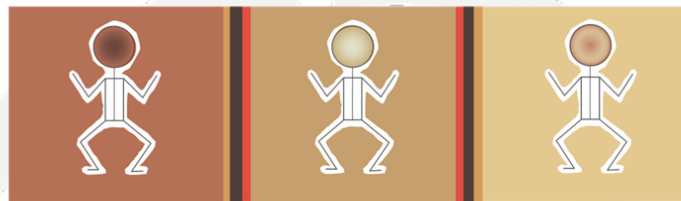


reconciliation



victoria

**Submission to the Yoorrook
Justice Commission - Education**

Reconciliation Victoria

March 2024

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Acknowledgment

Reconciliation Victoria acknowledges the Traditional Owners of country throughout Victoria and recognises First Peoples continuing connection to lands, waters, and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present who carry the memories, traditions, cultures, and aspirations of First Peoples, and who forge the path ahead for emerging leaders. We dedicate ourselves to working respectfully with and guided by First Peoples, and to listen and amplify the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in all areas of our work.

About Reconciliation Victoria

Reconciliation Victoria is the statewide body promoting reconciliation across Victoria. This means we promote deeper understanding, respect, and justice for and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Our work is grounded in working with First Peoples to advocate for and facilitate progress in reconciliation, truth-telling, treaties, and self-determination for First Peoples. Our Board works with and receives invaluable advice from a First Peoples' Cultural Council. This ensures our work is guided by a diverse range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' voices, knowledge, and backgrounds.

Externally, we also work with a broad range of stakeholders with strong commitments to reconciliation. These include the Australian Reconciliation Network, Victorian Local Reconciliation Groups (LRGs), Victorian local governments, schools, educators, and organisations with Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs).

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Executive Summary

Reconciliation Victoria welcomes the opportunity to present this submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commission as part of the Commission's inquiry into the education system in Victoria. The stories shared in this submission were collated through a series of 12 formal interviews and conversations conducted by Reconciliation Victoria. They include interviews with Reconciliation Victoria Board members, Cultural Council representatives, and individuals from Reconciliation Victoria's network of Aboriginal Education Leaders. We have also included observations and conversations with teachers and other workers in the education sector. From these interviews, conversations, and observations, the following key themes, issues, and ideas emerged, to form the basis for this submission:

Racism – Cultural Safety, Cultural Load, and Cultural Identity

Racism was a thread that ran through most of the stories we were told. Those we spoke to talked to us about their experiences, and or observations of racism in schools and of the interlinking themes of cultural safety, cultural load, and cultural identity in education settings. We were told about the importance of making education settings culturally safe for First Peoples students, staff, educators, and families, and we were told ways that things could be done better including; teaching First Nations languages in schools; and better promotion and enforcement of mandated regulations and legislation (such as the Commission for Children and Young People Child Safe Standards¹, and the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006²). We were also told by some of the interviewees, stories of racism they experienced when they were in school in Victoria.

Teacher Knowledge

Our consultations made it clear that the knowledge of Victorian teachers in relation to First Peoples perspectives, cultures and histories is incredibly mixed at all levels and in all sectors of the education system. While some teachers have a strong level of knowledge, there are many who do not, and this has significant effects on how this material is taught throughout the sector.

Teacher Education Training (Tertiary Sector)

Changing the way teachers (and education students) are taught First People's perspectives, histories and cultures in universities was identified as a significant area for improvement. Ensuring teachers are taught more about First People's perspectives, histories and cultures, and how to teach this as the cross-curriculum priority would not only help non-First Nation's children and young people come away with a better understanding but would also ensure schools were more culturally safe for First People's children.

¹ Commission for Children and Young People. "The 11 Child Safe Standards," Commission for Children and Young People, accessed February 2023, <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safe-standards/the-11-child-safe-standards/>.

² *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Victoria), <https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/charter-human-rights-and-responsibilities-act-2006/015>.

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Teachers Resources

Through the interviews for this submission, and our work in the education space, it was clear that there are multiple barriers to teachers accessing and or locating local-based resources to teach First Peoples perspectives, histories and cultures, specifically locally based resources. Some barriers teachers are faced with include time pressure; unsure where to find authentic resources; limited local-based teaching and learning resources from the Department of Education that are authorized or co-written by First Nations People (such as Arc).³

Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) in Victorian schools and Early Learning Services

While the number of Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) in Early Learning services is relatively high in Victoria, the program take up could be much higher in primary schools and secondary schools. This is despite research suggesting RAPs can help create more culturally safe learning environments for First Peoples children.

Systemic Barriers to Teaching First Peoples' Perspectives, Histories, and Truths in Schools

Teachers and others connected to the education sector spoke about how there are several systemic barriers to improving the teaching of First Peoples perspective, histories cultures and truths in schools. These include lack of time to prepare and or undertake training, lack of in-depth and in person training opportunities, lack of funding to engage local First Nations community members and pressure from other curriculum areas which can take up significant time and focus.

The Victorian Cross-curriculum Priority: *Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures*

The cross-curriculum priority: *Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures*⁴ is a key focus area of the Victorian curriculum. However, we were told by those we interviewed that many teachers and schools are not embedding these teachings throughout the curriculum as is intended. Time constraints on teachers, lack of knowledge, and fear were the main reasons raised for this lack of integration into the curriculum.

³ State Government of Victoria. "Arc Home," Arc, accessed February 2024, <https://arc.educationapps.vic.gov.au/>.

⁴ Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *Learning About Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures* (Online: Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2018), <https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/static/docs/Learning%20about%20Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20histories%20and%20cultures.pdf>.

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The Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026 and The Koorie Education Workforce

Those we spoke to called for more funding to support First Peoples children, and the Koorie Education Workforce.⁵ In particular, interviewees called for an expansion of the Koorie Education Support Officer (KESO) workforce, to better serve government schools, but to also support First Peoples children in the Independent and Catholic school sectors.

Introduction

“It is a basic human right to have an education and a fundamental right that Aboriginal people have a right to self-determination, and to determine for themselves what the education for their kids should be like”. Aunty Vicki Clark OAM

“Education is key to making societal change, we can’t wait for society to change, we need to change society through education.” Teacher C

Reconciliation Victoria, including our cultural council, and board, strongly believe in the power of education as a transformative tool. We believe in the power of education to create significant change in the perceptions and understandings of First Peoples perspectives, histories and truth-telling for non-First Peoples educators, students, schools, and communities.

We also believe that if there is a significant shift in the perceptions of non-First Peoples educators, students, schools, and communities, then it is possible that the education sector can make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children feel culturally safe and supported in educational settings. However, for this to be achieved, it is crucial for self-determination to be deeply embedded in the education sector.

Reconciliation Victoria would like to acknowledge that this submission was made possible by those who generously gave their time to speak with us about their experiences in the education system. This included First Peoples and allies who shared their observations and thoughts.

Note: Some of those interviewed by Reconciliation Victoria wished to remain anonymous and as such their comments have been attributed to a pseudonym (e.g., Teacher G).

⁵ Koorie Outcomes Division. “Koorie Education,” Department of Education, accessed February 2024, <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/koorie-education/policy>.

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Recommendations

For Schools

1. Child safe standards, July 2022, Standard One, “Organisations establish a culturally safe environment in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people are respected and valued”⁶ must be more strongly enforced and educator learnings around this standard should be resourced.
2. All Victorian schools should be supported to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan.
3. All Victorian schools should be funded to engage with local First Nations communities on a regular basis, and each school should be funded to engage a local Elder to conduct a Welcome to Country, once per year.
4. The State Government should work with Aboriginal Controlled Organisations as a priority to ensure that Aboriginal languages are taught in Victorian schools.
5. Anti-Racism training needs to be mandated for all Victorian schools.
6. Teaching of the cross-curriculum priority: *Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures* needs to be both mandated, but also resourced.
7. Curriculum planning days relating to integrating the cross-curriculum priority must be mandated. Alongside this, we recommend that training is provided for teachers to confidently teach the cross-curriculum priority.

⁶ Commission for Children and Young People. “The 11 Child Safe Standards.”

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For Professional Learning and Resources

1. The existing guides and frameworks (e.g. AITSL's *Cultural responsiveness reflection tool*,⁷ and the Victorian Government's *Culturally safe environments guidance*⁸) need to be better promoted to school leaders and principals.
2. Cultural Awareness training must be mandated and funded in all Victorian schools for all teachers and staff and this mandated training needs to be experiential and have an in-person component (not solely online or webinar delivery).
3. The Department of Education should fund the creation or compilation of resources which enable schools to undertake a 'deeper dive' into understanding First Peoples perspectives to grow truth-telling in the education sector. These resources must be developed in partnership with local First Peoples communities.
4. The Department of Education must invest in Arc⁹ in relation to First Peoples education resources, so it can be a reliable, current, culturally safe, and appropriate repository for teaching materials.
5. Arc needs to be made available to all schools in Victoria, including Government schools, Independent Schools, and Catholic Schools.
6. Time for additional professional learning relating to First Peoples' perspectives, histories, and cultures must be factored into the school calendar.

7 Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. "Explore the Indigenous Cultural Responsiveness Self-reflection Tool," Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, accessed February 2024, <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/improve-practice/indigenous-cultural-self-reflection-tool>.

⁸ State Government of Victoria. "Schools - culturally safe environments guidance," State Government of Victoria, accessed February 2024, <https://www.vic.gov.au/schools-culturally-safe-environments-guidance>.

⁹ State Government of Victoria, "Arc Home."

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For Universities

1. Universities must make First Peoples content mandatory in Teaching degrees. This should include how to embed the cross-curriculum priority: *Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures*¹⁰ across all units within pre-service and post-graduate education courses.
2. The Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT),¹¹ in conjunction with universities, should make it mandatory to employ First Peoples academics to teach prospective educators, or provide cultural safety training to university lecturers and tutors with mandated time to co-design unit content with First nations community members.
3. Universities need to urgently enact policies that protect First Peoples teaching staff from racist remarks by students. Additionally, universities must provide culturally safe spaces for all First Peoples staff in the tertiary and TAFE sectors.

For The Education System

1. The Koorie Education Unit funding must be increased to enable more culturally safe schools, but also to further and deepen self-determination in the Education sector.
2. Funding and resourcing for the Koorie Education Coordinator program (including Koorie Education Support Officers) needs to be increased in the Government sector, and the program needs to be expanded to also service the Catholic and Independent school sectors.
3. Collaboration between all school sectors in relation to teaching First Peoples perspectives, histories and cultures, and self-determination, should be fostered and supported by the Department of Education.
4. The State Government should investigate how the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006¹² can be used to support anti racism strategies in the education sector.
5. When Government creates policy, it must include the consideration that not all teachers have the level of knowledge needed to be able to teach First Peoples perspectives, cultures and histories to an acceptable level. To address this, we further recommend that the State Government resources and funds comprehensive professional development for all Victorian teachers and Educators.

¹⁰ Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *Learning About Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures*.

¹¹ Victorian Institute of Teaching. "VIT Home," Victorian Institute of Teaching, accessed February 2024, <https://www.vit.vic.edu.au/>.

¹² *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*.

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Racism – Cultural Safety, Cultural Load, and Cultural Identity

All interviewees who spoke to us for this submission had either experienced racism in an educational setting or witnessed racist behaviours, so subsequently it is a common theme throughout the submission. It is widely understood and documented that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people face racism and discrimination in schools. National figures from ANU’s Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR)¹³ survey show that:

- “Over 40% of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds... reported experiences of racial discrimination from their peers.
- Students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds... were two times more likely to report experiences of racial discrimination compared to students from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds overall.
- Close to 20% of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds reported experiences of racial discrimination from their teacher”.¹⁴

Further to this, a recent report to the Victorian State Government by the Commission for Children and Young People stated that “we saw a continuation of the exclusion from education that began with colonisation, and concerningly, unacceptably, this continues today.” The report also stated that “It is crucial that schools are culturally safe, and racism addressed in order for Aboriginal children and young people to excel.”¹⁵

In Victoria several initiatives attempt to address racism in the education sector. However, both the stories and evidence we gathered, along with the abovementioned statistics show that these initiatives are not making a sizable impact on this experience for First Peoples children and young people in schools and universities. Historically, racism in our schools and universities has been systematic and widespread, and Reconciliation Victoria believes that a more concerted effort is needed by the education sector, including government and organisations, to address it. Aunty Karen Lovett told us that we “have to knock out the racism! One way to do this can be naming classrooms Indigenous names, have art in the classroom. If we teach them young, then it will knock out racism.” Others we spoke to shared their experiences of racism while at school in Victoria.

Uncle Tony McCartney told us that particularly in primary school “the education system wasn’t kind” to him. He told us of an incident he remembers in grade 3. A teacher at the front of the class held up a book “with natives in it”, and told the class, “This is what Tony is”. He also spoke to us of experiencing a lot of racism from parents of other kids who went to his

¹³ Centre for Social Research and Methods. “SOAR – speak out against racism,” Australian National University College of Arts and Social Sciences, accessed February 2024, <https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/research/projects/soar-speak-out-against-racism>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Meena Singh. “Media Release: Victorian education system fails to meet the needs of Aboriginal children and young people in care: Commission report released today,” Commission for Children and Young People, accessed February 2024, <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/news/victorian-education-system-fails-to-meet-the-needs-of-aboriginal-children-and-young-people-in-care-commission-report-released-today/>.

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school. He recalled that a parent of one of his friends in school once screamed out in the street “stay away from my daughter you little black bastard”.

Anon 1 grew up in country Victoria and went to a Catholic school. They told us there was no ethnic diversity at all in their school, and nothing to support cultural safety. When they got to VCE, they told us that they “ticked the box to identify as Aboriginal”. Their Year 12 study score wasn’t high enough to get into the University of Melbourne by the standard entry, and the careers counsellor was dismissive of their desire to go there and keep it on their preference list.

However, they did get in via a First Peoples’ entry scheme and went on to complete an Undergraduate Degree and a Masters. Anon 1 told us they got their foot in the door, however worked really hard to complete the degrees. Despite this, the counsellor’s comments had made them feel that they were not good enough. Anon 1 told us they were made to feel that they were ‘taking advantage of the First Peoples entry scheme.’ “However, in my professional life now I know many people who achieved great things because of being given an opportunity”.

Anon 1 told us that their cousin went to the same school and was a few years behind them. They also didn’t get a high enough score in VCE to get into the course they wanted. They also spoke to the same careers’ counsellor, who told them “Ask Anon 1 how they managed to get in”. This was not said in a positive way, but rather the derogatory connotation and “societal belief that Aboriginal people get unfair advantages”.

In conclusion, this section of our submission has the overarching theme of racism, but to better represent the voices of those who spoke to us, it has been split into theme areas of cultural safety, cultural load, and cultural Identity which will be outlined in the next subsections of this submission.

Cultural Safety

Cultural safety is a fundamental human right and cultural safety “is about creating an environment that is safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This means there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity and experience.”¹⁶

Overall, those we spoke to felt that there was much needed to be done to ensure that First Peoples children and young people were learning in culturally safe environments. While Aunty Vicki Clark told us that over the last 20 years a lot has been done to make positive change in education settings, she also reflected that “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids still face racism, discrimination, and a lack of cultural safety in the education system”.

¹⁶ State Government of Victoria. “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Safety,” Department of Health, accessed February 2024, <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/health-strategies/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-cultural-safety>.

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People spoke to us about the importance of systemic change to improve the experiences of all First Peoples in the education system. Dr Kate Harvie told us that “the education system needs a thorough audit of colonised curriculum and practices”. Reconciliation Victoria Board member, Keith Gove, stated he felt that “education institutions need to be held to account” for how they acted in the past, and how they act now regarding cultural safety.

Aunty Vicki Clark told us that “the majority of our (Aboriginal) kids will be educated by non-Indigenous staff - we know that, and somehow the system needs to be able to do a clean wipe of all the systems to make sure our kids are culturally safe in their classrooms.” ... “We know that there is so much ignorance about their (teachers) own white privilege and we’ve got these teachers teaching our kids. The white privilege is a big injustice for our kids because they have to put up with that bullshit (sic) in the classroom.”

Reconciliation Victoria Board Co-Chair, Professor Andrew Gunstone, spoke of the need for “educational institutions, including schools and universities, to be more culturally competent, and to drive transformational change in these spaces”. Professor Gunstone told us that there needs to be much more support and work to ensure this happens.

Through our interviews it was clear that in many schools across all education sectors, symbolism (in the form of displaying flags) is present, but the teaching of First Peoples’ perspectives and histories is not always embedded well in the classroom. Aunty Karen Lovett told us that “classrooms named in language are an important thing to do to increase cultural safety. If Aboriginal kids have pride in this, and then other kids are thinking these things are cool, and are taking pride in this, then it makes it easier for the Aboriginal kids to feel pride about their culture.”

While it was acknowledged that some form of symbolism in this space is good, without the step up into embedding culturally safe practices in schools, those we interviewed felt that schools run the real risk of being culturally unsafe environments for First Peoples children and young people. This was echoed by teachers in the independent sector with Teacher C expressing that “there isn’t enough cultural knowledge of teachers in the sector, many don’t even understand what cultural safety means”. Teacher F stated, “if teachers don’t know what cultural safety is, how can we expect that school, that education environment to be culturally safe?”.

Many felt that there were not enough schools, principals, and sector leaders “stepping up” to create change in their educational settings. Professor Gunstone told us that “There is a reluctance among educational institutions to genuinely engage in truth-telling”. Teacher C echoed this, telling us that “teaching First Peoples’ perspectives is still a blind spot for many schools”.

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Further to this, some we interviewed said that schools and teachers were particularly bad at embedding cultural safety. Teacher G told us that the excuse of “Oh we don’t have Indigenous kids in the school” has often been heard as a reason to not teach First Peoples’ perspectives or embed cultural safety protocols. Teacher C from the Independent sector told us that “we can’t just rely on it happening over time, if true change in the system is going to happen, then it requires an intervention”.

This was echoed by Worker 1 from the state government sector, who told us of the importance of self-determination in the education sector. They told us that “the work in the department needs to go much deeper and have a stronger focus on self-determination.” We were also told that to help forward crucial self-determination principles, Local Aboriginal Education Consultative groups (LAECGs)¹⁷ could be better supported, with young people needing to be mentored to join. “Look at making an afterhours meeting to reduce barriers for participation for young people who work full time “(Anon 1).

Child Safe Standards, July 2022, Standard One, relates specifically of the need to provide a safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids. It requires “Organisations establish a culturally safe environment in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people are respected and valued.”¹⁸ A number of those who we interviewed raised Child Safe Standard One as a potential mechanism for shifting thinking regarding the need for, and importance of, cultural safety in schools for First Peoples children and young people. (Teacher C, Teacher H) However, some also questioned if the Child Safe Standard is making any difference. Aunty Vicki Clark told us that “the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) Culturally Safe Standards 1 for Aboriginal young people must be constantly measured to ensure cultural safety in our classrooms is a lived experience for Aboriginal children.”

In a similar vein, it was highlighted that most schools have anti-racism protocols. Teacher H told us that it is mandated via VRQA (Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority). The VRQA mandates that schools must implement some minimum standards regarding anti-racism protocols.¹⁹ Others we spoke to questioned if they were effective, “who is enforcing these anti- racism protocols?” (Teacher G).

Aunty Vicki Clark also talked about the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act, 2006. She told us there was a lot of hope when it was enacted but feels it is now underutilised and could be better used to support First Peoples regarding cultural safety. “The Charter requires public authorities, such as Victorian state and local government departments and agencies, and people delivering services on behalf of government, to act

¹⁷ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. “Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups,” Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc., accessed February 2024, <https://www.vaeai.org.au/local-aboriginal-education-consultative-groups/>.

¹⁸ Commission for Children and Young People. “The 11 Child Safe Standards.”

¹⁹ State Government of Victoria. “Minimum standards and other requirements for schools,” Victorian Registrations and Qualifications Authority, accessed February 2024, <https://www.vrqa.vic.gov.au/schools/Pages/standards-guidelines-requirements-for-schools.aspx>.

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consistently with the human rights in the Charter.”²⁰ Section 19 of the Charter, *Right to Protection of Cultural Rights* “recognises that First Nations people hold distinct cultural rights”.²¹

Aunty Karen Lovett shared with us some ideas and solutions: “Art programs and connecting kids and teaching culture had a huge impact on learning. It was a positive and deeper experience for the kids... Seeing kids not comfortable with culture before the workshops, but then seeing them getting more comfortable with sharing and expressing culture was wonderful. If you make kids feel more comfortable in their culture, then they feel comfortable expressing it and then they embrace it”.

Aunty Vicki Clark told us that language is an important part of culture, and cultural safety. She posed the question “Why aren’t all kids learning language in (Victorian) schools?”. Aunty Karen Lovett told us that “having a safe environment to learn about culture is key, cultural stuff, (including language) with the kids makes a huge difference.”

We were also told about historical examples of culturally unsafe and racist education settings. Uncle Tony McCartney shared a story with us about his experience in high school in which “the Aboriginal kids had to do chores in the garden at school at lunchtimes”. He said they were singled out and made to do this task in his school, “white kids didn’t have to do it”. Cultural safety/lack of cultural safety is a key component of understanding how racism is displayed in education. The interviewees we heard from said they felt education settings in Victoria were not doing enough to support First Peoples’ self-determination, and that transformative change is needed to create culturally safe learning environments for First Peoples children.

Cultural Load and Cultural Identity

Closely linked with cultural safety, the cultural load experienced by First Peoples either as students, or working in the education sector was raised as a prevalent issue. Those we interviewed told us that both cultural load, and complexities surrounding identity were negatively impacting First Peoples staff and children alike in the education system.

Anon 1, who works in the Department of Education, told us “There is a significant load on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders working in this space; It’s not just work, it is life, and this is often not recognised by the department. Aboriginal workers don’t ‘knock off’. It’s personal for Aboriginal staff, and they don’t turn off, they are always working.” Professor Gunstone reiterated this point, saying there is “far too much cultural load on Aboriginal people” in the education sector. He told us he feels that “there are not enough non-Indigenous workers in the sector who are committed or confident enough to engage in this

²⁰ *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*.

²¹ *Ibid.*

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work”. In addition to this, despite the significant load on First Peoples workers in the space, many that we interviewed reiterated there is an overall lack of understanding about this cultural load. Many expressed that non-Indigenous educators seemed to not acknowledge the depth and breadth of this cultural load and were unaware of the burden they placed on their First Peoples colleagues. (Aunty Vicki Clark, Anon 1).

Some spoke to us about the importance of having strong and supportive mentors for both First Peoples children and young people, but also educators. Uncle Tony McCartney told us that mentors were so vital for him growing up (both in and outside of the formal education system) and shaped the person he is now. Aunty Karen Lovett told us that “more needed to be done for Aboriginal kids to have strong mentors in education” settings. She spoke about how the support isn’t always given by organisations in and out of community to Stolen Generation kids/kids in out-of-home care. She told us that “a strong mentor for these kids in a school could make a significant difference to both their educational success and cultural wellness.”

Those we interviewed told us of the complexities of identity, that can further place cultural load on First Peoples children, young people, and educators in this space. Aunty Karen Lovett talked to us about working at the “Indigenous Education Centre”, (Kangan Institute) where “at the time, a lot of kids (and some adults) were not comfortable about acknowledging their Aboriginality.” She told us that many were “very scared to acknowledge their Aboriginality. So much stigma and trauma to acknowledging (and danger).” Adding to this she said “There is a lot of confusion surrounding Identity of Aboriginal people today, and where they belong. For kids to feel safe in schools, it’s imperative for educators to have an understanding around the issues of identity.”

Reconciliation Victoria’s Education officer Sarah Joyce recalls how a mid-level teacher shared a story when he created a morning tea event for First Peoples students in his school, with the intention to make them feel included and supported. He placed special invitations on the desks of students who had identified as Aboriginal, inviting them to the event. One student got very upset at the invitation. The teacher said they later reflected on how they thought they were doing the right thing, but they ended up stigmatizing the student and making it less safe for him to express his identity. The teacher told us that they hadn’t realised that identity is a complex space, and that he should have given the students more choice in how they were openly identified by the school.

Aunty Vicki Clark told us that “there are parents that have been deprived of their culture” and they face this terrible expectation that they “should” know everything. This then creates shame because they don’t know everything (and not for any fault of their own). This is due to historical reasons around what has happened to them.

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During a visit to a school, student A told Reconciliation Victoria's Education Officer Sarah Joyce that she didn't know much about her Aboriginal identity due to her family being part of the Stolen Generations. She said that it made her feel uncomfortable when teachers assumed she'd know "everything about being Aboriginal", and because of that she felt less safe in school.

Overall, the themes that form this section of the submission all have racism either at their core or as an element of influence. Whilst there have been improvements over the last 20 years, significant change is required to transform the education sector in Victoria to reduce racism in education settings, and to create culturally safe environments for First Peoples children.

Teacher Knowledge

A sizable percentage of current teachers in Victorian schools will not have received any meaningful education themselves in school about First Peoples perspectives, histories, and truth-telling. Reconciliation Victoria believes this significantly impacts how schools and teachers operate in truth-telling and teaching about First Peoples' perspectives. Those we interviewed for this submission told us they felt overall teacher knowledge about First Peoples' perspectives, histories, and truth-telling is currently insufficient to be able to teach confidently about these things. And because of this, the shift to culturally safe and knowledgeable schools is too slow.

Dr Kate Harvie imparted her knowledge about 'teacher memories', which she describes as the knowledge and dispositions that teachers bring to the classroom based on what they were taught in school. She spoke about how these 'memories' have a direct impact on how many teachers approach teaching First Peoples perspectives and histories. Historically, most current teachers will not have been educated in First Peoples histories and perspectives, and as such rely on the memories of what they were taught about in school, leaving teachers to revert to colonized practices of First Nations perspectives that they experienced during their school days.

This was reinforced by former Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority staff member and current Reconciliation Victoria Board member, Alistair King, who reflected "I was only taught about Captain Cook and the First Fleet. I was not taught any Aboriginal perspectives or the history of invasion". Many stakeholders that Reconciliation Victoria engages with similarly shared they were not taught in any meaningful way about First Peoples' perspectives, histories, and cultures in primary or secondary school.

Many we interviewed said that teachers reflect the wider society and are influenced by many factors and elements in their environment. They can mirror the diversity of opinion that exists

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in wider society and because of this, teachers can be amazing allies, they can share their eagerness to learn more about Aboriginal perspectives, or they can be teachers who do not care, and actively influence or ignore bias or racist behaviour. Interviewees who raised this, said that the education department needed to deepen reflection when creating policies regarding teacher education, and the delivery of First Peoples' perspectives in the curriculum. (Teacher C, Aunty Vicki Clark, Professor Andrew Gunstone, Anon 1). Those who raised this point also highlighted that there needs to be more focus on acknowledging the broad spectrum of teachers and their own learning journeys in this space. It was raised that many of the policy directives (e.g., Child Safe Standards, Cross-curriculum Priority) appear to assume that the overall level of teachers' knowledge in the education system is high. Those who we spoke to said this was an inaccurate assumption, and it should be a requirement for teachers to engage in professional learning.

Professor Andrew Gunstone told us there needed to be a lot more critical reflection by educators in this space. He told us "Teachers need to recognise their privilege and also their (lack of) knowledge in the space". Professor Gunstone also said educational institutions often predominantly teach about "pre-invasion" rather than about invasion and colonisation. Reconciliation Victoria's Education Officer has observed similar thinking patterns. She recalls teacher A contacted her to ask for help with resources; and when teacher A was offered a variety of resources on current issues and historical materials, teacher A said they would prefer to teach pre-invasion materials because they "are safer to teach and are not so negative".

Professor Gunstone also told us many teachers can be hesitant or nervous, and this is problematic because reconciliation awareness and truth-telling can only get stronger if teachers have a higher level of confidence. He advised us that many teachers "can be uncertain about teaching are too scared to teach Aboriginal Studies, and Truth-tellings". Another Reconciliation Victoria Board member, Keith Gove, told us that among educators there is often "Great concern about doing the wrong things" and a "fear of getting it wrong". He said that in some schools there is a lot of goodwill, but this is also coupled with a lot of apprehension.

Teacher C told us that there are exceptions, and there are good schools in the independent sector. However, they stated that overall, the independent school sector is varied, and because of this, the schools and teachers come from many different perspectives. As such, to assume that all these teachers and schools will have the knowledge to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives well is a mistake. Worker F told us there needs to be partnerships between schools and the local Aboriginal community for any true shift in thinking and attitudes to occur. "For knowledge to increase, meaningful relationships need to be created with the Aboriginal community."

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Aunty Karen Lovett spoke to us about how she has tried to shift perspectives. She told us of teachers being invited into her home, to sit down with her to have a yarn about what would be the best way to teach First Peoples' perspectives. Aunty Karen would tell them clearly that "I'm not from this community – I'm your steppingstone." Then she would show the school or teacher "how to go to the local Aboriginal people's co-op". She would tell them to "have a bbq at the school and invite the Aboriginal community in. Make connections with the community that you live in. Get on google and look on the map – see what Aboriginal organisations are in the area, make contact, build up relationships over time. These schools that have done this, build up real relationships with community and because of this they are safer places for Aboriginal kids."

Dr Kate Harvie suggested that "the State Government should allocate funding to each school to help foster relationships between schools and traditional owner groups. Part of this funding could go towards a Welcome to Country smoking ceremony for every school once a year. Cultural safety training for all teachers is also a must as well as a budget for teaching and learning resources."

Aunty Karen Lovett told us she would advise all teachers to all have an Aboriginal person in the room with them when they are teaching about Aboriginal perspectives. She said she knew that was not always possible though, so "if this wasn't possible, then for the teacher to have sat down with an Aboriginal person for a few hours to do the session plan" would give the teacher a deeper perspective.

Teacher Education Training (Tertiary Sector)

Those we interviewed told us they saw fundamental flaws in the way teachers were taught in universities and felt this has significant repercussions for how new teachers enter the workforce. They felt that if teachers are not taught First Peoples' perspectives in a culturally safe way, then it will take significantly longer to make a sizeable shift in the education system - regarding how First Peoples' perspectives are embedded in the curriculum. Professor Gunstone stated (in its current form) "teacher training is generally very inadequate regarding First Peoples' knowledge and education". He told us many universities do not employ First Peoples lecturers to teach pre-service teachers. Dr Kate Harvie also told us that "there were not enough First Peoples lecturers to teach the First Peoples perspectives", and that because of this, this important topic was often being taught by non-First Peoples lecturers with insufficient knowledge.

It was also highlighted by a number of those who we interviewed that teaching courses had reduced in teaching & learning time significantly over the past 10 years. Dr Kate Harvie stated that "in 2009, the Bachelor of Education course at the university I lectured in was 2 x 12-week teaching semesters, by 2021, it had reduced to 2 x 8-week teaching semesters."

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She added “the 8-week block to teach education students my subject area; curriculum; and the three cross-curriculum priorities was far too insufficient to impart any real knowledge and understandings about First Peoples histories, perspectives, cultures, and truths. It’s impossible for these pre-service teachers to develop any depth or breadth of First Nations cultural knowledge and understanding in this short space of time.” We were told by Dr Kate Harvie that all teachers (but especially pre-service teachers) “need the opportunity for more experiential learning in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. One way to achieve this would be to include mandatory *on Country* experiences and field trips to First Nations exhibits or museum displays as part of pre-service teachers' placement or assessment tasks.” Teacher C echoed this saying “*on Country* learning in conjunction with more formal professional development deepens understandings”.

Aunty Vicki Clark told us the biggest failing is that hundreds and hundreds of teachers, who in their teacher training learn something, end up not feeling confident enough to teach on it. Therefore, it is critical teacher training is improved because a unit there, and a unit here, isn’t going to cut it, she said. Aunty Vicki Clark also commented on doctors and trainees in other professions needing to spend time in an Aboriginal community, and suggested there should be an equivalent for teachers in training. “The current way it’s done is that it’s all over the place, there is nothing consistent, it’s very ad hoc”. Further to this, “teachers aren’t taught how to weave the truth into all elements of their classrooms”.

“When I talk about cultural safety training for teachers, we really need to be careful not to be creating a new industry of gammin Aboriginal cultural educators who have no idea of the legacy many of our Elders have left us to carry, cultural lores, sacredness of ceremonies, songs and connection to the land, water ways and all that had been created. I don’t want a second-rate teacher educating my grandchildren, I want the best and that the teacher values my grandchildren for who they are.” Aunty Vicki Clark OAM

We were told by teacher G that teachers need the opportunity for more experiential learning in this space. One way to achieve this would be to include field trips for teachers in work plans and/or professional development plans. Teacher C echoed this saying “on country learning in conjunction with more formal professional development deepens understandings”.

Two people we spoke to had experiences as academics, teaching First Peoples’ material in universities and had experienced having to deal with racist remarks from students when delivering lectures.

A non-Aboriginal lecturer told us of an experience she had when delivering a lecture to final year pre-service teachers where she was heckled by a student making racist remarks, denying that First Nations history was part of Australian identity. Although she addressed the student during and after the incident, she felt that there was little support to reprimand the

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student as universities are seen as promoting “freedom of speech”. She was told by a senior colleague that it was “an opportunity to make this situation into a teachable moment,” which left her powerless to take any disciplinary action against the student. Further to this, the audio recording portion of the lecture was removed before being uploaded, to avoid First Peoples students from being exposed to these comments.

Emily, an Aboriginal Nyikina woman, told us about an incident where she also had to deal with a racist student when delivering a lecture. Her experience of how it was handled by the university she was employed by was similar to the non-Aboriginal lecturer mentioned above. She told us it became a protracted experience and was harmful and not at all culturally safe for her.

Teaching Resources

In the past decade, there has been a large increase in the number and quality of teaching resources for educators, around many topics relating to First Peoples’ perspectives, histories, and truth-telling. However, the consultations we have undertaken, in combination with observations and conversations with educators and those working in the sector over the past year, suggest that there is a relatively low take-up of these resources. There are a variety of reasons and barriers for teachers’ slow uptake of resources, such as time, accessibility, and authenticity. Many teachers also reported to Reconciliation Victoria’s Education Officer that they are very unsure about where to find resources, and when they find a resource, they are not sure if it is “culturally safe”, or how and when to use it.

We were told by teacher G that “there is no good central place to access lesson plans and resources and because of this, a lot of teachers are not sure where to go”. It was further reported by Worker F (employee of the Department of Education) that “there aren’t the resources in terms of trainers and programs available to get the schools to do a deeper dive”.

The Department of Education has a repository of resources called *Arc*²² which needs further development to ensure that First Nations resources are authenticated, co-designed or created by First Nations People. Teacher G told us that- “it’s easier to find French revolution resources on ARC than First Peoples Resources”. This commentary has been repeated to Reconciliation Victoria’s Education Officer Sarah Joyce by multiple educators.

²² State Government of Victoria, “Arc Home.”

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Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) in Victorian School and Early Learning Services

As of the 31/12/23, there were approximately 2400 Victoria-based schools and early learning services that had registered to develop a RAP on Reconciliation Australia's *Narragunnawali*²³ platform. Of these, 1866 were early learning services, and 534 were schools (320 Government schools, 91 Catholic Schools and 123 Independent schools), representing approximately 34% of all Victorian schools and early learning services.

These RAP registration figures encompass the spectrum of schools and early learning services from those that are first drafting their RAPs, to those that are implementing published RAPs, to those that are working through the RAP refresh process (every 12 months after publication) to ensure their RAP remains an active, living document.

Of these, 569 (80 schools and 489 learning services) had a current published RAP, with the remainder being at various points on their RAP drafting or refresh journeys.

Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) can make schools culturally safer places for First Peoples children. For example, a Reconciliation Australia commissioned study drew on data from the latest wave of the longitudinal survey of Indigenous Children and found that:

“Students who attend schools that their parents know have a RAP are less likely to be reported to not want to go to school, more likely to be reported as attending a school that understands their needs, and more likely to say that their school is good for them. All of these differences are statistically significant.”²⁴

Informal and anecdotal findings from Reconciliation Victoria's work with schools and early learning services also emphasises the importance and positive impacts of Reconciliation Action Plans. For example, when a whole-of-school approach is taken to shift attitudes, RAP activities and processes help to prioritise things, and Anon 1 told us “It's not just individual teachers, but the wider school community that is impacted”. Teacher F from the Independent sector talked to us about the important flow-on of wider community involvement that can stem from RAPs; “kids are interested, and ahead of their teachers in many ways. And then kids go on to teach their parents when they are being taught well.”

Reconciliation Victoria regularly gets requests from schools and early learning services for localised advice and assistance with developing and implementing their Reconciliation Action Plans. This gives us a strong insight into how embarking on a RAP can create a sizable shift

²³ Reconciliation Australia and BHP Foundation. “Who has a RAP?” *Narragunnawali*, accessed February 2024, <https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/raps/who-has-a-rap>.

²⁴ Reconciliation Australia and BHP Foundation. “Evaluation and Impact,” *Narragunnawali*, accessed February 2024, <https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/evaluation-and-impact>.

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in a schools' learning journey about First Peoples' perspectives, histories, and cultures, and about taking culturally responsive action towards reconciliation between the wider Australian community and First Peoples.

In addition to providing guidance and advice around individual Reconciliation Action Plans, we have also observed models of sector collaboration which are assisting schools and services with their RAPs. Such as collaborative models of learning, where teachers and school leaders can learn from and with each other, to strengthen capacity and produce stronger results. A community of practice, convened by a metro region Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO), is an example of an existing model, in which schools at different stages of their cultural learning meet quarterly to share knowledge, and collaborate on learnings and objectives.

Systemic Barriers to Teaching First Peoples' Perspectives, Histories, and Truths in Schools

Throughout our interviews, many interviewees told us about systemic barriers which impact how First Peoples' perspectives, histories, and truths are taught in schools. Barriers such as lack of time to upskill and develop new knowledge so teachers can become better 'educated' in First Peoples' perspectives, histories, and truth-telling. In government schools, we were informed that there are only 4 allocated curriculum days per year, which must include mandatory medical/first aid training, and literacy and numeracy training. "This leaves no space for upskilling teachers with First Peoples' perspectives" (Dr Kate Harvie).

We were also told by Anon 1 that "despite an increase in the number of Principals requesting *Professional Development* sessions and assistance with upskilling staff in schools, the department doesn't have the *funding or resources* to provide this. In addition to this, it is very ad hoc re the schools who are requesting this. There is no key pattern, and no follow-up with the requesters." A common theme was for schools to hold "one off" cultural training. However, Teacher D told us that "one off events are never enough to increase teacher knowledge; the training needs to be ongoing or a continuing module."

When compared to the state government school sector, the independent school sector has a little more flexibility regarding the timing, frequency and depth of training and curriculum days. Despite this, Worker C stated to us that professional growth plans, and strategic plans in this area are missing. Due to time pressures on educators, many teachers use websites such as 'Twinkl' or "Teachers' pay teachers" to source lesson plans. These aren't always written by Australian teachers, which runs the risk of incorrect information being imparted to students here in Victoria. In the Catholic system, there is a program designed to promote reconciliation called the FIRE (Friends Igniting Reconciliation through Education) Carrier

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program. Aunty Vicki Clark told us that “schools who have a Fire Carrier covenant (FIRE Carrier version of a Reconciliation Action Plan) have ongoing professional development embedded for their teachers. This training must be led by First Peoples of their local area, traditional owners. And this type of training is key to shifting the perspectives of kids and staff”.

“This is the true power of the Fire Carrier Program, learning the skills to have positive conversations about the changes required for our country. The program provides resources and education, but the larger the program is, the more hope for Reconciliation. Australia has the oldest living culture on earth and that is something that needs to be protected, appreciated, and most importantly celebrated by all.” - Miranda Koroknai
(See Appendix One for a detailed description of the Fire Carrier Program).

Many we spoke to suggested several things that could improve teacher knowledge levels and understanding in relation to First Peoples perspectives, histories, and truth-telling. Teacher D suggested trying to build networks, to get schools to share learnings with each other. They felt that when schools are mentoring and coaching each other it becomes a more psychologically safe place for teachers.

Another teacher suggested to us that “one way to achieve change, was to have a group of schools/teachers working together in a collaborative way”. Reconciliation Victoria’s Education Officer has observed this in practice in a region of Melbourne and saw how successful it was in terms of teacher learning and growth. Additionally, a pilot project, ‘Koorie Curriculum Clusters Project’, is currently underway in the Department of Education, which aims to do this.

Those we spoke to said that in this space, teachers feel safer when they are face to face, rather than online learning. Teacher A told us that when they learn the best, that’s when they can drop their guard to talk about what they need to learn etc. Teacher G reflected that “most people learn better in a collaborative way and in person. A little bit of imagination is needed – you could make the training at a gathering place, make it attractive to people to come.”

Teacher C told us that “for teachers to learn effectively, they need to have the space to commit to trying. They then need to be able to try it, and then have the point where they can share and learn together and reflect. For it to work well and have impact, teachers need to have a commitment to this goal. Finally, for more buy in, a safe space where there is no judgment is required.” Teacher C also told us, for this to succeed, “teachers must have time to have these moments. Secondly, it is vital that as part of the learnings, teachers need then [to] do something in the classroom, and then bring back the learnings from that to share and discuss in a supported way. Lastly, to ensure real learnings occur, teachers must be kept accountable.

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The Victorian Cross-curriculum Priority: *Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures*

Many of those we spoke to for this submission talked about the Victorian cross-curriculum priority: *Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures*. This priority “includes the knowledge and skills students are expected to develop about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders histories and cultures, given their particular and enduring importance.”²⁵ Most were broadly supportive of the cross-curriculum priority. However, through our observations over the past year, and through our consultations for this submission, it’s apparent that there is a gap between the expectations of the priority and the reality of implementation.

Teacher C told us “There are requirements with the (cross) curriculum framework, and it’s in the AITSL [Australian Institute for Teacher and School Leadership] standards. But the ones that are related to Indigenous areas are not priorities, are not done well.” AITSL Standard 2.4 outlines how teachers must “Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians”.²⁶

Teachers, academics, and workers connected to the Department of Education, Independent and Catholic schools all told us that “Many schools don’t have a curriculum planning process, and don’t bring any of these things [First Peoples perspectives] in, they do the same lessons every year.” (Teacher H). Teacher Z told us that overall, in the Independent school sector, teachers are not planning with the cross-curriculum priorities in mind, and schools don’t regard it as a priority. This was echoed by those we spoke to in the Catholic sector. However, in balance with this, we were told that Catholic schools who were Fire Carrier schools, had much better curriculum planning and integration of the cross-curriculum priority.

Similar issues were reported about the government system that “there is no time, no focus in schools in relation to this key priority. Further to this, teachers are not taught how to do it, and so it doesn’t get done” (Teacher C). Professor Gunstone stated that “teachers don’t have the training skills and knowledge to be able to teach truth-telling. Because of this, they are not able to embed the cross-curriculum priorities in a significant or meaningful way.”

²⁵ Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. “Overview: Cross-curriculum Priorities,” Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, accessed February 2024, <https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/cross-curriculum-priorities>.

²⁶ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education,” Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, accessed February 2024, <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/deliver-ite-programs/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-education>.

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Through Reconciliation Victoria’s conversations with teachers over the past year, we observed that many teachers don’t have a clear understanding of the cross-curriculum priority, including the fact that it is intended to be taught throughout the year, interwoven into subjects across the curriculum. Teacher F, who has strong knowledge of First People’s perspectives and histories, was offered resources related to lesson plans and information relating to the cross-curriculum priority. They responded that they thought they “didn’t need them now”, as they “would get to that at the end of third or fourth term”. Furthering this theme, Teacher G also told us that “the depth of integration of knowledge is mostly missing.” and “The camps and excursions are tourism, on their own they are not good enough, it has to be part of something bigger.”

Additionally, some people we spoke to stated that the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is a barrier for teachers to teach cross-curriculum priority. Dr Kate Harvie told us that NAPLAN is a priority in schools, with the cross-curriculum priority often taking a back seat.

Lastly, some of those we spoke to wondered who held school leaders to account for this mandated cross-curriculum priority. Teacher C asked “who does this in the department? Who is checking if teachers are meeting measurables for the cross-curriculum priority?” Anon 1 reflected that, in this regard, “Sometimes you need a big stick”. They also told us that reporting structures exist in every government school – one example is the “Annual Implementation plan, which makes schools accountable. Measurables could and should be included in these plans.”

The Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026 and The Koorie Education Workforce

Overall funding and resourcing in the government sector were raised as significant barriers to improving cultural safety, and the teaching of First Peoples perspectives in Victorian government schools. Those we spoke to talked about this in relation to programs and initiatives within the Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan. The Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan is a 10-year plan (2016-2026) which was developed by the Victorian government in conjunction with the Aboriginal controlled organisations: Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Victorian Community Controlled Health Organisation, and the broader Koorie Community. “Marrung ensures that all Koorie Victorians achieve their learning aspirations.”²⁷ In our interviews for this submission, those who we spoke to were supportive, respectful, and positive about this initiative. However, some reflected that Marrung is nearly 10 years old and that “while it was

²⁷ State Government of Victoria. “Marrung,” State Government of Victoria, accessed February 2024, <https://www.vic.gov.au/marrung>.

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innovative in its inception, it now needs a refresh" (Teacher C). Anon 1 told us that "because of its age, governance in Marrung has become a bit ad hoc, implementation and monitoring is not as tight as it was at the beginning of Marrung, and now it's not as tight as it could be."

Teachers and those connected to the Department told us that the different regions have been implementing Marrung differently, including various models of 'Communities of Practice (CoPs).' Reconciliation Victoria's Education Officer has observed differences in implementation. These differences are not negative, as good things are being done in different regions. However, there are missed opportunities in not being able to share and reflect on the different modes of practice.

We were told by Worker D that it was essential for the Koorie Education Unit to be funded at much higher levels than it is currently. Anon 1 added that more needs to be done to understand the variations and strengths within the workforce. Many of those we interviewed talked about the Koorie Education Managers (KEM); Koorie Education Coordinator (KEC); and Koorie Education Support Officers (KESO) work. These roles are identified positions-meaning that these roles are exclusively available to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander People. "KESOs provide advice to schools about culturally inclusive learning environments, coordination of services to support engagement and improved outcomes for Koorie children and young people."²⁸ Those we interviewed also noted that more resources are needed for the KEC program, and more specifically for KESOs. Teachers and workers in the State Government system told us that they did not have adequate access to KESOs, and that the KESOs were overstretched and overworked.

Teachers we spoke to in the Independent and Catholic education systems commented that they did not have access to the Koorie Education workforce, expecting these schools to support Koorie students through their own initiatives. Teacher G in the Independent sector said that not having access to the Koorie Education Workforce is "a barrier to schools learning more about First Peoples perspectives and cultures and schools don't know where to go for information".

Reconciliation Victoria's Education Officer was told that many schools "are in the dark where to go, sometimes they go to the land council, some schools go to an Elder that they have connections with some go to VAEAI, but it's very ad hoc." Teacher H also pointed out that "First Peoples kids are missing out on the support the First Peoples kids get in the state system". Additionally, teacher H said that they didn't know where to get help if a First Peoples kid in their school needed culturally specific support. Aunty Vicki Clarke also raised this in our conversations, and said she felt it was discriminatory that "Aboriginal kids in non-state schools don't have access to the same support". Additionally, through the STRIVE (Strengthening Truth and Reconciliation in Victorian Education) committee (which

²⁸ State Government of Victoria. "Contact a Koorie education coordinator," Department of Education, accessed February 2024, <https://www.vic.gov.au/koorie-education-coordinator-contact-details>.

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Reconciliation Victoria chairs), we have been told by representatives from across the education sector in Victoria that the existing siloes between the Government, Independent, and Catholic sectors are detrimental to First Peoples children. Many who spoke to us, felt that cross sector collaboration is vital to enhance learnings, and make educational settings more culturally safe for First Peoples children and young people, regardless of which school they are at.

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**This submission is authorised by the Reconciliation Victoria Board.
Key authors are Education Officer, Sarah Joyce, and Board Executive Member, Keith Gove.**

Significant contributions were made by Chief Executive Officer, Nicole Findlay, Office and Projects Manager, Jude Rangı, and Communications Officer, Anna Van Vliet.

We extend our special thanks to:

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Aunty Karen Lovett

Uncle Tony McCartney

Professor Andrew Gunstone

Dr Kate Harvie

Alistair King

Lisa Moloney

Emily Poelina-Hunter

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but wished to remain anonymous.

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Appendix One

Submission from the FIRE Carrier Program to the Yoorrook Justice Commission (included as part of Reconciliation Victoria's submission)

Prepared by Lisa Moloney, FIRE Carrier Program Coordinator



OPENING THE DOORS FOUNDATION

Keeping Koorie Kids in an Education of their Choice

Background

The FIRE Carrier Program began in 2009 as an initiative between the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry to support reconciliation in school and the Opening the Doors Foundation. The program was officially launched in the Melbourne Diocese and the Sandhurst Diocese in 2010. The program came across to the Opening the Doors Foundation in 2022. FIRE stands for Friends Igniting Reconciliation in Education.

At the start of 2024 there are 53 Primary and 31 Secondary Schools in the Melbourne Diocese that have made the voluntarily commitment to join the FIRE Carrier Program. The 58 schools and Early Childhood communities in the Sandhurst Diocese are all FIRE Carrier Schools. Both the Sale and the Ballarat Diocese schools are looking at being part of the program in 2024.

One of the commitments that a school makes as a FIRE Carrier School is to support the Opening the Doors Foundation. This raises funds for the foundation and also raises awareness of the work that the Opening the Doors Foundation makes in supporting First Peoples Students to attend the Catholic School of their choice. This is supporting self-determination in education for First Nation families. To learn more about the Opening the Doors Foundation on their [website](#) or to hear [student and family testimonials](#).

The sharing of culture and spirituality is celebrated across all aspects of the school. It is embedded in the fabric of the school and reaches out into the school community. The school supports self-determination in education for First Peoples families and seeks to improve education outcomes for First Peoples' students across Victoria. The FIRE Carrier Program creates a community of Primary and Secondary Schools committed to reconciliation and social justice.

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School Covenant

As part of the FIRE Carrier Program the schools complete a Covenant to show their commitment to reconciliation and enculturation. This is an active document that is referred to throughout the year as the school achieves the practical goals, actions and outcomes. The Covenant includes the three core values of Cultural Recognition and Awareness: Spirituality; Practical Reconciliation and Justice. Three Aboriginal symbols are used to represent the three core values of the program: Practical Reconciliation and Justice (Journey), Spirituality (Campfire) and Cultural Recognition and Awareness (Message stick).

The Covenant provides a framework for improving cultural understanding in the school and through this process improves the cultural safety of the school community. It is a living document that is continuously referred to and reviewed every year in consultation with and support from the Opening the Doors Foundation. The Covenant is symbolically passed on to the new FIRE Carriers at the Commissioning Ceremony. A copy of the Covenant is also shared with the Opening the Doors Foundation at this time.

Schools may have just the Covenant, or they may have a Reconciliation Action Plan as a Covenant action. Having a Covenant will build on this base. A Covenant has more breadth and depth than an education Reconciliation Action Plan with a stronger focus on core values as well as actions that align with Catholic teachings and identity. A Covenant focuses on the spirituality of First Peoples and includes where Catholic spirituality and identity align. Social justice issues and the importance of standing in solidarity with First Peoples across Australia, including local communities, are an important part of that commitment.

Compliance and the FIRE Carrier Program

The FIRE Carrier Program can help schools with compliance in the following areas:

Child Safe Standards 1, 2, 3, 5.1 & 5.4

CECV Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy

Victorian Curriculum – Cross-curriculum Priority – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures

AITSL Standard 2.4 - Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians

Meeting Compliance with the Child Safe Standards

FIRE Carrier Schools are a more culturally safe place for students, families and staff. Cultural awareness and understanding training for staff is a commitment that schools make. First Peoples culture is celebrated and significant days are observed. The FIRE Carrier Program provides an opportunity for students to be part of the actions that the school makes towards reconciliation. Students contribute to the Covenant and can be part of achieving the actions and goals for reconciliation.

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Beyond Compliance

The school is a more culturally safe place for everyone. Embedding First Peoples perspectives throughout the whole school including spirituality, social justice, cultural recognition and awareness. Supporting First Peoples families and students to attend their school of choice (through supporting the Opening the Doors Foundation and creating a more culturally safe school). FIRE carriers share a passion for learning about First Peoples culture and history. They are committed to sharing this knowledge and promoting Reconciliation within and beyond the school community. A FIRE Carrier promotes respect, fairness, and inclusion for First Peoples.

Reflection from Lisa Moloney Avila College teacher and staff FIRE Carrier (2010 to 2014) and FIRE Carrier Coordinator (2022-present)

I joined the FIRE Carrier Program while a teacher at Avila College which has a very active Reconciliation Group and was one of the early FIRE Carrier Schools. We had over 50 students attend the fortnightly Reconciliation Group meetings. I didn't realise how much First Peoples were embedded across all aspects of the school until I went to another school. The Aboriginal and the Torres Strait Island flags were flown at the front of the school and there was an Acknowledgement of Country at the front. The school had its own message stick that was processed in as part of school mass and liturgies and was on display when not being used. The students raised money during the year to go to the Opening the Doors Foundation. Many of the students were FIRE Carriers as students.

It has been reassuring to see so many schools want to come on board as a FIRE Carrier School and commit to making their schools a more culturally safe place and embedding First Peoples perspectives. During the FIRE Carrier School Commissioning Day, a grade 4 student (Yorta Yorta) shared that she didn't like her old school as she couldn't see herself. She started at a FIRE Carrier School and said she felt like she had "came home". For a school to feel like home it was a culturally safe place.

Reflection from Miranda Koroknai FIRE Carrier Captain at Avila College (2012 & 2013)

Being chosen for induction into the Fire Carrier program back in 2012 was and still is, such an honour. The program opened up so many learning opportunities for me during my time at secondary school. This knowledge continued to be built on over the past decade and will undoubtedly continue to be explored further into the future.

Being gifted with this recognition also came with responsibility. Responsibility to First Peoples People, responsibility to friends and family within my social circles, and responsibility to the wider community, for the rest of my life. It sounds daunting when it's put like that, but it's true. As a 16-year-old at an all-girls Catholic School with a large and active Reconciliation Group, it was really easy to show support as an ally to Reconciliation. In that environment when meeting with other schools and community reconciliation groups, showing you want to learn

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more about working towards equality, was easy. Having parents and friends who wanted to learn and grow in their education made being a Fire Carrier easy.

The true challenges emerged post-secondary education, as I transitioned to university and entered the workforce. The realisation that the nurturing and supportive bubble, which fueled my passion for justice, did not accurately reflect the wider world was a profound culture shock. Calling out racism in the workplace, where the stakes were higher posed unforeseen challenges. Yet, it is within these challenges and moments of discomfort that genuine personal growth occurs.

Over the past 12 years, invaluable lessons have been learned about fostering understanding and advocating for genuine Reconciliation in Australia. It became apparent that people can evolve and grow over time, and expressing one's stance on widely misunderstood issues with kindness and thoughtfulness holds more sway than forceful lecturing. I have learned that the first time speaking up for what you believe, in a situation where the response is possibly hostile is the hardest. After that, every interaction challenging someone's opposing or problematic opinions is easier every time.

An enriching experience unfolded during a year spent living and working in an NT community, presenting both extensive growth and formidable challenges. The most significant challenge was not the 44 degree summer or weekly headlice treatments. The most significant challenge was returning home with a sense of responsibility to share newly acquired knowledge and realising that widespread interest was lacking. This realisation was emphasised further beyond my immediate circles I was.

In 2023, when it came time to vote in the Voice referendum, this was the first time I felt maybe I had left some sort of influence on the people around me. It was so encouraging how many people reached out searching for resources, and information, wanting to participate in discussion to ensure their vote was not cast uninformed.

This is the true power of the Fire Carrier Program, learning the skills to have positive conversations about the changes required for our country. The program provides resources and education but most importantly, the larger the program is, the more hope for Reconciliation is created. Australia has the oldest living culture on earth and that is something that needs to be protected, appreciated, and most importantly celebrated by all.