02 9557 1460 or email at [admin@semannslattery.com](mailto:admin@semannslattery.com)

Afternoon tea will be provided: Please advise if you have any dietary requirements.

**Workshop** **1** - ***Knowing your local community***

**Date and time:** Tuesday 22 March - 4.00pm - 6.00pm

**Location:** Century Inn, 5 Airfield Rd, Traralgon

**Overview:** Why is it important to know your local community? Localised knowledge builds capacity for teachers and educators in prior to school settings and in schools, for local programs and services, and for children and families. It provides everyone with a greater community presence, and enables teachers and educators to access community resources to better meet the needs of children and families. It also means working with greater awareness of local context. Localised knowledge also allows teachers and educators to connect families to the full range of people and services available to them, and to make more informed and empowered choices for themselves and their children.

This workshop will provide you with opportunities and possibilities for maximizing the impact of your work through building culturally and locally specific knowledge. Specifically, participants will:

* Hear from local Koorie Engagement Support Officers
* Learn about the SNAICC Journey to Big School project
* Find out about the Victorian DET funded Transition to School: Reciprocal Visits project in Morwell and other areas in Victoria
* Connect with local organisations that support Koorie children and families
* Share experiences, insights and stories of success
* Come away with new strategies and new connections to utilise in their workplace.

Save the date for workshop 2 to be held on **19 April 2016**, and workshop 3 to be held on **17 May 2016**. Both workshops will be held from 4.00pm - 6.00pm. More information about workshops 2 and 3 will follow.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

**Supporting positive outcomes for Koorie children in**

**prior to school settings and schools in Morwell**

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REGISTER: By phone on 02 9557 1460 or email at [admin@semannslattery.com](mailto:admin@semannslattery.com)

Afternoon tea will be provided: Please advise if you have any dietary requirements.

**Workshop 2 - *Cultural safety for Koorie children and families***

**Date and time:** Tuesday 19 April - 4.00pm - 6.00pm

**Location:** Century Inn, 5 Airfield Rd, Traralgon

**Overview:** The concept of cultural safety may be unfamiliar to some educators and teachers but is central in Koorie communities. Cultural safety is a critical first step in engaging with and empowering Koorie children and families. Cultural safety also ensures programs are welcoming and delivered in a culturally responsive and appropriate manner. This session will explore the elements that contribute to the establishment of cultural safety for children and families.

**Presenter:** Elder Carolyn Briggs is the 2011 National NAIDOC Award Winner – Elder of the Year. She established Australia’s first Aboriginal child care centre, is Chairperson of the Boonwurrung Foundation, which she set up to help connect Aboriginal youth to their heritage, and is also a member of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples. She has developed Indigenous employment strategies with the State Government and is a former director of La Trobe University's Aboriginal Tertiary Support Unit, Bendigo.

As a mediator with the Equal Opportunities Commission, Carolyn was seconded to work with the Federal Attorney-General as head researcher for Victoria on the Muirhead recommendations to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Carolyn was inducted into the 2005 Victorian Honour Roll of Women, and gained entry in the 2012 and 2013 Who's Who of Australian Women. Carolyn has also completed a Bachelor degree in language and linguistics in the hope of recording her Boonwurrung language in oral and written form. She is currently completing her doctorate in Philosophy, researching in engaging urban indigenous youth to understand indigenous knowledge.

Save the date for workshop 3 to be held on **17 May 2016**. More information will follow.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

**Supporting positive outcomes for Koorie children in**

**prior to school settings and schools in Morwell**

Come and join us for a series of professional learning opportunities to explore what it takes to support the success of Koorie children in prior to school settings (kindergartens/long day care) and in schools.

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COME TO ONE OR AS MANY WORKSHOPS AS YOU LIKE!

FREE EVENT: Funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training as part of the Transition to School: Supporting Reciprocal Visits project

REGISTER: By phone on 02 9557 1460 or email at [admin@semannslattery.com](mailto:admin@semannslattery.com)

Afternoon tea will be provided: Please advise if you have any dietary requirements.

**Workshop 3 - *Improving numeracy outcomes for young Koorie children***

**Date and time:** Tuesday 17 May - 4.00pm - 6.00pm

**Location:** Century Inn, 5 Airfield Rd, Traralgon

**Overview:** This workshop provides teachers and educators in prior to school settings and in schools with ideas on how to enhance young children’s mathematical explorations and thinking. The session explores the place of mathematics in play, learning environments and intentional teaching and the role of the educator in these situations. Various numeracy concepts, skills and processes are explored through games and hands on activities that are embedded within the context of the Early Years Learning Framework. Culturally relevant experiences, resources and pedagogies are discussed and explored.

**Presenter:** Associate Professor Marina Papic is the Director of the Children and Families Research Centre at Macquarie University. She is interested in all aspects of early childhood education, learning and development and is committed to maximising opportunities for young children, families and communities, particularly in rural, regional and remote communities of Australia. Marina has worked in the education field for 30 years and has held various executive roles including Head of Department, Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University and Executive Officer Primary of an Independent K-12 College.

The professional development is funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training as part of the Transition to School: Supporting Reciprocal Visits project.

## Appendix 6: Professional Development Reflection Sheet



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**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT REFLECTION SHEET**

Name:

Date:

Please respond to the following statements by ticking the relevant box indicating how much you agree or disagree

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Statement** | **Strongly agree** | **Agree** | **Neither agree or disagree** | **Disagree** | **Strongly disagree** | **Not applicable** |
| The topic was relevant to my needs |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| The content will be useful in my work |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| The training will make a difference to how I do my job |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| The materials (where provided) were helpful |  |  |  |  |  |  |

What are one or two critical take away messages from the professional development session today?

What might you do with this information and how might it be transferred into the workplace so it has a positive impact on:

1. Transition to school for children and families?
2. Transition to school for Koorie children and families?

What questions have been raised that you would like to explore in more detail?

Are there other professional development topics that would help you better support Koorie children and families have a positive transition to school?

## Appendix 7: Public Professional Development Reflection Sheet Summaries - Morwell

**Session 1: Community engagement**

Thirty-three people attended the first public professional development session in Morwell, although only 23 evaluation forms were returned. A range of prior-to-school and school services were represented, including four directly involved in the Reciprocal Visits project. Participants included educators and teachers in prior-to-school and school settings, Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs), Inclusion Support Facilitators (ISFs), university students and program managers. Participants came from a number of towns in the Gippsland region including Morwell, Moe, Traralgon and Churchill.

Of those who responded, only one person was non-committal about the relevance of the topic and the value of the materials provided. All but one agreed that the content would be useful in their work, and importantly, all respondents agreed the training would make a difference to how they do their job.

When asked for “one or two critical take away messages” from the session, participants nominated a number of key points. Many highlighted a greater knowledge of the programs, services and resources available to support schools and services to better meet the needs of Koorie children and families. More specifically this related to an increased awareness of the role of KESOs, the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) program, and resources such as a Koorie Review Checklist that aims to assist schools to review what is happening in their setting for Koorie children and their education.

It was evident that a number of participants were finding out about such resources for the first time. One participant, in response to this question, reported finding out about *“lots of different Koorie services and programs [that] I was not aware of and could access to improve outcomes for Koorie and non-Koorie children*.” Communication, relationships and strong connections between educators and teachers, children and families were noted as being essential *“for a positive, smooth and successful transition.”* Participants also noted strategies for promoting cultural safety, including *“cultural comfort for families and children when entering the service”, “looking at body language and the way we to speak to families”* and *“[being] genuine in your care and concern.”*

When asked what they might do with the information provided, answers varied according to current practice. For some participants the event affirmed some of the strategies they were already implementing. Other participants were motivated to seek out and connect with key stakeholders to support transition to school, and some to make greater use of available resources. Some participants sought to engage in ongoing conversations with colleagues and others to reflect on current practices, including engagement with families. By doing so, participants hoped to *“ensure families feel secure, comfortable and welcome in their learning services – always”,* and to *“have families feel included/ have ownership regarding choices.”*

Questions to be explored in more detail varied. Some participants were interested to find out more about some of the programs highlighted in the session, such as the HIPPY program, and others to start using some of the resources shared, such as the Koorie Review Checklist. Some participants were keen to explore their next steps with regard to their current transition practice *(“How can we transition better?”*), their classroom practice *(“Would like to know more about indigenous culture and how to implement it in the classroom”)* and their interactions with families *(“Dealing correctly when interacting with Koorie children and families. Learning more about the language of our Koorie community”).*

Participants’ commitment to better support Koorie children and families to have a positive transition to school was reflected in their suggestions for future professional development topics. The most requested topic related to cultural awareness and culturally appropriate practice. More specifically, this included: *“How to actually connect to Koorie community and support services”, “How to support services that are not Koorie services”, “How to implement and incorporate Koorie culture and resources into ECEC programs and environment”* and “*Local language*.”

**Session 2: Cultural safety**

Twenty-five people attended the second public professional development event in Morwell and 21 evaluation forms were returned.A range of schools and prior-to-school services were represented, including educators/ teachers and KESOs directly involved in the Reciprocal Visits project. Participants included educators and teachers in prior-to-school and school settings, Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs), Inclusion Support Facilitators (ISFs), program managers, librarians and welfare workers.Participants came from a number of towns in the Gippsland region including Morwell, Moe, Churchill, Newborough and Traralgon.

All participants were in agreement about the relevance of the topic to their needs. Furthermore, the vast majority were in agreement that the content would be useful in their work (85%), the training would make a difference to how they did their job (90%) and that the materials provided were helpful (76.1%). The remaining responses were neutral, with no participant disagreeing with any of the statements provided.

When asked for “one or two critical take away messages” from the session, participants highlighted some key points. This included awareness of Aboriginal history and languages, the value of relationships, the importance of not making assumptions, and recognition of each child and family’s uniqueness. Other participants noted the importance of *“the stepping stones to cultural competence - safety/ awareness/ sensitivity”.* Other comments worth noting included: *“The need to see things from other perspectives - sometimes we are not of the same understanding because we view things differently”, “Everyone has a story. It takes time to develop a relationship so that a little part of the story can be told”* and *“Not making assumptions and assuming all Koorie [families] are the same.”*

Participants identified a number of strategies with regard to what they would do with the information presented and how it might be transferred into the workplace. For some this reflected making changes to current practice, with increased awareness of the need for a whole of school approach, the importance of relationships, and ensuring families feel safe. More specifically, one participant sought to *“create an understanding and aware school* *community around Koorie considerations [to] help to transition families into our school.”* Another participant saw an opportunity to rethink approaches to preparing transition statements, noting they would *“Sit and talk the story, rather than just write the transition report.”* Other participants spoke about the need to *“listen to the full story” and to “[not] judge and be open to everyone’s story.”*

Participants highlighted two key areas they were keen to explore in more detail, including through future professional development opportunities. Topic areas related to gaining increased knowledge of Aboriginal history, including history specific to the local community, and increased knowledge of Aboriginal language and how to introduce local Aboriginal language into schools. Other suggestions for professional development topics included being culturally sensitive when building relationships with and seeking information from Koorie families, and encouraging preschool attendance to support a positive start to school.

**Session 3: Improving numeracy outcomes**

Twenty-seven people attended the third public professional development event in Morwell and 24 evaluation forms were returned. A range of prior-to-school and school services were represented, including those directly involved in the Reciprocal Visits project. Participants included educators and teachers in prior-to-school and school settings, maths specialists, Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs), Koorie Preschool Assistants (KPSA), Inclusion Support Facilitators (ISFs), program managers and community workers. Participants came from a number of towns in the Gippsland region including Morwell, Moe, Traralgon and Newborough.

Participant feedback from this session was positive. All participants were in agreement about the relevance of the topic to their needs and that the content would be useful in their work. Furthermore, all participants agreed that the materials provided were helpful. The majority of participants (91.3%) agreed that the training would make a difference to how they did their job and 8.7% provided a neutral response.

When asked for “one or two critical take away messages” from the session, a number of participants highlighted the importance of making numeracy fun, accessible and engaging, for children and for adults. For others the session revealed new possibilities for promoting children’s numeracy development through everyday experiences, while also incorporating Koorie culture into the learning. One participant noted: *“Maths activities can be extremely enjoyable. I like the idea of laying down a framework of maths concepts and activities that builds up familiarity and that can be visited in future schooling.”* Another added, *“[This was a] great session [and] made maths learning so fun. [I] can't wait to start implementing these games.”*

Participants identified two key strategies for transferring key ideas and information into the workplace. This included 1) replicating the games and activities shared in the session in their work with children; and 2) sharing information with families to reinforce learning at home. Clearly, the session provided participants with *“a bank of activities”* to engage children in numeracy experiences and improve numeracy outcomes. One participant commented, *“I think Koorie kids would just 'eat up' these activities and it [will] unlock a lot of talent and skills*.” Participants were also inspired to consider how they might share information with families, for example through family ‘maths’ nights and by creating ‘kits’ for families to use at home to “*support their children's learning through everyday activities.”*

Only a few participants highlighted questions requiring further exploration. These were quite specific in response to an aspect of the session and included: incorporating music and pattern into the curriculum; how the activities shared might connect with algebra; other ways to look at mathematics; and how to engage Koorie families in the classroom with regard to numeracy experiences.

Suggested topics for future professional development events were consistent with those raised by participants in previous sessions. They included: Building relationships with Koorie families; Supporting Koorie families in transition to school; Connecting with community; Cultural inclusion; and Koorie language and storytelling.

## Appendix 8: Public Professional Development Reflection Sheet Summaries - Mildura

**Session 1: Community engagement**

While there were 30 people in the room representing every prior-to-school service and school children’s service/setting in the project, only 19 people completed evaluations. Of those who responded, only one person was non-committal about the relevance of the topic, although three were neutral about whether the training would make a difference to their work. Interestingly, all respondents agreed with the statement that “the content will be useful in my work”.

When asked for “one or two critical take away messages” from the session, it was clear that the facilitators’ intentions were achieved. For example, in addition to the importance of “*real listening and respect”, “Not making assumptions”* and *“Making all services culturally welcoming”,* there were comments such as *“The importance of building community relationships. Use the knowledge from people in our community to build the trust with our families”* and *“Understanding what is going on ‘behind the scenes’ in the children’s lives; the family is the key to understanding the child.”*

When asked what they might do with the information, answers varied depending on roles, but included actions such as: “*Plan on sharing with other staff to enable a culture free from judgment”, “Keep working on building these relationships between kinder, school, family, children, community, other professionals”* and *“Develop relationships with local kinders early in the year; develop relationships with prospective students and their families to assist transition.”*

Questions to be explored in more detail included several about learning ways to include local languages: *“Learning more about the Aboriginal culture in my area and its meanings”, “Looking up the Latje history, mapping - where was the child born? Where were parents born?”, “What do I include for local culture?”, “Where do I find out more?”, “How does our local Aboriginal community manage disability?”* and importantly *“Personal reflection about myself as a listener.”*

Other suggested professional development topics that might assist transition to school included: Indigenous symbols, confidence in supporting Koorie children, Koorie children’s language development, bush teachers and teaching culture outdoors safely in nature, building relationships, how to teach cultural languages, developing trusting relationships, actual skills of transitioning learners to school, and finally, *“Everything possible please!”*

**Session 2: Cultural safety**

The second professional development session seemed valuable for the 30 people who attended, with only one person indicating disappointment in any area, wishing to receive more resources. In addition to the two participating kindergartens, six other kindergartens had representatives participating. Unfortunately, no school personnel were able to attend other than the project KESOs who were giving presentations. Interestingly, there were a large proportion of health and family support workers in attendance as well as unexpected participants including a librarian and a team of secondary school educators.

Presentations were given by members of the project team with open discussion throughout from the group. Presentations were also given by KESOs from Ranfurly Primary and Mildura Primary Schools.

Generally, in the evaluation of this session, responses were very positive, with 82% of responses indicating agreement with the four evaluative statements, including 27% who ‘strongly agreed’. Participants stated: *“The guest speakers were informative and shared ideas and strategies”; “Very engaging/stimulating! Thank you!”; and “The training will make a difference to how I do my job.”* Of the responses received, 18% of participants offered a neutral response and a few ticked not applicable or gave no response. Written responses were generally thoughtful, indicating the value of the session. However, it was also evident that there is still much work to be done in this area.

Participants indicated a range of ‘takeaway’ messages, generally reflecting key messages from speakers (e.g. welcoming families, promoting respect, valuing cultural sensitivity and inclusion). Strong responses included personal reflection (*“Awareness of ‘me’ and others”; “If I don’t know why’, then why don’t I? Need to be aware of my own assumptions/ prejudices/ stereotypical thinking and how my identity can impact on others”*), foundation principles *(“Importance of building relationships with children and their families”; “Reminder about the importance of challenging stereotypes”*), and pragmatics *(“Work towards removing complacency with my kinder setting in respect to attendance etc.”*

When asked:What might you do with this information/how might it be transferred to the workplace?, there were strong groupings of responses related to supporting children’s transition including sharing information with other staff, building relationships with families, and linking with schools and KESOs. Philosophical orientations were also apparent: *“That transition is about time to help families feel familiar, informed and safe about change.”*

Topics that people wanted to explore in more detail tended to be site/organisation specific, such as *“What should we be ‘sensitive’ about when providing activities or story time within our libraries?”* and *“Programs available for secondary schools.”* Pragmatic matters were also raised, including *“Where can we find funding to release parents, prep teachers and kinder [educators] to attend meetings and events?”* and *“More MDAS programs to extend to all schools - not just the two Indigenous prominent please.”* The raising of focus concerns suggested the value of ongoing work in this area, e.g.: *“What can be done in our local area to assist parents to feel more comfortable with coming to orientations - How do we build connections?”*

Finally, further professional development was sought in a wide range of areas. This included assistance with particular programs and organisations, more on ‘culture’ and cultural safety (including “*more resources of Barkindji and Latji Latji language and how to teach/pronounce correctly”*), and important pedagogical concerns: *“How to connect EYLF & VELS as schools don’t have a lot on ‘sense of belonging’ or ‘play-based curriculum’.”*

**Session 3: Improving numeracy outcomes**

Of the 14 participants who attended the third professional development session three were from schools and four from prior-to-school settings, including one person from a long day care setting. Of the other participants two were from MDAS, and the remainder were from Sunraysia Community Health Services, Mallee Accommodation and Support Program, and Mildura Aboriginal Health Services. Both project schools and key prior-to-school settings were represented. All enjoyed the practicality of the hands-on session, with everyone either agreeing or strongly agreeing (the majority) to all evaluation statements.

Take away messages included the obvious *(“include more maths”* and *“make learning engaging”)* as well as the focus topics: *“Maintain strong relationships and connections”, “More numeracy/maths hands-on with young children”, “Lots of time and positive reinforcement”, “Using materials that are known/culturally appropriate to engage children”, “Numeracy should be an everyday experience”,* and “*We need to use language around maths to teach children words to express mathematical concepts”.*

In considering what to do with this information, and in transferring it to the workplace, one participant suggested working in partnerships with families to build numeracy skills for schools and everyday living. Other participants wrote: *“Continue to build relationships with families”, “Relationships with kinders is important to help to get to know students”*; *“Create familiar environments for children to transition smoothly into school setting”; and “Link Koorie stories to mathematical concepts.”* One community organisation participant noted: *“Incorporate into KPSA programs, HIPPY and playgroups”* and *“To incorporate natural materials to make the concept more attractive to Aboriginal families.”*

When asked, “What questions have been raised that you would like to explore in more detail?” one person wrote, *“Looking forward to integrating these games into my service”.* Others raised issues like: *“What makes children enjoy maths more or less?”* and asked for *“More on the birth to three age group”.* Requests for future professional development included a similar session on literacy and *“Everything available please!”* One person listed: emotional wellbeing, engagement, culturally appropriate practices, and entwining culture into early childhood settings better. Finally, one person concluded: *“Well presented and I really enjoyed this information session. Please email me activities.”*

This productive professional development session was thoroughly enjoyed and valuable for those who attended. Unfortunately, there was a KESO conference on the day so that precluded some interested people from attending.

## Appendix 9: Discussion Points Raised in an Initial Action Planning Session in One Site

*Sustaining relationships*

* Stronger relationships with each other helps families to connect with schools and KESOs – providing greater continuity and increasing their sense of familiarity, trust and respect
* Starting meetings early in the year, and being clear about the purpose/ rationale of these meetings. The Reciprocal Visits project has made teachers and educators more comfortable and confident connecting with each other – the more information that can be shared the better for everyone. It is the conversations with each other that are important! This includes thinking about other ways to communicate, e.g. emails and phone calls.

*Environments*

* How do we get children comfortable in school environments? What prior knowledge may they need? For example, toilets are very different in schools, signs on toilets, the space/ size is very different, fences and gates, stairs, long corridors, etc. - this will look different in different schools
* Working with schools to take photos of key areas/ aspects of the school - follow up conversations with children in prior-to-school settings
* Talking to children and families about what they would like to know more about in getting ready for school
* Reciprocal visits with children - children and/or teachers take photos of the schools to develop social stories to address potential concerns and questions raised.

*Removing stigmas and key messages for families*

* Learning is lifelong. Learning happens in different ways and in different spaces
* Second year of kindergarten is not failure. Children benefit from this. This requires greater community awareness and education
* Long day care programs and out of school hours care programs also provide educational programs and have a role to play as a key stakeholder in transition to school
* It is okay to seek support. Parents need to know there won’t be negative repercussions because their child went to the breakfast program two days in a week. Highlighting local services available to support children and families is critical.

*Making connections with schools*

* Inviting schools/ prep teachers to visit kinder at the end of a kindergarten session to meet children and help families make links to teachers/ key contacts
* Schools providing orientation dates to kindergartens allows kindergarten educators to remind families about upcoming orientation visits and promote greater attendance. [Currently schools send written information to families, make phone calls and conduct home visits]. Kindergarten educators and prep teachers could consider making joint home visits to strengthen connections between home and school
* There is some uncertainty about where to direct families wishing to enrol in the new merged school. Kindergartens can refer families to existing schools until more information is available regarding this process
* How can information be passed on to kindergarten educators not involved in the project, e.g. other Council kindergartens?
* How can we incorporate this project in with the local networking group? Perhaps there could be a key person assigned to be responsible for coordinating the networking group, noting that involvement in this group is voluntary and currently sits outside of teaching responsibilities
* Contacting KESOs for support and assistance.