



Overview: Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children in Care (2022)

Introduction

Victorian Aboriginal children and young people have more challenges with learning, lower achievement and leave school earlier. Aboriginal children in out-of-home care have extra stresses that increase their risk of disengaging from learning. Understanding the experiences of Aboriginal children in care with education begins with connecting and deep listening.

The Alliance is part of an Education Project to improve educational engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care. A key goal for this project is building the capacity & capability of ACCOs to support Aboriginal children and young people and their carers with education.

The Alliance Senior Project Officer (Education) met with our members in 2021 and 2022 to hear about their experiences with education for the children they support. ACCO staff have generously shared their practice wisdom and concerns.

The stories and feedback were brought together to make a submission to the Commission for Children and Young People [systemic enquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in out-of-home care](#).

This overview outlines the main themes and key recommendations made as part of the submission to CCYP.

Cultural Safety

Cultural awareness and respect at kindergarten and school is vital for Aboriginal children, young people, and their families. Celebration of culture that moves past token actions is highly valued. Our members spoke of

'Helping schools establish cultural leadership groups. This allows Aboriginal children the opportunity to take pride in their culture and an opportunity to enhance leadership skills. It also gives disengaged children something to look forward to at school.'

'Cultural goals incorporated into learning plan.'

Most staff spoke about culturally unsafe schools in their area. Examples of unconscious bias, racism and negative stereotyping were given.

Case Example: An Aboriginal student wore a cap pulled down over his eyes to feel safer. He was uncomfortable with eye contact for cultural reasons and due to anxiety. Wearing a cap in class was against the uniform policy. The school were unwilling to be flexible in their policy and suspended the student. Staff asked for in-school suspensions. The school refused. The at-home suspensions put pressure on the placement, which broke down. The student had to move off-country in his new placement.

Staff spoke strongly about the importance of other organisations recognising and respecting Aboriginal ways of doing and being. Cultural load with Aboriginal communities adapting to Western ways and styles of communication was clear. Staff felt they made most of the effort reaching out to other organisations.



Recommendations

1. Ensure all staff in schools complete the Community Understanding Safety Training (CUST)**, including assertive follow up with schools and staff who have not completed the training. Completion of cultural audits at 6- and 18-months post CUST.
2. Ensure that cultural activities are included in the IEP and absences for cultural reasons are appropriately approved under educational activities.
3. Ongoing support for the implementation of actions from the self-determination in education reform.

Early Childhood Learning

Staff have high levels of confidence in supporting carers and children to participate in early childhood education and programs. This includes playgroups, early start kindergarten and kindergarten programs.

Most staff felt that **Transition and Learning Development statements** (TLDS) were helpful to support the move to Primary School. They were confident in supporting the development of the TLDS.

There was less knowledge about **Individual Learning Plans** for children in care.

26% of survey respondents were not sure that Carers have the practical support they need to help the children in the care to participate in kindergarten and other childhood services. 36% of respondents mentioned the importance of support to Carers.

Concerns were expressed about culturally safe kindergartens, understanding the effect of trauma, and responding to behaviour in a flexible and supportive manner.

Trauma Informed Schools and Kindergartens

Trauma informed understanding of the child is key to success in learning. Trauma informed staff and schools understand the child's behaviour differently, work pro-actively and seek creative, flexible solutions. They see the child not the behaviour e.g. '*Understanding that a child who has retreated up a tree is scared not naughty.*' (ACCO staff member comment)

Trauma informed staff were sadly lacking in the 'on the ground' experience of case managers. Schools do not always understand the effect of trauma and loss on the young person.

Recommendations

1. Whole of school trauma informed training to be provided to all schools.
2. Ensure that regional Student Support Services staff are skilled in understanding the impact of trauma including supporting Aboriginal students and the role of the cultural support plan



Supporting learning

The Victorian government partnered with stakeholders to develop two agreements to support children in care with education. '[The Out of Home Care Education Commitment: Partnering Agreement](#)' and the '[Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out of Home Care](#)' outline the key roles, responsibilities, and requirements to support children in care with early childhood and education.

This includes the role of the LOOKOUT Education Centres. There is a **LOOKOUT Education Centre** with a team of staff in each region. They work to lift educational outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care.

All staff consulted understood and valued participation in learning. Strong positive relationships with schools and organisations were seen as a key factor to support success. Strong Aboriginal connections and extended family support is vital.

Alliance staff have different levels of knowledge about educational supports outlined in the partnering agreements and the role of the LOOKOUT Education Centres.

Educational Supports

- **Student Support Groups** [SSG] bring together the people who are supporting the student. The school leads this process. (Program Support Group in Catholic Education)
- The **Individual Education Plan** [IEP] guides the educational planning for the student. (Individual Learning Plan in Catholic Education)
- The **Educational Needs Analysis (ENA)** evaluates the student's educational, social, emotional, and cultural needs and strengths to help them do well at school.
- The school appoints **Learning Mentors** to build a relationship with the student and support their learning and wellbeing.
- **Designated teachers** are in each school. They make sure that the right supports are in place and act as a champion for the student. LOOKOUT provides training and support to designated teachers.

Alliance member feedback

Staff actively participate in Student Support Groups. Attendance of the KESO (Koorie Education Support Officer) at the first SSG (as recommended in the partnering agreement) is inconsistent.

There is mixed practice in the development of IEPs from schools. Some staff said that the SSG and the IEP work together well to support the student. Other schools do not involve the case managers and carers in the IEP. Schools do not always provide a copy to the case manager and/or the carers. Alliance member staff are more confident participating in the SSG than the IEP. They spoke about the need for goals to be individual and realistic.

'For the school to work with each child/family as an individual. At times we must not focus on academic goals but simple goals that support the child in attendance or school familiarisation. For the school to not judge the child as being difficult'

Many staff are aware of the ENA and recognise their value. Some staff reported difficulties with ENAs being completed.



Many staff did not know about Learning Mentors or the Designated Teacher.

Staff are creative in listening to the child/young person's voice. They spoke of

- being at the young person's level. Showing that they are equal to you in this space.
- checking in with the child or young person without the carer present.

Staff were unsure that the child and carer voice was heard in the SSG and included in IEP planning. Persistent advocacy was often needed e.g. case manager and carer speaking to the school one to two times a week to help them understand the child's needs.

Case example: A student attended school regularly but was uncomfortable with participating in formal meetings. They did not want to go to the IEP meeting. The IEP was not completed by the school, because 'the student voice' was not heard. There was no problem solving or commitment to hearing the student voice in other ways.

Most staff expressed concern about

- students who were struggling with attending school
- school processes around discipline (suspensions, exclusions, and modified programs).

79% of survey respondents felt confident in supporting participation in education for children with very limited attendance. 86% of respondents were supporting or had supported school age children with less than 3 days a week attendance.

Staff felt that students were often suspended for minor reasons and school staff did not understand the context for the child/young person. They spoke about how suspensions affect the child or young person's engagement with education. Frequent suspensions put up a barrier for the child. They feel unwanted as if *'they're being suspended for every little reason'*

Case example: A student wanted to have their backpack next to him at school because they were worried about it being taken away from him. The school would not *'budge for this child'*. The student was suspended and has now stopped going to school

Some staff identified a power imbalance with schools setting the agenda, deciding the level of attendance for the students (modified program), and making the plan. ACCO staff and families do not feel included in these plans. They want to see a more positive approach to behaviour rather than behaviour management focusing on the negatives.

Helpful approaches included

- working to engage the family/carers and build strong relationships with children/young people
- staff who respectfully ask about what is happening at home and give extra support
- persistence
- extra tutoring

Case example: The school made sure that the child knew all the safe people, teachers, and peers. The student now regularly attends school. They had low attendance. Now their attendance is above 90%. They are doing well emotionally. They still struggle with learning, but have increased self-confidence.



Staff are concerned about the high number of students leaving school early because of

- expectations that Aboriginal children won't succeed at school
- learning needs not being met e.g. Year 6 level teaching when the student is at a Year 2 level.

Practical barriers included

- transport to school
- inflexible uniform policies that can be hard to meet
- costs & access to funding

Recommendations

1. Ensure that every Aboriginal child and young person in care has an high standard Individual Education Plan, developed with the child/young person, carer and care team.
2. Supportive and realistic return to school plans developed with the young person and carer, with the involvement of the ACCO as needed.
3. Increased availability of attendance data to community for Aboriginal children in out of home care and monitoring of modified programs

Working with the LOOKOUT team

LOOKOUT Education Support Centres work to boost the capacity of schools, carers, practitioners & services to improve educational outcomes for children in care. There were different experiences of working with LOOKOUT in different ACCOs. Staff had varying levels of knowledge about the work of LOOKOUT. 71% of survey respondents were familiar with the role of LOOKOUT centres. 17% did not know the LOOKOUT centre contacts in their area.

Some staff asked, 'What does LOOKOUT actually do?'. They did not feel that the LOOKOUT staff 'know about the students' and that's LOOKOUT's involvement was 'ticking a box' rather than a genuine effort to support the student. Some ACCO staff reported that they felt the LOOKOUT staff member 'was on the side of the school' and did not advocate strongly for the student. Many staff don't know when to consult LOOKOUT or what to expect.

Other ACCOs felt they had a strong relationship with LOOKOUT, and felt they were '*very helpful*'.

Case example: A family with complex needs started at a new school where they weren't used to working with students with these complexities. The school sought additional training. LOOKOUT provided the training which made all the difference to this child.

ACCO staff value

- scheduled regular contact
- LOOKOUT staff reaching and checking in with a phone call
- LOOKOUT staff attending meetings in person rather than over the screen



Good practice example: One ACCOs reported a strong relationship and collaboration with LOOKOUT. They have a monthly meeting where they discuss 3-4 cases of students with extra needs. The level of knowledge around the partnering agreements and supports in schools in this ACCO was noticeably higher than other ACCOs. They said they '*learned about the partnering agreement through working closely with LOOKOUT staff who advocate strongly for the students and provide information about what schools are mandated to provide under the agreement.*'

Collaborative practice

The importance of strong communication and meaningful teamwork was emphasised by Alliance members in all consultations and in the survey responses. This includes working closely with the school and including school staff in care team meetings.

Good practice examples included

- Build a relationship with the school especially the teacher and the teacher aide. Visit the school and become a familiar face in the school outside of formal meetings. Sit in the tea room and have casual conversations with staff
- Care team meetings: Start care team meetings with a Case manager overview, then schedule the education update. This practice gives the school key information when they can't attend the whole meeting. Schedule at least one care team meeting a term that suits the teacher's availability e.g. outside of teaching time.
- When attendance is poor, more regular meetings and discussion with all the people involved with the child are important.

Concerns

- Sometimes the school had a more negative view of the student after hearing the information shared in a care team meeting. Inviting the teacher in for a specific amount of time can help address this issue.

Supporting Carers

Many case managers spoke about the importance of carers connecting with each other, and the need to support carers with

- understanding and responding to behaviour that is driven by trauma.
- supporting the child or young person to attend school, especially for disengaged learners

Concerns

Clear information about available funding that carers can access is difficult to find.

Individual ACCOs have limited resourcing and capacity to support carers, particularly kinship carers. There is no ongoing funding for supporting carers or an Aboriginal led practice model.

Case managers commented that sometimes schools don't listen to carers because they don't use the right words. Other carers don't feel comfortable attending parent/teacher events or information evening. Many schools do not adjust for carers with low literacy and limited access to technology. They provide all communication through their online systems.



Recommendations

1. Review current educational practices that disadvantage carers, with consideration for intergenerational trauma, low literacy, low access to ICT and distrust of authority
2. Resource the development of an Aboriginal practice model, training and resources to help ACCOs to support carers, especially kinship carers.

Impact of Covid

The impact of COVID has been felt deeply by the community. One ACCO staff member commented that *'some of the kids will never get over it.'*

Most children/young people and their carers found online learning and learning from home difficult. There were problems with internet access and funding for laptops. Some children waited weeks or months for funding support to come through. Many children and young people continued to struggle with attending school when schools returned to face to face learning.

The lockdowns affected the support that case managers could give. Carer support was especially hard. Many carers were not comfortable with phone or online support.

The support from schools was inconsistent, with some schools offering a full program of on-site learning, other schools only allowed vulnerable children to attend for half a day. Some schools did not offer on-site learning for Aboriginal children in care.

Conclusion

Our members spoke passionately about their experiences of supporting young people with school and early learning. They were very concerned about cultural safety, understanding of trauma, behaviour support for students, and modified programs. The ongoing impact of Covid and better support for carers were key issues. It is critically important that ACCOs continue to be supported with understanding the education system and the supports available for Aboriginal children in out-of-home care.



Attachment

Consultations

There were 24 separate consultations with 62 participants over a 10 month period. All Alliance members were involved. In addition, a survey was distributed to the Alliance members for completion by staff. The survey evaluated confidence and knowledge in supporting Aboriginal children in care with early years and education.

Alliance members

	Member
West Division	Ballarat & District Aboriginal Cooperative (BADAC) Website: www.badac.net.au <i>Central Highlands, Ballarat.</i>
	Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative Website www.wathaurong.org.au <i>Barwon, North Geelong</i>
	Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Cooperative Website: www.goolumgoolum.org.au <i>Wimmera South West, Horsham</i>
	Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative Website: www.gunditjmara.org.au <i>Wimmera South West, Warrnambool.</i>
	Winda-Mara Aboriginal Cooperation Website: www.windamara.com.au <i>Wimmera South West, Heywood & Hamilton,</i>
	Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly & Community Health Service (DWECH) <i>Wimmera South West, Portland,</i> Website: www.dwech.com.au
North Division	Bendigo & District Aboriginal Cooperative (BDAC) Website: www.bdac.com.au <i>Loddon Campaspe, Bendigo</i>
	Njernda Aboriginal Corporation Website: www.njernda.com.au <i>Loddon Campaspe, Echuca</i>
	Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS) Website: www.mdas.org.au <i>Mallee Swan Hill & Mildura</i>
	Murray Valley Aboriginal Cooperative (MVAC) Website: www.mvac.org.au <i>Mallee, Robinvale</i>
South Division	Dandenong & District Aborigines Cooperative (DDACL) <i>Southern Melbourne, Dandenong.</i> Website: https://ddacl.org.au
	Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation Website: www.ramahyuck.org <i>Inner & Outer Gippsland, Morwell & Sale</i>
	Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative Website: www.gegac.org.au <i>Outer Gippsland, Bairnsdale</i>
East Division	Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative Website: https://rumbalara.org.au <i>Goulburn Mooroopna</i>
	Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation Website: https://mungabareena.org.au <i>Ovens Murray Wodonga</i>



Project Overview

Initially, 2 -year project with funding to the Alliance, VACCA & CECFW for a Senior Project officer to

- Build capacity & capability to support Aboriginal children and young people and the carers with educational engagement.
- Support the implementation of the Out of Home Care partnering agreements.

The project includes

- Understanding enablers & barriers to educational engagement and achievement
- Supporting ACCO staff
- Supporting Carers
- Supporting collaboration with LOOKOUT & other services

The funding for the project has been extended for 12 months.

These are some of the activities completed as part of the project

- Consultation with members
- Consultation with education including the LOOKOUT team
- Submission to CCYP enquiry
- Development and delivery of training: Educational Supports for children in Care
- Resource development
- Participation in Carer Lunches & providing information

**CUST training has been developed in partnership between VAEAI (Victorian Aboriginal and Education Association Incorporated) and the Department of Education and Training. It is an introduction to ongoing learning and engagement with Aboriginal perspectives throughout the curriculum.

