Engagement with African-Australian families in South Australian Catholic schools

A research report from the Cabrini Collective

Research conducted by Dr Melanie Baak and Emily Miller in collaboration with Catholic Education South Australia
Foreword

As the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of families in our school communities become increasingly diverse, we are called to respond in ways that ensure all students have access to an effective education and all families are able to engage with our schools and their children’s learning.

To enable this, effective leadership and teaching strategies will be based on deep understandings of not only the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of families but their lived experiences, their aspirations for their children, their familiarity with Australian education systems and their modes of communication.

The research findings presented in this report provide insights into understandings and effective strategies employed by a group of schools to improve engagement and partnership with more recently arrived Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families, many of whom have refugee experiences.

While the research specifically focused on the African-Australian community, the practices and approaches described could be applicable to other CALD communities.

I thank the Cabrini Collective schools for their leadership and commend this research to you.

Dr Neil McGoran
Director, Catholic Education South Australia

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Engagement with African-Australian families in South Australian Catholic schools
Executive Summary

This project was initiated by Catholic Education South Australia (CESA) with the African Catholic Council and Archdiocese of Adelaide in response to concerns that some African-Australian families were experiencing barriers in accessing Catholic education for their children, and some families whose children were in Catholic schools were experiencing challenges in communicating with schools. The Cabrini Collective, a funded program to increase engagement with African-Australian families and to improve outcomes for students, was introduced in four Catholic schools in 2018. These schools all have a significant number of students from diverse backgrounds and make use of a range of approaches to support these students. Through the Cabrini Collective, the schools implemented a range of additional strategies and provided additional support to students and families with the aim of improving the engagement of families and outcomes for students. These included: structured language support from classroom teachers, the employment of a community liaison officer, changes to communication approaches with families, and discussion forums with the African-Australian community to improve staff understanding of the community and their needs.

Through the use of online surveys and focus groups with staff, students and families at the Cabrini Collective schools, this project identified a range of school approaches that can foster improved communication with families and engagement of families and students.

These strategies include:

• building understanding of the diversity of student and family experiences and knowledges through staff engaging in conversations with families,
• building understanding of the diversity of student and family experiences and knowledges through pedagogical strategies which enable students to explore and express their experiences, languages and histories,
• building relationships with families and students underpinned by a knowledge of family and student diversity,
• employing staff, such as cultural liaison officers, who can help to facilitate staff learning about culturally diverse communities within the school, and to build rapport and communication with these communities,
• using multiple communication strategies ranging from face-to-face formal and informal meetings to online communication, which might be assisted by translators when required,
• following up on communication when no response is received,
• fostering a school environment where all students and families feel valued.

While the project was based on the schools that participated in the Cabrini Collective and the research specifically focused on the African-Australian community, the practices described can be used by all schools working with families and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, with care taken to recognise the diversity of experiences within these communities.
Almost one third of all Australian people were born overseas,¹ and there are additional diverse identities in the Australian-born population including Indigenous Australians. Cultural and linguistic diversity is therefore a standard element of most Australian classrooms. Reflexive and responsive cultural practices are fundamental to effective practice in schools,² and teachers’ and schools’ work with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students and families is of great importance.³

Australian schools and teachers are uniquely placed to connect with students and families to collectively build positive learning and wellbeing outcomes for all students. A vital component of effective school practice is active acknowledgment of the complex interplay between students’ language, literacy and culture, which is integral to young people’s sense of self and belonging.⁴ Connections and communication between schools and families can provide opportunities for cultural and linguistic recognition, respect and cross-cultural learning for all involved.

Political and academic interest in the communications between schools and homes and the involvement of families in their children’s education has grown significantly in recent years.⁵ Catholic Education South Australia (CESA) has highlighted this as a key focus area in their continuous improvement framework. The research presented here is a contribution to this ongoing work in relation to ‘strong home, school, community engagement’, with a special focus in this instance on students and families from diverse African backgrounds.

While there is a long history of migration between Africa and Australia, African-Australian communities have grown significantly over the last two decades in Australia.⁶ 2016 census data suggests that over 388,000 (or approximately 6%) of Australia’s overseas-born population were born in African countries.⁷ This number does not include people of African descent who were born in Australia or other countries outside the African continent. Early research with the growing African communities investigated relationships between families and schools and suggested that schools generally had poor communication and engagement with African migrant or refugee background families.⁸ Initial challenges for these families and students have been further explored as communities settle as Australians and children grow up in the Australian context, but there is acknowledgment that school policies and practices continue to warrant additional attention and further development.⁹ Emerging Australian communities from African backgrounds encounter challenges in schooling,¹⁰ and deficit views or essentialising of students with African heritage may have become common practice as a result.¹¹ Deficit views of parenting values pose an additional range of acculturation challenges for African-Australian families.¹²,¹³ Australian schools can speak back to these deficit views by actively valuing the strengths and skills of African-background students, parents and extended families.¹⁴
The Cabrini Collective

During 2018, Catholic Education South Australia implemented a program through the Cabrini Collective in selected metropolitan schools to develop effective practices for engaging with students and families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, with a focus on members of the African-Australian community. The resultant project was driven by an identification by the African Catholic Council in South Australia that members of their communities were having difficulty accessing Catholic education and that their children were experiencing some challenges in CESA schools. The Cabrini Collective is a collaboration between the Archdiocese of Adelaide, Centacare, the Catholic Education Office of South Australia, Catholic school staff and members of the African Catholic Council. A selection of Catholic schools in Adelaide, South Australia, participated in this project, including one secondary, two primary schools, and a comprehensive birth–12 school with primary and secondary schooling split over two campuses. In the comprehensive birth–12 school, research was conducted separately at the primary and secondary campuses, so for clarity in this report these are considered as separate schools. As such, the project was effectively conducted in two secondary and three primary school campuses. During the project, the African Catholic Council and key leaders from the Catholic Education Office held several ‘deep listening’ forums to facilitate effective communication of views and perspectives between the African-Australian Catholic community and the Catholic education sector in Adelaide.

The Cabrini project focused on two key areas: language and literacy teaching and learning practices for students from oral language backgrounds; and communication and engagement between schools and families, particularly families with African heritage. Various practices were focused on in the schools, with each school making decisions about implementation based on local context. In addition to individual and localised practices, a group of teaching staff from each school liaised with an education consultant from the Catholic Education Office to focus on specific and directed literacy pedagogies that were relevant to each school context.
The Research Approach

This research was conducted throughout 2018 and 2019 in Adelaide, South Australia. The research focus was primarily on family and school communication and engagement in line with the following aims.

**Research Aims**

1. Identify how schools engage with African-Australian families and students.
2. Identify strategies for improving engagement with African-Australian families and students.
3. Develop a range of resources that can be used for professional learning to support how school staff understand approaches to engaging African-Australian families and students.

**Research Process**

In 2018 the research team collected data from three primary schools and two high schools in Adelaide.

**Secondary School #1**

- 750 students
- 43% language background other than English

**Primary School #1**

- 630 students
- 25% language background other than English

**Primary School #3**

- 160 students
- 78% language background other than English

**Secondary School #2 combined with Primary School #2**

- R-12 over two campuses
- 1800 students
- 16% language background other than English

**Figure 1** Primary and Secondary School Data Collection 2018

Data given is approximate in order to maintain confidentiality of school identity.
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Data Collection

Ethical approval to conduct research in schools was obtained from Catholic Education South Australia. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected for this research. A survey provided a quick snapshot of experiences across the participating schools, and interviews and focus groups provided opportunities for participants to express more nuanced perspectives. Participants included students with African-Australian heritage, their families, and school staff.

The surveys were available online via Survey Monkey, or via paper copies that were available at each of the participating schools. Electronic surveys were emailed to participating schools and disseminated to participants via email. Paper copies were shared with participating families and students. Researchers and school staff worked with some students to facilitate survey completion. On average the questionnaires took about 5–10 minutes to complete. All staff chose to participate via the online tool, and students and families used a mixture of online and paper versions.

Focus groups were conducted at participating schools when convenient. Focus groups ranged from 20 minutes in duration to an hour, with most being closer to one hour in duration.

Consent was gained from staff and family members prior to participation, with parent/caregiver consent gained for those under 18 years of age. School staff liaised with families to gain consent. School staff also facilitated time during the school day for participants to access and fill in the survey and to participate in focus groups.

Connecting with families to recruit participants for the research was challenging, and this may be indicative of the difficulties of contacting families on other school-related matters. The best outcomes were achieved for family and student recruitment when school staff independently and individually contacted families either in person or on the phone. Poorer outcomes were achieved when messages were sent only through students. The one school that was able to facilitate a family focus group provided an interpreter for a parent. This school had also phoned participants both to ask them to participate in the focus group and then as a follow-up to remind them about the focus group. Some of the African-Australian families expressed concern during informal conversations at being singled out for the research.

### Surveys
- 18 family members
- 115 school staff
- 40 students

### Interviews / focus groups
- 1 family group
- 2 student groups
- 4 staff groups
- 1 staff interview
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Learning About and for Diversity

The survey strongly indicated that staff, students and families were all interested in learning more about each other.

74% of staff participants in the survey agreed or strongly agreed that they would like more information about families with African backgrounds.

“There is always more to learn about the family cultural and faith backgrounds. Opportunities to learn more adds to our knowledge and understandings and opens up dialogue.

“it would be interesting to learn more about the cultural beliefs that students’ families have about learning, in particular their understanding of and values around disability, learning support and the role of the teacher.”

- Staff participants, survey data

83% of family participants would like more information from their school, particularly around their child(ren)’s learning.

“Progress”, “If she is improving”, “Strengths and weaknesses”, “Learning”

- Family, survey data

80% of student participants would like their family to know more about their education.

“I would like the school to tell my mum I am good.”

“How school is not as easy as they think.”

“Subjects that I struggle in so they can help me with it.”

“Outcome of studies and paths of courses.”

“Talk about me and my family and the community.”

- Student participants, survey data
Understanding the African-Australian Community

Diverse African Backgrounds

Students and their families have a variety of backgrounds, language skills, experiences and home lives. ‘African-Australian’ is a term that indicates students and their families have some history and connection to at least one African nation. Many students and families report that their experiences interacting with Australian schools and society are shaped by assumptions made by non-African Australians, particularly experiences of discrimination or racism. African-Australian families do not have one culture and one language background, and migration experiences are diverse. Students may have only ever lived in Australia or other English-speaking countries, or they may have had a range of nuanced migration journeys. They may have had refugee experiences, or they may have travelled with their skilled migrant parents. Students may only know English, or they may speak up to five languages fluently. Many students and families felt that this diversity of African-Australian experiences and identities was not well understood by school staff.

Assumptions about African Heritage

The study highlighted that many staff members did not have a strong understanding of the backgrounds or the diversity of heritage of their students. There was a lack of clarity in most schools around how schools identify students of African heritage. Staff were keen to learn more, and those who had opportunities to learn more through their interactions with students, families or staff members with African heritage highlighted that these relationships were a great way to learn.

This study also highlighted that students and families from African backgrounds valued their cultural heritage, but also felt that assumptions made by the schooling sector about their needs or skills could be problematic.

My child grew up in [an English-speaking country] even though both parents were born in Africa. I hate the presumption by the school and other non-African students that just because a child has African origin, they are disadvantaged in some way.

- Family survey

One school seconded this notion of the problematic approach of singling out ‘African’ students and families for the research rather than conducting research that focused on all students and families with multiple diverse identities. Assumptions that school staff made about African-Australian families and students and home discipline practices sometimes made school staff hesitant to contact or communicate with families.

Opportunities for Staff Learning

Effective school practice reported in this study included opportunities for staff to learn through day-to-day interactions, or through dedicated sessions with families or community members. Organised sessions that enabled staff to learn more about students and families included creative opportunities for learning such as ‘Tree of Life’ drawings and subsequent exhibition at one of the focus schools and a forum for ‘deep listening’ where members of the school’s African-Australian community met with staff to discuss their community and schooling. Staff communication with family members was a key element of learning about individual students and families. Staff created personal connections with families and built on these connections to learn about each student, their background and their home life. In-class tasks also provided opportunities for staff to learn about students and their backgrounds, which had potential to further build relationships and inform pedagogical approaches to curriculum and learning.
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Linguistic Diversity

Language skills within families were reflective of the diversity and heterogeneity of African-Australian backgrounds and heritage. This diversity contrasted with the staff cohort in this study.

Student participants

- The majority knew two languages (25/40)
- Next largest group knew 3 languages (8/40)
- 10% of student respondents knew English only
- Popular languages other than English were Dinka, Amharic, Arabic, Kirundi

Staff participants

- The majority knew English only (93/115)
- 20 people knew two languages (half of whom spoke Italian)
- One person knew three languages
- One person knew four languages

Linguistic and cultural differences and similarities were core to the findings in this study. Students and families with African heritage have a wide range of qualities, expertise and skills and if the points of difference and connection are shared then a rich school community can develop.
School and Family Expectations of Education

Staff suggested that the work of the cultural liaison staff members has been very helpful, not just in facilitating improved communication between home and school, but also in helping staff develop a better understanding of the community and their cultural contexts.

When I came here, when I called some of the parents, they get surprised that to hear someone from, either from Dinka … calling from [the] school, and then some are, who are you? … And some of them, sometimes if I call and they said … is there any problem? And when I said, no there’s no problem, we need you to come for the meeting, so that is the occasion that we need you on. And I think things are easy for them now, and some of them sometimes call me too, if there’s a problem that they want to know more, and then they call me.

Cultural liaison officer, staff focus group

Despite the amount of cultural training and whatever I’ve had in the past, I did not realise that until I spent a day sitting [with the cultural liaison colleague] every week, talking about, just talking about life. It doesn’t even have to be about a particular family, but just having those conversations, and you go, oh, oh, really? Like it just – you know, and you don’t get that in a PD session, at all.

- Staff focus group

However, some staff members did not know about the cultural liaison role or how to engage the help of the staff member.

We have had a new liaison join staff but I do not know what languages he speaks other than English.

- Staff survey

Special Events as an Opportunity to Build Connection and Communication

Special events are a time of celebration that can be a point of connection for families and staff. Events such as celebration evenings provide an opportunity to invite families into the school and to enable informal conversations, particularly with families who may not be able to attend school during the school day. Parent–teacher nights are a key time for families and teaching staff to speak to each other, especially in the secondary school context where day-to-day conversations are less likely to occur. These meetings are often the main time that interpreters are made available for families. However, it is important to ensure that these special events or parent–teacher interviews are followed up by continued communication with families throughout the year.
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Australian School Systems and Expectations of Students and Families

This study showed that school staff have a clear and strong perception that school in Australia is a partnership between families and school staff and that this provides the best educational opportunities for students from all backgrounds. Staff conveyed an understanding that schools provide a safe environment where students are supported to learn, and also to make friends and connections.

These key qualities of Australian schooling and educational ethos were familiar to African-Australian families in the study who had been living in Australia for some time. However, some families were learning about the Australian system and both staff and families mentioned the benefits of school staff taking time to reach out in a range of ways to ensure effective communication and understanding of expectations and systems. For most African-Australian families, the expectation that they will engage with their children’s schools and education was different to experiences with schooling in Africa where school and home were seen as quite separate domains.

Schools as Communities

African-Australian families may have a range of perceptions of the ways in which they can engage with Australian schools, depending on individual family stories. Schools and staff may (correctly or incorrectly) assume that families know they are welcome to be involved. Schools can ensure that families understand this welcome, and the expectations of home–school engagement and partnership, by developing positive individual relationships with families over time.
Flexible and nuanced communication and relationship building were found to be key elements of successful school practice. The most effective communication strategies were employed in a nuanced way that responded to individual families. In the most successful cases, expectations of schools and of families coalesced through effective two-way sharing of information that highlighted shared values and celebrated difference.

Schools used a range of methods to communicate with families such as notes, emails, online platforms, apps, phone calls and face-to-face discussions. Any of these communication methods were at times effective depending on individual family circumstances. This individuality is important to recognise, and staff can learn about how best to communicate by getting to know each student and their family.

So they are like the three options the school uses to communicate to the mother. So one option is to send a note or letter especially when the children are expecting to go for the excursion, so they send a letter for the Mum sign it and they return it. So secondly, they phone her, so maybe we need to you can come to school or to talk. Thirdly, when she drops the children here sometimes the teacher says hey and then they talk, depends on – yeah, so it depends which way, but they use the three options.

Some staff members expressed reluctance to contact families for a range of reasons including: worries about language barriers; concerns about cultural differences in discipline which might lead to children being punished; and thinking that the families would not want to be contacted.

Staff 1: I think mostly people call home, but I think also sometimes – and this is a bit of a confession – because their [African families’] home life is different, sometimes people will be reluctant, or they might be a bit afraid of the kids getting in too much trouble because it might – I don’t know if that – if people agree with me. But –

Staff 2: Feels like an unknown a little bit.

Staff 3: And if you don’t have the language to be able to express and they don’t have the language to be able to process what you’re saying, they might just go automatically, ‘you’re in lots of trouble’. I think that might be a barrier sometimes for some staff.

A common feature of the schools with positive communication practices was that they knew students and families on a personal level. Building a positive relationship enabled staff to feel more comfortable to contact families if any issues arose.
Which Communication Methods Work Best?

The most effective way to ensure successful communication identified by staff and families in this study was via conversation either in person or over the phone. Phone communication sometimes included siblings or other extended family members answering a phone call or offering interpreting. School staff were sometimes hesitant to phone students’ homes; however calling home was also highlighted as a key communication strategy that helped support better outcomes for students. Text messaging was a relatively unexplored option in this study; only 10% of staff reported using text messaging in the survey. However, families identified that SMS was a useful communication strategy as it gave them time to read the message and to seek interpretation from friends or relatives if needed.

Phoning for positive reasons instead of only negative ones helped to build rapport between home and school.

_The other thing they do if there’s been an issue around a child and have had them in to talk about a concern – and especially if it’s around – if it’s around behaviour particularly or around learning – they’ll also contact them over the next few weeks to say when things are going well – to try and do both … We’ve found it really important to talk about the positive information, not just the negatives._

- Staff focus group

In-person and informal communication was especially relevant to the primary school environment in this study, where family members were often present at pick-up and drop-off. School staff who made a daily effort to be available in the yard during these times had positive rapport with families that assisted subsequent communications. Informal daily contact helped to build relationships.

More formal, pre-organised meetings are also a key element of home–school communication and often are a key time when interpreters are made available for families. Ensuring families were made aware of opportunities for formal meetings or events was important. In schools with strong communication channels, staff followed up via phone or in person if they did not receive a response.

_We also follow up with phone calls sometimes. So, if they have a meeting, we just always help them to remember the meeting because sometimes they – whether they’re busy or they don’t see a message that’s gone through to them or their child hasn’t given them their – a message from the teacher or from the office._

- Staff focus group

Electronic communication methods were sometimes useful, but staff reported that families may not receive the messages if they don’t check emails, don’t give an email contact to the school, or don’t check the apps or online management systems (in the secondary school context). Some families and students stated that emails were fine but follow-up phone calls were also helpful at times.

_We looked at the families who’ve actually got an email address and there were only probably about 5 families out of 43 that actually had given the school an email address. So, email probably isn’t a great way of communicating unless they’ve given an email address personally to the teacher._

- Staff focus group

One of the most important observations, made particularly by school staff, was that staff should persevere and try multiple different approaches to ensure that families have received communications.

_So, it works sometimes, but you just have to use a different approach all the time. If one doesn’t work, you have to be ready to use another one._

- Staff focus group
English or Interpreters when Communicating with Families?

Many families are fluent in English, with 10% of students reporting they only know English and speak English at home. However, interpreters can be an important element for success when family members are learning English. Staff can learn about the needs of each family by getting to know them through building relationships over time and with persistent contact.

School staff noted that they use simplified language or ad-hoc sign language when speaking with families that may be developing their English language skills. In the survey, 87% of staff indicated that they always use English to communicate with families. Parents’ English skills are variable. Some may be fluent and literate; others are developing their skills.

I have always found the parent/caregiver keen to listen and most of the time they will say, yes, yes, yes, of course, thank you, goodbye. But I wonder, did they understand what I was saying? Are they just being polite?

- Staff survey

When families may benefit from the presence of interpreters, it is important that the availability of interpreters is known to staff and families. Staff may need to have training around organising interpreting services. School staff may not have a clear understanding of the ways in which interpreters can be engaged or may believe that this is too expensive and difficult to organise. Additionally, sourcing interpreters for less common languages can be difficult. School staff often rely on families to provide interpretation, engaging students or other family members to interpret.

At parent meetings with leadership translators can be arranged but intermediate communication often goes through family members.

- Staff survey

One school highlighted the importance of nuanced engagement of interpreters. The school actively ensured that families were aware that hired interpreting was available, and made sure this was facilitated, but also ensured that families were given a choice around this.

We spend about $12,000–$14,000 on interpreters over a year. We also invite them if they want to bring someone for their own interpreters rather than have an official one. Because sometimes we’ve found that for some families, that they see someone turn up and they don’t want that person to know their business. So, it’s sort of up to them if they want to bring a friend or someone else that will do the interpreting. So, we work with each family on what their circumstance is.

- Staff focus group

Knowing individual student and family contexts helps staff and schools to know whether and how to utilise interpreting services. Also, language skills and relationships evolve over time, and as such families may shift from requiring an interpreter to feeling comfortable using their own language skills to communicate.

Building Relationships through Positive Communication

Frequent, positive communication between home and school helps to develop positive relationships. Building these relationships with families can help to set up effective individual communication strategies for every family; as staff learn about a family then they can work towards communication that works for them. Effective communication leads to staff knowing families and therefore knowing their students, as well as families learning about school life and expectations from the school.

It is always so important to share information with families especially the really fabulous days the students have to show the success students are having.

- Staff survey
Differences between Primary and Secondary Schools

Schools have a range of strategies for communicating with families, and this differs somewhat for primary school and high school. This research showed that in-person conversations were the most productive, and this could be in the school yard, in meetings or over the phone. While informal conversations were relatively common and easier to facilitate in the primary schools, this was less likely to happen in the secondary context where students are more independent. In the primary school context, the most successful communication took place when staff were available in day-to-day school life in the yard, in the classroom, or phoning families to discuss upcoming events or issues relating to their child(ren). In the high school context, families were less likely to be physically present in the school yard, so phone calls were very important. Notes home and emails or apps were less effective but worked for some families.

Key Staff to Facilitate Communication

Some schools had specific staff employed to engage with families and build school community. This included strategies such as visiting families in their homes. This community outreach helped families to feel connected and supported, and communications between home, school and external services were enhanced through this additional avenue. Families and students mentioned community outreach staff as key people in the communication between home and school.

Some schools chose to employ staff from diverse cultural backgrounds in a liaison role. These individuals played multiple important roles in supporting students, families and staff. They helped staff to understand students and families from a range of backgrounds. They also communicated with families, often in a range of languages other than English, to communicate about school and student related matters and to help families connect with the school community.
School Practices for Belonging and Connection

Students are Connected Individuals

Students indicated that they feel comfortable when they have connections with friends and key teachers at school.

What helps you to feel included?

‘having friends to play with’
‘my friends are kind to me’
‘When my friends encourage me.’
‘I have a lot of friends who make me happy and my friends make me laugh’

- Student survey responses

Like sometimes when people are stressing out in there, they always need someone to bring the bright side of it up, and like if you hang with the right group of people in class, you … either just like learn in class but you also have a … bond and stuff that could grow more and more.

- Student focus group

Students affirmed that they would like to be known for their individual qualities rather than only being perceived within the bounds of their culture or language. However, students also commented that they enjoyed attending culturally focused activities such as Culture Club or Harmony Day/Night.

Student 1: Yeah, like when you get to know, like people who always try to be there to help you progress in your learning, and so like that affects their connection with you, your family and like the work you do at school, what you provide for them. I feel it’s a good way for kids to always be focused.

Student 2: Like what she said, like how … like get to, for me, my actual personality instead of like my culture, I think that’d be more helpful.

- Student focus group
Pedagogy and Curriculum

Specific tasks and assignments that focus on language or culture offer opportunities for staff to learn about students’ cultural and linguistic knowledge and skills. Students feel that their culture and languages are unknown to staff unless there are explicit opportunities to share.

Q: Do you think people know about the ways that you use language?

Student: Nah, I don’t think so. Like with teachers, the only reason they would know is like if there’s an assignment about a culture and everything, and that’s when they’ll ask. Other than that they wouldn’t.

- Student focus group

Some staff members make focused efforts to learn about students’ culture and language backgrounds.

Student: [That] teacher is the person that truly knows my cultural side, other than that not really anyone knows.

Q: And is that because people don’t ask, or is that because you’d prefer not to share?

Student: Probably people don’t ask, I don’t think it interests them ... and what can they do with the information?

- Student focus group

Creating opportunities for culturally diverse curriculum content is an important element of teaching and learning that broadens the knowledge base of all students. An example of this was raised in one focus school where a comparison task in a secondary English class created lively classroom discussions.

Staff 1: There was the example of the – making connections between Shakespearian play and film and different cultural practices and understandings around marriage … someone came up the term, making culture knowledge, earlier on today that’s sort of bringing it in, but bringing it in as content in itself. So, it comes core to what you’re studying and –

Staff 2: Makes the kids feel a bit more successful because they can contribute and then –

Staff 3: They know what they’re talking about.

Staff 2: Be praised. Yeah.

Staff 3: There was an essay question which was comparing Taming the Shrew to 10 Things I Hate About You. And then I said, ‘Why don’t you add in – why can’t they compare it to a culture as well as the film?’ So, it did become – because it was meant to be a comparative … as soon as they started talking about dowries and gender roles and relationships and things … there were four Sudanese kids in the class and a couple of Indian students as well. So, it actually worked out much better for them to be able to compare it to cultural things as well as the … So, all the other kids in the class were really interested because these kids were talking – oh, they have dowries in my culture and that still. And they talked about arranged marriages and – because that’s what Taming of the Shrew’s all about.

- Staff focus group

Linking school events to work at a classroom level is an important way to build inclusive practices. Special events, such as Harmony Day, can be connected to curriculum-based work so that the benefits of the event are integrated with day-to-day teaching and learning.
Parent Groups

Opportunities for community building in primary schools included playgroups as well as parent-led activities such as morning tea or cooking club. These activities were facilitated in some schools by a school staff member with allocated time to liaise with attendees and to organise resources such as tea, coffee or a room to use. These groups are an opportunity for schools to build positive, trusting relationships with families. Additionally, family members had opportunities to learn about school practices through this extra contact with the schools.

Schools in this study were keen to build community through specialised spaces and programs. One school had a café space that was well attended by families, and two other schools were working towards community hubs that would be able to link families to the school and to services outside of the school. Community hubs also acted as central meeting spaces for connection and conversation.

Language Learning and Literacy

Students had a range of experiences and their individual story and identity was important to them. Students may have lived in African countries or they may have been born in Australia. Some students were monolingual English speakers, and others were multilingual and fluent in two, three or more languages.

Yes … what type of information would help me, that’s the question. So backgrounds on me could possibly help, but I think like the individual instead of the whole group is better suited to the person’s education … not like as an ethnicity because at the end of the day we’re all individuals, we’re not a race.

- Student focus group

The Cabrini initiative highlighted that some students may be highly competent in oral communication, but their literacy practices may not accurately represent their competency in subject knowledge.

when I see it written down and it doesn’t seem to correlate to what I know the student can tell me they know. So, they can demonstrate understanding really well verbally, but then that’s – doesn’t match what I – what I see on the – on the paper.

- Staff focus group

Language learning sessions in class were highlighted as an opportunity to provide curriculum in a way that included every student, no matter their level of English proficiency. The schools in this study used a variety of literacy strategies as a core part of the Cabrini Collective initiative. Teachers reported that the extra access to training and discussion with colleagues helped them to develop their teaching practice. The Cabrini Collective initiative offered staff time and opportunity to learn about literacy strategies, and to learn about the diversities of culture and strengths and skills of African-Australian students.

I’ve always been able to form really good relationships with them, but it’s really only through this project that I’ve actually been like, oh, this is how to help them with the learning part as well. So, this has helped a lot with that. I think a lot of things I didn’t know, and a lot of stuff I learnt from [the EALD teacher] and just from being with, about the different things they bring into the classroom as well. So, just that awareness helped a lot to change or adapt teaching.

- Staff focus group

1 English as an additional language or dialect (EALD).
Recommendations

The findings from this study may be useful for practitioners and policy makers in the Australian context, or in other similar contexts; however it should be noted that the metropolitan experience may be markedly different to the complexities of education in regional and rural areas. The Cabrini project did not explicitly discuss or address issues of racism, which may be an area for future focus. In addition, while the research specifically focused on the African-Australian community, the findings could be applicable to other culturally and linguistically diverse communities. However, this would warrant further exploration due to the diversity of communities and experiences in Australia.

The recommendations arising from the project are detailed below.

1. Schools should learn from and about their diverse communities through a range of strategies, including:
   - pedagogical strategies, such as culturally responsive pedagogy, that give students opportunity to explore their own cultures and backgrounds as well as the backgrounds of other people
   - having informal and formal conversations with students and their families where teachers and school staff are open to learning about students and families, as well as sharing information about school.

2. Schools could ask families at the beginning of the year what the best communication strategy is for them and offer a range of options including email, SMS, phone calls and the use of interpreters. While online communication works well for some families, others have difficulty accessing this mode of communication. As such a range of communication strategies should be used. SMS was an underutilised communication strategy from schools, but families identified this as a useful strategy as they could easily seek translation of the text if needed. If no response to communication is received from families, staff should follow this up through phone calls or face-to-face chats to help ensure that every family is included in vital student information and that they feel included in the school community.

3. Employing cultural liaison staff members is recommended to facilitate communication between school and home, and also to improve staff understanding of communities.

4. Schools could nominate key contact people such as cultural or community liaisons to facilitate successful and effective communication between school and home. However, it is important to recognise that when communication between home and school is facilitated mainly by a dedicated liaison staff member (either cultural liaisons or community liaisons), other staff may rely on this person to contact families. Classroom teachers may miss opportunities to get to know families or students if they assume that ‘someone else’ will contact families. It is important that classroom teachers also build relationships with and understanding of all students and their families.

5. Schools should create opportunities for staff to learn about a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students and families. This is an important element of improving outcomes for students and increasing effective communication between school and home.
References


Engagement with African-Australian families in South Australian Catholic schools