Why is cultural diversity important?

Australia is one of the most culturally-rich and linguistically-diverse countries in the world. Diversity began with the first peoples of the land, Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, whose cultural practices are believed to have started over 40,000 years ago (Rasmussen, Guo, Wang et al., 2011). Colonisation in the late 1700s resulted in the dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from their land and disruption and breakdown of traditional culture; a loss that continues to be experienced today (Dobia & O’Rourke, 2011). After colonisation, waves of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have continued to build the diversity of cultures and languages in Australia.

Today, Australia has a population of over 22 million people who have a cultural heritage from over 200 different countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Many people living in Australia – about 43 per cent - were born overseas or have a parent who was born overseas. More than 50 per cent of Australians speak a language other than English at home. Each state, territory, suburb and rural town has its own unique population made up of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the cultural mix of communities and regions is changing constantly as people arrive to work and live in Australia, and move within Australia.

What do we mean by cultural diversity?

‘Culturally and linguistically diverse’ (CALD) is a term often used in Australia to describe groups of people who identify themselves as having links to particular cultures or languages due to their place of birth, ancestry or ethnic origin (Victorian Government Department of Health, 2009).

The term ‘cultural diversity’ is used in this series of videos to recognise the numerous differences between individuals including customs, traditions, language, religion and socioeconomic status. It takes into account the experiences of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and second and third generation Australians and how these might influence their interpretations, expectations, values and beliefs.

The term acknowledges individual differences in groups of people to avoid the assumptions and stereotypes that can occur when an individual is defined by their cultural background. Using a broader description identifies the importance of getting to know families and the way expectations may differ between families and schools.
Why is cultural diversity important in Australian schools?

The rich diversity throughout Australia means that many schools’ enrolments will include students with varying cultural backgrounds. Acknowledgment, open acceptance, valuing and celebration of this diversity by the school is linked to better outcomes for students, their families, and the school overall.

Valuing and respecting the cultural backgrounds of students will help them to develop a positive cultural identity. When students have a strong cultural identity, they are well-placed to make social connections with others and to develop a sense of belonging to their school and local community. In turn, belonging builds children’s self-esteem and resilience, and reduces the likelihood they will experience depression and anxiety.

A sense of inclusion for families helps them to feel part of the school and that their input is valued. It also increases a families’ understanding of their child’s education and how they and the school might work together to deliver ongoing support.

School staff can provide meaningful support by incorporating each student’s cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and frames of reference into the classroom to make learning more relevant for them. The participation of families helps make it easier for school staff to learn about their students and develop links between school and home.

Building schools through cultural diversity

Research has shown that when schools develop certain attributes, their plans, policies, procedures and practices are inclusive of cultural diversity (Perso, 2012).

The diagram on the next page (adapted from Perso, 2012) may help you think about and develop an action plan to support cultural diversity at your school. It can be used as part of your whole-school KidsMatter Action Plan.

If your school already has an Action Plan, you might like to assess how culturally-inclusive it is currently. It may be that a lot of your policies, procedures and practices are already culturally-inclusive; or there might be some gaps or new things your school community could try. If you are just beginning your journey with KidsMatter, more information about action plans can be found on the website at: www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary/resources-schools.
Attributes

‘Attributes’ are characteristics that individuals hold at particular times in their life. Perso (2012) describes three main types of attributes: 1) attitudes, values and beliefs; 2) skills and understandings; and 3) knowledge. Each of us grows up with a set of beliefs and expectations that are initially based on those of our families, the media, the arts, our peers, schools, religious institutions and a host of other factors. Understanding how attributes influence our own current values, beliefs and interpretations is really important. It will help us avoid making judgments based on our own attributes when interpreting the actions of others.

Schools, like individuals, have attitudes, values and beliefs that come from the society of which they are part. School staff are most inclusive when they are open to diversity, do not judge one culture by the standards of another, and respectfully and sensitively provide information about the expectations and systems at the school.

Adapted from Perso, 2012
Attitudes, values and beliefs include...

- acceptance of the importance of being aware of your own and others’ attitudes, values, beliefs, assumptions and biases
- a belief that you can all learn from each other to produce the best outcomes for students and the broader community
- the value that respecting everyone is important, as is a non-judgmental attitude
- upholding social justice (eg acknowledging that oppression can occur when one culture is more dominant than others and there are no inclusive plans, policies, and practices to support cultural diversity)
- valuing and celebrating the richness that cultural diversity brings to the school and the classroom
- valuing cultural diversity in the school community (eg embedding respect for diversity into school plans, policies and practices).

Skills and understandings can include...

- developing skills to communicate sensitively and effectively with children and families with diverse cultural backgrounds (eg listening skills, problem-solving skills to understand issues and arrive at collaborative solutions, working sensitively with a trained interpreter)
- utilising people with the skills to effectively communicate with families (eg multi-lingual school staff, community organisations, services with trained interpreters, local leaders)
- understanding how your own attitudes, values and beliefs may influence your perceptions and interactions with students and families with diverse backgrounds
- understanding that expectations of the school and families may differ, yet striving to bring the two together
- understanding the importance of families’ past experiences with schools and institutions.

Knowledge can include...

- knowledge of the diversity within a cultural group
- knowledge of the history of the cultural groups in the school (eg laws, policies and losses to which they might have been exposed)
- cultural knowledge of communication patterns, world views, beliefs systems, and values (eg the importance of family, respect for elders or local leaders)
- current social or political situations (eg immigration policies)
- knowledge of community organisations.
Intercultural competence

When individuals and organisations develop all three types of attributes (as the centre part of the three circles in the diagram on Page 3 shows), it means that they can be described as interculturally-competent.

Intercultural competence can be defined in lots of different ways, but in this series of videos it means that an individual or a school has the ability to understand, interact, and communicate effectively and sensitively with people from different cultural backgrounds.

It is about school staff and the school as a whole having a deep awareness of how assumptions and biases can influence perceptions, thinking, interactions and behaviours; and having the skills to manage these when building an inclusive school community. Intercultural competence is not a ‘fixed’ thing (ie you either have it or you don’t), but continues to develop as people and schools change.

The two-headed arrow between ‘attributes’ and ‘intercultural competence’ in the diagram shows the dynamic relationship between developing the attributes needed to support inclusive planning, policies and practices and achieving intercultural competence.

Intercultural responsiveness

When people and organisations are interculturally-competent, they are ready to be interculturally-responsive.

Like intercultural competence, intercultural responsiveness is not something that is static (eg once you become intercultural responsive you stay that way). It may change, for example, as school staff learn about newly-enrolling students with different cultural backgrounds.

Perso (2012) describes intercultural responsiveness as the ‘action’ of intercultural competence. (Video 2 has more information about how school staff and schools can build and maintain intercultural responsiveness.)

Moving towards intercultural competence and responsiveness

The first step of being interculturally-competent is getting to know yourself, your school, and the families in your school.

You and your school may be well on your way to competence and responsiveness, but reflection may still be helpful for new ideas.

Using the content on the following pages, take the opportunity to reflect on your own experiences and to look at how your school is going. There are also some examples of how other schools learned about the families in their school community.
Influences on my attitudes, values and beliefs

Learning and understanding others’ perspectives begins with self-awareness. Some areas that can be powerful influences on us are listed below. It might be helpful to look at your own self-awareness by thinking about each of these and how they have influenced your attitudes, values and beliefs.

- Gender
- Country or countries of origin
- Religion or religions
- Parenting practices
- Childhood, adolescent and adult experiences
- Peers
- Media
- Education
- Work

Key questions for intercultural competence in the school

Once you have considered the attributes that have influenced your own attitudes, values and beliefs, you might think about the intercultural competence of your school community.

- Is cultural competence embedded in the philosophy, policies and key objectives of the school?
- Are staff with diverse backgrounds employed throughout the school?
- Have staff received comprehensive training to support their cultural competence?
- Are resources available to support staff working with children and families with diverse cultural backgrounds?
- Has a cultural self-assessment of the school been conducted and have goals and strategies been developed for areas needing further development? (See the KidsMatter framework: www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary/about-kidsmatter-primary/framework.)
- Is there a strong knowledge and understanding of the cultural profile of your school community?
- Are approaches to teaching children and working with families flexible and sensitive to cultural differences?
- Is cultural competence discussed openly and promoted?
- In delivering information about the school, are there adequate translating and interpreting policies?
- Are there incentives for initiatives in cultural competence?

Questions that might be helpful on raising self-awareness

- What traditions do you share with your family?
- Do you have preferred foods, music, movies or hobbies? Where did these come from?
- Do you have strong beliefs about how children should be raised, religion, school or other things? Where did these come from?
- What experiences have been most important for you and why?
- Can you think of a time when you felt out of place because of your cultural identity? What happened? How did it feel?
- Can you think of a time where you felt you really belonged to a cultural group? How did it feel? What made you feel that way?

Modified from Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, 2006.

There are more ideas on examining the origin of your own beliefs in Module 1 of KidsMatter’s eLearning package, Connecting with families: Conversations that make a difference: www.kidsmatter.edu.au/elearning.
Tips for your school community

Some schools staff have found the following strategies useful when getting to know the families of students attending their schools:

• Speaking with the local council regarding the cultural diversity of the community.
• Creating links with community services and organisations who provide support to the community.
• Having discussions with school staff regarding their knowledge of the local community, their awareness of their own culture, and their skills in working with families with diverse cultural backgrounds.
• Offering enrolment forms that contain details of country of origin, language or languages spoken at home.
• Having school staff attend community events.
• Using multicultural aides to communicate with newly-arrived families and other families that do not have English as their first language, and help establish links across the school and broader community.

References