An Examination of the Implementation of the Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework Strategy to Close the Achievement Gap between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Students

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Abstract:

The Indigenous population of Australia has long suffered from a disadvantaged position in the country’s education system. Poor academic outcomes among Indigenous students prompted the Australian government in 2010 to initiate the Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework (VIAF). A central goal of the VIAF was to close the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. My project evaluates the overall effectiveness of the VIAF, focusing specifically on its ability to narrow the achievement gap for literacy and numeracy between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the state of Victoria. Data was collected through a series of interviews with people who have worked closely with VIAF. Results indicate that culture is a significant causal variable that policymakers failed to consider in both the design and implementation of the VIAF educational programs. The alienation of Indigenous culture helps explain repeated policy failures and the need for a more inclusive educational framework.

I. Introduction:

The Problem: Australia’s Indigenous Education Gap

Today, Indigenous people represent five percent of the world’s population and also make up fifteen percent of the world’s poorest people (Combating Discrimination). The United Nations Human Rights Committee in the "Combating Discrimination against Indigenous Peoples” report, found that Indigenous people lack any control over their own progress and are frequently undermined or ignored in politics. This comes from being pushed out of mainstream society because of different values, needs, and priorities. When it comes to land rights, the native owners are overlooked and fall prey to forced displacement (Combating Discrimination). Governments have also neglected the education of Indigenous children, which has contributed to
a cycle of poverty within their communities. In Canada, the United States and Australia, the majority of the population comes from immigrated ancestors.

Yega Muthu and Gregor Grzeszczyk (2011) explored the similarities between the Australian and Canadian Indigenous populations. Their research discovered many cultural similarities between the Indigenous populations in both Australia and Canada, including their traditional lifestyles and history of victimization. Both of these commonalities have also resulted in similar problems today such as unemployment, alcoholism, and low education achievement standards (Muthu and Grzeszczyk 2011). Muthu and Grzeszczyk collected data from a series of reports on homelessness and healthcare in Canada and Australia and found that the gap between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in both countries appears to be considerably wide. From the ranking of the United Nations Development Program’s Human Development Index, in Canada the non-Indigenous population ranks in 8th and the Canadian Indigenous population is in 32nd. But Australia has a considerably larger gap with their non-Indigenous population sitting in 4th and the Indigenous population sitting in 103rd (Muthu and Grzeszczyk 2011). Their data indicate that current governmental policies are not assisting the Indigenous communities, especially in Australia. Muthu and Grzeszczyk believe that the main problem in policy is its delivery to the Indigenous population. The lack of progress in Australia coming stemming from its government policies is a result of poor implementation which can mean a considerable number of variables. Looking at education policies, variables to consider are student attendance, language development, funding, and government outreach.

In each of the USA, Canada and Australia the countries exist with similar governments and the Indigenous population makes up less than five percent of the entire country’s population. This makes the comparisons between the three countries beneficial to see if other strategies are
working. In a study focusing on the educational outcomes of different Indigenous populations, Australia had the worst Indigenous educational outcomes when compared to the USA and Canada. Based on 2001 data, 40% of Indigenous young Australians left school before reaching 16 years of age, 22 and 26 percent respectively of young Indigenous Canadians and Americans did. Fewer Indigenous Australians had post school qualifications than their counterparts in these two countries (Gray and Beresford 204). Jan Gray and Quentin Beresford explained in part why comparative data studies continuously show higher levels of educational results for Canadian and USA Indigenous populations by the formal arrangement these two countries made to their Indigenous people for the federal government to provide educational services (204). The Australian government has never made an official arrangement with its Indigenous population. This distinction points out the unique relationship between the Indigenous population in Australia and their government. When looking at the outcomes of a policy addressing the Indigenous community it is important to understand the dynamic relationship these people have with their government and how both groups have reacted to past policies. Focusing on education, how past education reforms have been created by the government and how these reforms have been received by the Indigenous community will provide insight into present education policies.

Indigenous people in Australia also referred to as Aboriginals make up 2.5 percent of the Australian population, living in urban, rural, and remote areas all around the country (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010). Being a definite minority in a primarily white society has contributed to a long history of oppression and separation from the mainstreamed culture. Trying to maintain their traditional beliefs and practices, Aboriginal communities have a unique set of needs. Although there is an expanding middle class, the Indigenous population still struggles with unemployment, overcrowding, and imprisonment. A socio-economic report from 2005 showed
that situations are worse in remote areas and urban environments that cultivates discrimination (Gray and Beresford 197). In recent years, the Australian government has been trying to assist Aboriginals in the areas of health, safety, and education.

Australia has been focusing on Indigenous education and providing equal education for Indigenous students in Australia since the 1960s when Indigenous students began to attend public school. The problem of disadvantagement in the public education system became apparent after the first Indigenous students began to attend public school (Gray and Beresford 197). The continuation of poor academic outcomes up till now has encouraged policy-making and investigations into how to shrink the achievement gap and why there is continued failure in the academic system. From the 2012 Australian National Assessment Program, in Victoria the non-Indigenous mean score for literacy was 43.1 points higher than the Indigenous student mean score and the non-Indigenous mean score for numeracy was 55.9 points higher (National Assessment Program 2012). This gap has been persistent since records for this test began since 2008 (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2008; 2010; 2012) In the context of education reform, the achievement gap is the disparity between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students’ academic performance. Since the 1960s there has been a substantial divide between these two groups when it comes to academics. My project will investigate the inability of the most recent Victoria state policy called the Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework (VIAF) to close the educational gap in Australia. More specifically, my research question is: Why did the Victorian Affairs Framework not decrease the achievement gap for literacy and numeracy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students?

Under the Australian constitution the state and federal governments share powers over Indigenous education. While the responsibility to provide education is under state jurisdiction,
the federal government has substantial influence through its distribution of funds. Aboriginal Affairs is also a shared issue. Diversity among Indigenous people has made addressing education through national solutions or over sweeping programs unrealistic. For this reason, most education policies are designed by the state government. The VIAF, which was implemented from 2010 to 2013, is the newest education reform in the State. The overarching objective of the policy is to address a number of areas that the government can improve on, in order to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people living in Victoria. These areas are broken down into 6 categories: (1) maternal and early childhood health and development, (2) education outcomes, (3) economic development including native title claims and land access issues, (4) health and wellbeing, (5) building Indigenous capacity, and (6) family violence (Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework). For each area, the policy details a strategy for improvement and goals for 2014. As noted earlier, my research project is specifically examining the VIAF’s strategic plan for improving education outcomes, its goal to improve the literacy and numeracy rates in Indigenous students to close the gap in achievement standards between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and the reasons that the VIAF’s strategic plan failed.

Australia’s National Assessment Program is a standardized test administered by every state and territory that tracks the literacy and numeracy of Australian students (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2008). Since VIAF was implemented in 2010, Victoria wanted to see a visible improvement in the testing scores to demonstrate that the policy had been successful. By looking at the National Assessment Program, it can be seen that in both literacy and numeracy testing Indigenous students showed significantly lower academic performance scores than non-Indigenous students. Also, observing these scores over a period of time has shown that there has been no statistical evidence for any change from 2008 when the
The test was first implemented in 2012. The central thesis that I develop in this project is that VIAF policymakers failed to adequately integrate Indigenous culture into the VIAF educational reform policies. There has been a reoccurring dismissal for embracing and understanding Indigenous culture into education reforms, even within VIAF. These reforms have failed because they did not adequately include Indigenous culture. Culture is acting as a wedge between the mean achievement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

My project will make clear that despite a preponderance of academic research highlighting the importance of Indigenous culture, it is routinely ignored in both the design and implementation of Indigenous education policies. Although VIAF acknowledged the importance of culture, culture was not mentioned within its strategy plan. This paper is going to focus on understanding why Indigenous culture has continued to escape education policies, even though educational literature has pointed to the fact that promoting diverse cultures is important and can affect the academic achievement gap of Indigenous students. Understanding how the exclusion of Indigenous culture in the VIAF education system has perpetuated the achievement gap is a relevant contribution to the construction and evaluation of such educational reforms and policies. This gap has persisted because there has been an absence in recognizing culture in education policies and moving forward policies need to start recognizing the role Indigenous culture should have in the education system.

Methodology:

My project employs a multi-method approach that employs both quantitative and qualitative techniques. In order to explain the size of the academic achievement gap, this project explores and analyzes the data from Australia’s National Assessment Program (2008-2012). The results for the State of Victoria from this standardized test have shown a consistent gap with the
non-Indigenous students having the higher mean score. The gap has been consistent through the years and across the other States, regardless of the different ratios between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. To get a more qualitative look at the data and policy, I conducted an interview with Lisa Anderson, a Koorie Education Coordinator who is responsible for leading the Department of Education Early Childhood Development’s regions implementation of policies. She also co-coordinates and supports the Koorie Student Support Team and works with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI) and other stakeholders to implement the strategy for Victoria. Understanding that role culture plays in being a determinant of the Indigenous test scope gap is a relevant contribution to the construction and evaluation of such policies.

This paper is organized as follows: Section II reviews the literature on Indigenous populations and specifically what previous research has found on the importance of making efforts to incorporate Indigenous culture. Section III explains the main components of the recent Victorian education reform VIAF. Then, Section IV will provide the analysis of the National Assessment program from 2008-2012 that illustrates the persisting academic achievement gap and Section V will analyze the actions the State of Victoria made to address this gap through VIAF. Section VI is a discussion of the interview with Lisa Anderson, a Koorie Education Coordinator who is responsible for leading the Department of Education Early Childhood Development’s regions implementation of policies. Section VII then summarizes and concludes the findings while including possible steps for improvements in ways of designing Indigenous education policies.
Section II Literature Review:

For decades, Aborigines felt that the Australian government continued to infringe upon their way of life and have ignored the human rights of the Aboriginal population. Loretta De Plevitz and Larry Croft (2012) explained that human rights were granted based on race during the colonial and post-colonial Australian society. This marginalized Australia’s Aboriginal population. De Plevitz and Croft defined how Australia thought to differentiate race as, “Full blooded Aboriginal native or any person apparently having an admixture of Aboriginal blood, a half-caste being the offspring of an Aboriginal mother and other than Aboriginal father (but not of an Aboriginal father and other than Aboriginal mother)” (De Plevitz, and Croft 2012). To understand how Australia treated its Aboriginal population, Barbara Cummings (1996) researched in 1996 the past “Doomed Race Theory” which was coined by A.O. Neville, the Australian Chief Protector from 1915 to 1940. Neville believed that the Aboriginal blood line would eventually die out and proposed taking Aboriginal children from their parents. These children would be sent to government camps where they would learn Australian customs and be married off to a white spouse by the government’s approval, all the while being under the strict supervision of the government. These children were later called the Stolen Generation (Cummings 1996). The current conditions left these Stolen Generation children with a disproportionally unequal quality of life compared to the other Australians. As Cummings conveys in her research, fourteen percent of Aboriginals from the Stolen Generation said yes to having mental problems, twenty-one percent said yes to having a physical ill-health, and sixteen percent said yes to having substance abuse (Cummings 1996).

After World War II, Australia received immense international pressure to discard its government’s racist segregation policies because the war had brought a renewed focus to human
rights. This included the past barriers that kept Indigenous youth from receiving an education. Once segregation was dissolved in the 1970s, schools were looked at as a solution to assimilate Indigenous students into Australian mainstreamed culture (Gray and Beresford 208). Jan Gray and Quentin Beresford (2008) found that schools were used as a way to racially transform Indigenous children. From the 1970s and 1980s racialised curriculum was used to deny Indigenous culture and promote ethnocentric undertones on White Australia (Gray and Beresford 204). Goodnow (1974) examined the cognitive development of Aboriginal children and found that ‘cultural deprivation’ and ‘compensatory education’ assume identify the ‘other’ group as being less than the majority and that education must compensate for these deficits. This became the Deficit Theory and was the mainstreamed approach to teaching Indigenous students in Australia (Goodnow 56). The idea of assimilation in the education system and denial of Indigenous culture was thought to cure their shortcomings. Goodnow observed that this has an intergenerational affect in the Indigenous communities where they felt less capable of living in mainstreamed society. This past history created a major cultural barrier to addressing the academic achievement gap (Goodnow, 59). Gray and Beresford found that these assimilation approaches come at the expense of culture and that restoring Indigenous culture in mainstreamed education can be protect against then negative intergenerational effects of past policies (Grey and Beresford 216). Culture is an essential component to developing a solution.

Since such a wide range of factors have been found to influence school performance, addressing all of them has proven challenging. The National Aboriginal and TSI Education Plan (NATSIEP) in 1989 outlined five areas of development: welfare and heath, cultural identity, literacy and numeracy, academic aspirations, and parental involvement and within these five areas the government laid out 21 national goals for Indigenous education (Aboriginal Education Timeline). In order to achieve long-term change this list has been the continuous focus of
policies, being revised and reinvestigated throughout the years. From 1996 to 2007, the Howard administration had an Indigenous affairs policy in which there were a range of incentives and disincentives that were applied to the social welfare system, singling out Indigenous people. For instance, if an Indigenous child was found to not be attending school, the family would forfeit their rights to welfare (Gray and Beresford 215). The Howard administration had introduced these plans as ‘Shared Responsibilities Agreements’ with negotiations set up between the government and communities. However, the Indigenous people saw these programs as putting entitlements on a conditional status only for Indigenous people (Gray and Beresford 197).

The turning point in the relationship with the Aborigines, the other Australians, and the Australian government came on February 13, 2008 when Prime Minister Kevin Rudd gave the National Apology speech. Specifically, he was addressing the Lost Generation that was torn from their homes and families. The apology has bipartisan support and the support of the Stolen Generation’s elder Aunty Lorraine Peeters, as well as, the rest of the Aboriginal population (Rudd). Both parties came together that day with the desire to build a new relationship with each other. Resulting from this nationwide event to repair the relationship, people forecasted collaborative policies to be the next move in bringing the Aborigines into Australian society and governmental policy formation (Rudd). But this has only been the case in isolated policies and is not considered a regular practice.

This has provoked a discussion over the importance of incorporating Indigenous culture into this new dual lifestyle and what advantages caring over this culture can provide for Indigenous communities. Stephan May and Sheila Aikman discussed how Indigenous self-determination can be expressed through education in their research article, “Indigenous Education: Addressing Current Issues and Developments” that was published in Comparative
Education. May and Aikman offer a definition of what constitutes Indigenous peoples which was originally defined in the International Labor Organization’s Convention 169 in 1989. It states,

a) tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations;
b) peoples in independent countries who are regarded as Indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some of their own social, economic, cultural, and political institutions. (May and Aikman 140)

The main issue Indigenous people are dealing with in current education systems is that they want to have greater linguistic and cultural representation in the education system. May and Aikman found that a paradox formed by the education system and society is that formal education has contributed to the, “loss of Indigenous identity, control, and self-determination” (May and Aikman 143). The system works to reject Indigenous knowledge and culture and is instead used as a vehicle for assimilation and integration. At the same time, Indigenous people want access to formal education. May and Aikman argue that colonial histories around the world show a long line of cultural and linguistic assimilation, especially in the education system. This precedence has caused the loss of Indigenous languages and poor education outcomes for Indigenous students. In Australia, the past mainstream thinking for Indigenous culture was that the population needed to be assimilated. Now, education is seen as an important avenue for Indigenous people to reclaim and revalue their culture and doing this will also improve the education achievement of Indigenous students.

Similar to the paradox presented by May and Aikman, in “Culture and Wellbeing: The Case of Indigenous Australians”, Alfred Dockery tackles the tension between ‘self-determination’ and ‘assimilation.’ He focuses on the topic of maintaining Indigenous culture
while also trying to achieve socio-economic equity and the relationship between formal education and Indigenous culture. What Dockery found analyzing data from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey is that the past theory suggesting “attachment to traditional cultures and lifestyles is a hindrance to achieving ‘mainstream’ economic goals” is wrong (Dockery 315). In fact, the collection of data suggests just the opposite, that a stronger attachment to traditional culture is associated with better outcomes throughout a variety of socio-economic indicators, including education. Actually, Dockery found that Indigenous people with a strong or moderate cultural attachment have typically completed around one-third of a year more education that those with minimal cultural attachment (Dockery 326). This indicates that Indigenous cultures should be incorporated into the solution of disadvantage, and should no longer be portrayed as the problem.

The literature up to this point diagnoses culture as a causal variable to the academic achievement gap, but do not provide solutions. New education literature in the United States is focused on culturally responsive teaching in order to integrate minority cultures into the classroom and to embrace the diverse community. May (2000) defined culturally responsive teaching as “Using knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students”(Gay 31). Amatea (2009), author of Building Culturally Responsive Family-School Relationships argued that there is a need to change how schools interact with students, their families, and their communities. Amatea believed that in order to have an effective partnership between student families and educators, the schools need to welcome families into the decision making and problem solving processes that concern the students (Amatea 5). Elise Trumbell et al. explained in Bridging Cultures between Home and School that through past experiences with culture, schools can learn what works when dealing with a diverse multi-cultural student body. This can be particularly useful when the
schools try to understand the perspective of the parent and try to evaluate and think cautiously about the messages the school sends out (Elise Trumbell et al 15) When considering teacher strategies with a multi-cultural classroom, James Banks from the University of Wisconsin explained strategies for teachers in the United States to recognize and incorporate Native American culture. Banks suggested primary grades to have a discussion about cultural traditions like how people show kindness or caring and what are some special days of celebration (Banks 144). Then in intermediate and upper grades there can be a more sophisticated discussion of cultural diversity and similarities (Banks, 145).

A study in 2004 titled *The Indigenous Test Score Gap in Bolivia and Chile* by Patrick McEwan provides three reasons why the gap in academia continues to persist. First, according to McEwan, “Indigenous parents typically have less formal schooling and lower earnings than other adults” (McEwan, 157). The younger Aboriginal generation has received more years in schooling than their older generation. In fact, 78% of those ages 25-34 completed Year 10, and only 27% of those ages 55 and older completed Year 10 (The Health and Welfare of Australia). Although there is an expanding middle class, the Indigenous population still struggles with unemployment, overcrowding, and imprisonment. A socio-economic report from 2005 showed that situations are worse in remote areas and urban environments that cultivate discrimination (Gray and Beresford 197). Second, McEwan found, “Indigenous families are more likely to live in rural areas or poor urban areas, where public schools may have fewer and lower-quality instructional resources” (McEwan 157). Another factor alone or together with the first two was that schools have reportedly ignored or in some cases punished the use of Indigenous languages and have balked at many attempts to modify instruction to accommodate for language diversity. Understanding the factors that perpetuate the achievement gap is a relevant contribution to the construction and evaluation of such educational reforms and policies.
Government policy also dictates education goals for teachers. In, “Why Do We Have to do all this Indigenous Stuff?: Addressing Racism in Teacher Education.” Rachel Patrick looked at Australia and New Zealand and the role teacher education plays in preparing teachers to deal with diverse cultural, social, and historical experiences of their students. In order to talk about the achievement of Indigenous students, Patrick found that it was important to consider teacher responses to policies, social/cultural history, and professional practice (Patrick 57). The desire to alleviate social inequalities demands recognition of diversity. Indigenous students in both countries are still falling behind non-Indigenous student academic achievement scores. This is in spite of continued interventions made by governments and education authorities. One of the problems Patrick found was that policies and strategies formulated by the government do not necessarily translate into classroom application. Patrick looked at a qualitative study of early career teachers and explored three topics: “[1] The complexity of teachers work in addressing equity, [2] what can be learned from the experiences of early career teachers, whose encounters with often-contradictory policies, ideologies and practices are particularly vivid, and [3] what this might mean for teacher education in preparing teacher to view Indigenous students in non-pathologizing ways” (Patrick 58). This study found that people in charge of education on all levels need to recognize the complex negotiations teachers deal with over how relations with race and racial relations are constructed in the classroom and surrounding community, especially with the Indigenous people. There also should be a move from the characterization of ‘other’. It is important that teachers recognize and respond to the multiple contextual factors that impact themselves and their students, especially in relation to Indigenous students and history.

Lena Dominelli (2011), director of the Centre for International Social and Community Development at the University of South Hampton, and President of the International Association
of Social Work found that social workers and policymakers need to recognize that the minority populations require the same essential needs as the majority. There are also circumstances where ‘needs’ are changed because of minority status (Dominelli 435). It is important that to focus on the role of social workers and policy makers. When drafting a policy to address minority needs it is important to think about the group’s unique history or set of problems (Dominelli 436). The issue continues to be: what can be done to decrease the achievement gap? A discussion about Indigenous education further asks how government policies can address the current situation or if there are too many factors that cannot possibly be addressed all at once. For now, the state of Victoria in Australia is continuing to address Indigenous education through state policies, the most recent one being the Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework; however preliminary research suggests that this policy has failed to reach its goals.

The role of culture in Indigenous education has shifted from a focus on assimilating Indigenous students into mainstreamed society to now acknowledging the value of allowing people to maintain their cultural identity. In the past, Indigenous culture was seen as detrimental to society and the Indigenous community as a whole was perceived to be a dying race. Current scholarly literature shows that removing someone’s cultural identity can make them feel like less of a person and has a negative impact on education performance (Dockery 324). While Australia has begun to acknowledge and respect Indigenous culture it has not been a part of an official Victorian education policy and without oversight it won’t be effective.

**Section III Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework:**

This section is going to review the VIAF policy and more specifically its strategy to reach its education goals for 2013. VIAF was a framework for 2010-2013 that covered Indigenous issues. It identified six action areas: maternal and early childhood health and development; education
outcomes; economic development, the settling of native title claims and land access issues; health and wellbeing; Indigenous capacity; Family violence and justice outcomes (Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework). If they were meeting goals in these other action areas we would have expected there to be an improvement in education outcomes. Since there has not been significant improvement in education it can be deduced that these areas have also struggled to meet the goals.

This paper is focusing on Victoria’s ability to reach the targets established in VIAF that deal with education outcomes and particularly literacy and numeracy. In order to improve the literacy and numeracy for Indigenous students the first component was to require all government schools to develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for each Indigenous student, and to work with preexisting programs to keep principals, teachers and department officers accountable for achieving the improvement targets of Indigenous students. Another part of the strategy was to make certain that teaching practices and student pathways were adapted to the new high expectations for Indigenous students. VIAF supported a high quality Indigenous education workforce and leveraged effort to ensure that the system is working in the interest of providing a positive educational experience for all Indigenous students (Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework 17). Its main focus was to fix the past structure of Indigenous schools and teaching through a partnership with teachers and principals to foster leadership and establish high expectation for improving the educations provided to Indigenous students. The plan for the four years after 2010 was to set up accountability for schools to improve the learning of these students. It required the continuation of assigning an IEP to each individual Indigenous student, a strong effort to keep people within the system accountable for the students’ success and
achievements, and looked at teaching practices to make sure that there are high standards in place.

To improve the education outcomes of Indigenous students, the VIAF used improving literacy and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9 for Indigenous students as its indicator and set four targets to be achieved under the education strategy. According to the VIAF:

- for Year 3 reading, the gap in the percentage of students in bands 1 or 2 between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students will be reduced by 75%;
- for Year 5 numeracy, the gap in the percentage of students in bands 3 (or below) or 4 between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students will be reduced by 75%;
- for Years 3, 5, and 7 reading and numeracy, the percentage of Indigenous students in the top two bands will increase by 10%; and
- for Year 9 reading and numeracy, the percentage of Indigenous students in the top two bands will double (Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework 26).

The major problem with these targets is that there was no mechanism set up for the public to hold the government politically accountable for to not reaching the targets. In a Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI) audit of the VIAF policy and its effectiveness, the Indigenous community operated organization said that an issue they kept running into was that data was scarce. In the audit VAEAI reported, “VAEAI can gather the views of Koorie people from across the state, but we need the assistance of government to get meaningful quantitative data to use in program development” (VAEAI 6). They explained that data collection is important in order to analyze and inform the government, but requests for information like attendance data was not accepted. VAEAI believed that this type of information could help explain the unachieved targets and answer questions like, “Is there a sub-set of the Koorie student population who are chronic non-attendees of school and is this overly skewing the data set?” (VAEAI 6).

There was also no inclusion of Indigenous culture in any components of the VIAF strategy to reach the education targets. In fact, there is not mention of culture or incorporating the
Indigenous community into the education system in any part of the strategy. The policy does not address this point except to say that it endorses another program called Wannik Strategy, and its efforts to build a partnership with Indigenous students, families, and communities. However, Lisa Anderson, who works with the Wannik Strategy said that this partnership has not been achieved (Anderson). The key points of the process by which its education goals are going to be met is vague, leaving the interpretation and implementation very flexible and making it challenging to keep anyone accountable. Since there is no serious discussion on integrating Indigenous culture into the education system, this paper will consider each component of the VIAF strategy and see where culture could fit into these initiatives.

**Part IV: National Assessment Program from 2008-2012:**

To demonstrate the academic achievement gap this paper will use the 2008, 2010, and 2012 National Assessment Program. This is a standardized test taken nationwide, administered by each state that tests students on literacy and numeracy. The testing results are made public and also break down the test scores by different variables, such as gender, Indigenous or non-Indigenous and socio-economic status. It also separates the data by each state. This separation allows the data to show that there has been no statistical evidence for change in the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academic scores from 2008 to 2012. When assessing the data from the National Assessment Program there is a growing average of 6.1% of the Indigenous student population that is considered exempt from testing in Victoria. The program defined this exemption as, “Students with a language background other than English, who arrived from overseas less than a year before the tests, and students with significant intellectual disabilities may be exempt from testing” (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2013, 4). This means that not all Indigenous students are being tested because they are either
communicating in their native language or are considered to have significant intellectual
disabilities. This is significant because the number of exempt students has been increasing and
can be skewing results (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2008; 2010;
2012). There were also no standard deviations given for the data in 2010 and 2012. It is
important to keep this in mind while reviewing the data.

VIAF outlined four targets it wanted to achieve in order to improve Indigenous students’
literacy and numeracy on Years 3, 5, 7, and 9. These are:

for Year 3 reading, the gap in the percentage of students in bands 1 or 2 between
Indigenous and non-Indigenous students will be reduced by 75%; for Year 5 numeracy,
the gap in the percentage of students in bands 3 (or below) or 4 between Indigenous and
non-Indigenous students will be reduced by 75%; for Years 3, 5, and 7 reading and
numeracy, the percentage of Indigenous students in the top two bands will increase by
10%; and for Year 9 reading and numeracy, the percentage of Indigenous students in the
top two bands will double (Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework 26).

As you can see from Table 1 for Year 3 reading, there was no statistical change in the gap
between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students from 2008 to 2012. This means that not only
was the gap in Year 3 reading not reduced by 75% but there was no movement at all. For Year 5
numeracy, the gap in the percentage of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in bands 3 (or
below) or 4 has not changed. As illustrated in Table 2 that there was no statistical change in this
gap from 2008 to 2012. This means that not only was the gap in Year 5 numeracy not reduced by
75%, it actually was not reduced at all. This is the same observation made about the first target.
Table 3 shows that the third target that was to see a 10% of Indigenous students in the top two
bands for reading and numeracy in Years 3, 5, and 7 was not met. This target was not achieved in
any grade from 2008-2012, except there was a small increase in Indigenous Year 3 reading test
scores for the top to bands. In this instance there was a percentage difference of 4.6% assuming
that the standard deviations stayed consistent. Although this did not meet the goal of a 10%
increase, it did show an improvement. This can be attributed to that year’s class or the percentage of exempt Indigenous students fluctuating from 2008 to 2012. Although the Year 3 reading scores did improve, none of the other Year 3, 5, and 7 reading or numeracy scores reached a 10% increase and in fact showed no statistical change. The final target focused on Year 9 numeracy and literacy Indigenous achievement and it wanted to see a double in the percentage of Indigenous students in the top two bands (Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework). In Table 4 it is visible that there was no statistical change in the percentage of Indigenous students in these top two bands. This means that all four targets were not met and that there needs to be a discussion over what is missing within the strategy of VIAF that has led to this measurable failure to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. One of the factors could have been that Indigenous culture was not included in the education reform.

Table 1:

Year 3 Reading, the Gap in the Percentage of Students in Bands 1 and 2 between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Students¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Band 1 (%)</th>
<th>Band 2 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>8.3±2.5</td>
<td>19.8±3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Indigenous</td>
<td>2.0±0.2</td>
<td>7.9±0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap %</td>
<td>6.3±2.5</td>
<td>11.9±3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Indigenous</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap %</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Indigenous</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap %</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Data is from the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority National Assessment Program for 2008, 2010, and 2012.
Table 2:

**Year 5 Numeracy, the Gap in the Percentage of Students in Bands 3 (or Below) or 4 between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Band 3 &amp; Below (%)</th>
<th>Band 4 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>13.1±3.4</td>
<td>27.7±5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Indigenous</td>
<td>2.8±0.2</td>
<td>13.4±0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap</td>
<td>10±3.4</td>
<td>14.3±5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Indigenous</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Indigenous</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3:

**Percentage of Years 3, 5, and 7 Indigenous Students in the Top Two Bands for Reading and Numeracy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Numeracy</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3 (Band 6 &amp; Above) (%)</td>
<td>6.8±2.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>4.4±1.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5 (Band 8 &amp; Above) (%)</td>
<td>2.6±1.2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.7±1.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 7 (Band 9 &amp; Above) (%)</td>
<td>0.9±0.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.0±1.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4:

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2 Data is from the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority *National Assessment Program* for 2008, 2010, and 2012

3 Data is from the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority *National Assessment Program* for 2008, 2010, and 2012
Percentage of Year 9 Indigenous Students in Top Two Bands Reading and Numeracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading (Year 9)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band 9 (%)</td>
<td>3.9±1.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band 10 (%)</td>
<td>0.5±0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Numeracy (Year 9)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band 9 (%)</td>
<td>3.4±2.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band 10 (%)</td>
<td>0.9±0.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Explanation of National Assessment Program Data:

There is a lack of empirical research on the exclusion of Indigenous culture in the design and implementation of Indigenous education policies. Although scholars have linked recognizing Indigenous culture in the classroom to an increase in positive Indigenous academic outcomes, they do not look at the significant role education policies play in how the education system is structured. These policies have the potential to promote Indigenous culture in the classroom, just as it used to provide incentives for Indigenous assimilation into White society. As shown by the National Assessment Program results in which there was no statistical change in scores and the unachieved targets set in the VIAF policy, culture is a critical causal variable that explains the persistent gap. The rest of this paper is going to focus on understanding why Indigenous culture has continued to escape inclusion in education policies and the reported effects this has had on the academic achievement gap of Indigenous students living in the State of Victoria. The fact that these measurable targets were unreached requires an explanation. What is missing from their strategy is preventing them from gaining ground? There is a need for more years of data to see if these findings are a trend, but off of the data provided it is worrisome that they are meeting their

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4 Data is from the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority *National Assessment Program* for 2008, 2010, and 2012
targets. Understanding the factors that might close the achievement gap is a relevant contribution to the construction and evaluation of such educational reforms and policies.

V. Analysis of VIAF Components and the Absence of Culture:

To improve the education outcomes of Indigenous students, the VIAF used improving literacy and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9 for Indigenous students as its indicator and set four targets to be achieved by 2013. The data from the National Assessment Program confirms that the State of Victoria did not meet the targets and did not show any improvements towards decreasing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students or towards improving the outcomes of Indigenous students. In the Framework, the topic of culture is not mentioned once in the explanation of the strategy that was implemented or the targets that it wanted to achieve (Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework). It is useful to reflect back on Alfred Dockery (2010) finding that a stronger attachment to traditional culture is associated with better outcomes throughout a variety of socio-economic indicators, including education. Indigenous students with a strong or moderate cultural attachment to their Indigenous culture have typically completed around one-third of a year more education that those with minimal cultural attachment (Dockery 326). A strategy that does not incorporate culture as a component will not receive any of these benefits. The policy without this component would be lacking. An analysis of the VIAF strategy to meet its literacy and numeracy targets will illustrate where culture could have been incorporated into the policy and where it can possibly be incorporated in the future. The strategies outlined by the VIAF to improve education outcomes are: to require all government schools to develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for each Indigenous student, work with preexisting programs to keep principals, teachers and department officers accountable for achieving the improvement targets of Indigenous students, make certain that teaching practices
and student pathways are adapted to the new high expectations for Indigenous students, support high quality Indigenous education workforce, and to leverage effort to ensure that the system is working in the interest of providing a positive educational experience for all Indigenous students (Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework 16).

The first component of the strategy was to require an IEP be created for every Indigenous student. This was supposed to be compulsory and in collaboration with teachers, students, parents, and an Indigenous support worker (Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework). In an interview with Lisa Anderson, a Koorie Education Coordinator who is responsible for leading the Department of Education Early Childhood Development’s regions implementation of policies, Anderson has found that in the 260 schools that she covers an estimate of 100 of those schools have not completed IEPs (Anderson). She summarized, “The involvement and completion of IEPs in schools has not been greatly successful” (Anderson). In terms of incorporating parents into the process, which could have been a useful tool to get a holistic idea of students need or priorities, this was not the general practice. Anderson found, “Many parents have commented they have not been invited or played a role in the completion of the IEP” (Anderson). The opportunity to invite representatives from the Indigenous community that have an invested interest in the educational success of their children could have been a way to understand Indigenous culture and open a dialogue on how these Individual Education Plans could address the need for more representation of Indigenous culture in the schools.

To understand the effectiveness of VIAF, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI) conducted an audit of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria’s effectiveness at implementing VIAF. It found that in a 2012 survey of Koorie parents and caregivers across Victoria the knowledge of these IEPs were widely varied. Some parents are very familiar with the learning
tool and others are not aware at all that this resource can be accessed (VAEAI 3). The Wannik evaluation in 2013 also confirmed these results (VAEAI 3). An alteration to the implementation of IEPs would be to make Indigenous families more aware of the resources that are provided as a part of the policy and to educate the school administrator and teachers on the benefits of opening a dialogue with the Indigenous parents.

The next component of the VIAF strategy was to work within existing accountability framework to make sure that everyone involved in the education system was kept responsible for the academic achievement of each Indigenous student and the improvements made to reach the policy’s targets. Neither the improvements made to reach the targets nor the responsibility to have Indigenous academic achievement addressed Indigenous culture as an improvement that should be made or the responsibility of the school to supply. The audit executed by VAEAI found that there is no evaluation plan for VIAF (VAEAI 1). The vehicle through which this accountability was supposed to take place was never established or implemented universally across the State. Also, Anderson explained that through her interactions with teachers that she thought many teachers are still unaware of Indigenous strategies and that many of the components of the Wannik strategy have not been upheld (Anderson). This is because there is no evaluation plan established for VIAF. When looking at how VIAF has been received by Principals, Anderson thought that Principals do not have enough knowledge or understanding of Indigenous issues which has made it more difficult to get the schools to understand the importance of closing the academic achievement gap. When examining the introduction of Indigenous culture into schools Anderson responded:

“Cultural inclusivity in schools is vital to ensure safety and comfort for students to attend school. Some schools display the Aboriginal flag, have the words welcome or hello written in Aboriginal in their public areas. Some involve local community in ensuring culture is
taught to all students. Other schools do not see the need. Overall, has not been received well by Principals” (Anderson).

In order to provide tools for these teachers, principals, and administrators so that they can better serve their Indigenous students there should be an added component for cultural education for teachers, principals, and administrator so that they can become aware of Indigenous struggles and the Indigenous community needs. This would also make those working in the school system more relatable to the Indigenous populations.

The last three components were to make certain that high expectations for Indigenous students were created for teaching practices, student pathways, and for the Indigenous education workforce. The is all about counseling for student pathways to encourage students to advance to higher education and having high quality educators that can provide a quality education for Indigenous students. Culture can be a bigger factor to these components; it should not just be an implied factor. High quality educators for Indigenous students should be aware of the issues facing the Indigenous communities and be familiar with the resources that can be provided to achieve the State’s targets. VAEAI’s audit of VIAF noted concerns with the lack of these High quality educators that can act as liaisons to the Indigenous communities, stating that there are several vacancies across regions for these positions that would focus on education services and programs available to Koorie students. In terms of student pathways, there should be a component that directly addresses the communication with communities on the resources that this program and many other education assistance programs provide to assist Indigenous students transition into higher education.
VI. Interview with Lisa Anderson

An interview with Lisa Anderson, a Koorie Education Coordinator who is responsible for leading the Department of Education Early Childhood Development’s regions implementation of policies, including the VIAF, showed that there is an internal awareness of the shortcomings in school participation in improving Indigenous education outcomes. Anderson cites a lack of knowledge about Indigenous issues for the reluctance of school officials to allocate resources to Indigenous students. For Anderson’s job she covers 250 schools in Victoria and in her experience she has found,

 Initiatives around the support to Aboriginal students and families to meet [the reading, writing, and numeracy] target is vital. Yet, we are still having discussion with some schools around the ‘special treatment’ of Aboriginal people. This clearly shows a lack of understanding and provision for personal opinion is constantly being debated with key figures in the school system. Another contributing factor is the lack of support to those schools who only have 1 or 2 Aboriginal students in their schools. Regular debates around the fact that the schools has many students to work with and focus on the 1 or 2 Aboriginal students to ensure improvement in numeracy & literacy is seen as a waste of time (Anderson).

Some teachers are unaware of the official Indigenous strategy and many schools do not follow guidelines for effective student IEPs. In Anderson’s 250 schools, 100 of them do not meet the compulsory component of VIAF which is to provide IEPs for every Indigenous student. She has decided that, “Involvement and completion of IEPs in schools has not been greatly successful” (Anderson).

Overall, VIAF has been received differently by principals, teachers, and parents. Principals do not have an understanding of Indigenous issues and its importance to achieving academic equity. Anderson said that many opportunities to have cultural inclusivity in schools have not been supported by Principals (Anderson). Teachers have a similar lack of knowledge about the Indigenous communities and Anderson said, “In fact, we have has to intervene in
circumstances where teachers have expressed their dislike for parents” (Anderson). In terms of forming a partnership between principals, teachers, and parents this mindset would make this goal impossibility. The feedback Anderson and her co-workers have received from Indigenous parents signals that staff had acted rude upon reception. Anderson went on to explain, “[Parents indicated] a lack of understanding around cultural inclusion and a lack of support from schools” (Anderson). The overall message from the parents was that education staff need to be informed and on the same page in terms of education strategy (Anderson).

In response to an interview question asking about the general assessments of VIAF, Anderson found, “Responses to negative assessments of the program have been a regular occurrence. All negativity comes from a lack of understanding” (Anderson). Anderson states that without Aboriginal history in the school curriculum very few Australians are aware of past government policies that were detrimental to the Indigenous population and thus do not have the same understanding as those who have taken an interest in the success of the Indigenous people.

**VII. Conclusion and Steps for Improving Indigenous Education Policies:**

Through previous literature it can be seen that through more cultural collaboration there can be education benefits. Indigenous students with a strong or moderate cultural attachment to their Indigenous culture have typically completed around one-third of a year more education that those with minimal cultural attachment (Dockery 326). From reading the VIAF policy and interviews with Australian educators there is a willingness to collaborate further with the Indigenous community. Lisa Anderson stated, “I strongly feel that the lack of understanding around Aboriginal culture and the issues Aboriginal people face within the education system has a huge impact on the outcomes to the initiative” (Anderson). The role of government policies is
to set standards, inform expectations, and communicate applications of resources. In the area of education, the Victorian parliament has continued to overlook Indigenous culture in its education reforms, which excludes the state from experiencing the benefits of including such a resource.

The VIAF policy has while ambitious and good-willed has not been successful. The VIAF’s strategic plan for improving education outcomes and its goal to improve the literacy and numeracy rates in Indigenous students to close the gap in achievement standards between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students failed. The National Assessment Program from 2008-2012 has shown that none of the targets set by VIAF have been achieved and it is important to consider that there has also been no statistical evidence for any improvement towards meeting these targets (See Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4). Since the National Assessment Program began in 2008 there are only three years of data to analyze and more in the future could provide a more accurate picture of the academic achievement gap and will be able to show if there is a consistent trend over a longer period of time. It is clear that the current strategy, VIAF, does not incorporate Indigenous cultural education or awareness. No component of the VIAF policy’s education strategy ever mentions Indigenous culture or refers to inviting diversity.

Future education policies can incorporate Indigenous cultural education for all teachers, principals, and administrators to further educate those working within the education system on the issues facing Indigenous communities and the resources that can be obtained to help the schools reach the State’s targets. New education literature in the United States is focused on cultural responsive teaching which integrates minority cultures into schooling and teacher parent interactions. Australian education reform can adopt a similar model which considers the strengths of the students, including their cultural attachment. Amatea believed schools that promote a multi-cultural environment and allow parents to be involved in decision making and problem solving, can have a more effective partnership between student families and educators (Amatea 5). Furthermore, another
component for future policies should include education for Indigenous families and communities so that they are fully aware of the resources that can be provided for their students. Elise Trumbell et al explained in *Bridging Cultures between Home and School* that schools should try to understand the perspective of the parent and try to evaluate and think cautiously about the messages the school sends out. Future plans should include greater accountability, especially the availability of data for VAEAI for increased community oversight (Trumbell et al.15). The incorporation of culture should make students feel like they are not strangers in their own country.
Works Cited:


Appendix A:

Student Researcher: Kathleen Fultz  
Interviewee: Lisa Anderson  
These questions are in regards to the Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework 2010-2013.

Questions:
1. **How are you involved in the implementation of VIAF?**

   My role is to oversee the implementation of the education strategy that is aimed at improving education outcomes for Aboriginal students.

2. **Can you offer an assessment of the program?**

   To date there has been improvement in education outcomes in all areas such as retention, completion of year 12, attendance, cultural inclusivity, early years enrolments, parent/carer engagement, numeracy and literacy levels. There is still a long way to go with specific focus around the above and also including system changes to improve outcomes across education.

3. **When determining how to implement the policy was there input from Aboriginal communities? Why or why not? In your opinion was that a good strategy?**

   The strategy developed was done in consultation with Aboriginal communities in Victoria. VAEAI (Victorian Aboriginal Education Assoc. Inc.) work in partnership with the Dept of Education & Early Childhood Development (DEECD). They are the vehicle for obtaining
feedback and advice from Aboriginal Victorians around education matters. This is done through a process whereby Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECG’s) are based around the state. Membership is local Aboriginal community discuss issues and initiatives that improve the education outcomes for children. The information is fed back to DEECD via attendance of DEECD staff at the meetings as well as feedback to VAEAI.

4. Can you describe the strengths and weaknesses of VIAF’s education initiative?

Personally – I strongly feel that the lack of understanding around Aboriginal culture and the issues Aboriginal people face within the education system has a huge impact on the outcomes to the initiative. For example – by 2018, halve the gap for Aboriginal students in reading, writing and numeracy. This is totally reliant on school staff to ensure this occurs. Initiatives around the support to Aboriginal students and families to meet this target is vital. Yet, we are still having discussion with some schools around the ‘special treatment’ of Aboriginal people. This clearly shows a lack of understanding and provision for personal opinion is constantly being debated with key figures in the school system.

Another contributing factor is the lack of support to those schools who only have 1 or 2 Aboriginal students in their schools. Regular debates around the fact that the schools has many students to work with and focus on the 1 or 2 Aboriginal students to ensure improvement in numeracy & literacy is seen as a waste of time.

5. Have the Koorie schools that were supposed to be opened under VIAF been successful? Why or why not?

I don’t have any Koorie schools in my region and therefore am not informed enough to comment on this question.

6. How are the Individual Learning Plans (IEP) for Koorie students determined?

IEPs are the only compulsory component of the old Wannik Strategy and all Koorie students are required to have an IEP in place. A requirement of IEPs is that schools must meet with both the parent/carer and student to complete the IEP and ensure there are measurable targets for improvement particularly in the areas of numeracy and literacy. We have found that the:-

- involvement and completion of IEPs in schools has not been greatly successful.
- Many schools have not been able to complete all IEPs.
- Schools have not met with either the student or parent to complete them.
- They are completed by teachers only.
- Of the IEPs staff have been able to see, there are no specific targets for improvement.
- Teachers tend to focus on negative feedback with minimal positive information included in the IEP.
- The IEP process for some schools has proven to be a tedious exercise and IEPs are completed for the purpose of ticking the box.
- Many parents have commented they have not been invited or played a role in the completion of the IEP.
This is a number of schools. To provide an idea. The area I cover has approx. 260 schools. Of the 260 schools – 199 have only 1 or 2 Koorie students. The other schools have 5 or more Koorie students. At an estimate – 100 schools would fit the above.

7. Can you explain how the policy over all has been received by principles? teachers? students? and parents?

Principals – as stated above. Many Principals do not have the knowledge or understanding of Aboriginal issues to understand the importance of closing the gap in education. This proves to be difficult. For example – cultural inclusivity in schools is vital to ensure safety and comfort for students to attend school. Some schools display the Aboriginal flag, have the words welcome or hello written in Aboriginal in their public areas. Some involve local community in ensuring culture is taught to all students. Other schools do not see the need. Overall, has not been received well by Principals.

Teachers – many hold very little or no understanding of issues facing Aboriginal families. In fact, we have had to intervene in circumstances where teachers have expressed their dislike for parents. Many teachers still don’t know there is an Aboriginal strategy.

Parents – we recently worked through a process of parent & school community partnerships. Feedback from parents for the school we worked with indicated the rudeness of reception staff, a lack of understanding around cultural inclusion and a lack of support from schools. No representation or targeting Aboriginal families to participate on school councils. In fact, of the 260 schools, only 1 Aboriginal parent sits on the school council. Parents reported that school council forums are alien and uncomfortable. Parents do not feel confident in speaking up. Even though this was one school – speaking with community indicates this is a theme across many schools in our region. Overall, parents believe the strategy would be effective if all education staff were informed and on the same page.

Initially, prior to any Aboriginal staff being appointed under the strategy to implement it in schools; the strategy was promoted to schools executives as a deficit model. Creating may issues around the effectiveness of the strategy. Those students who are high achievers were not included or supported under the strategy by any schools as staff could not see the connection between high achieving Koorie students and the strategy.

8. Has there been any feedback or reports of the policy and its effectiveness? How do you respond to some of the criticisms or negative assessments of the program? Are those criticisms accurate? If not, what are they missing?

I think I’ve criticized my colleagues throughout this document with a particular focus on a lack of understanding around Aboriginal issues that have impacted on Aboriginal people particularly through past government policies.

Responses to negative assessments of the program have been a regular occurrence. All negativity comes from a lack of understanding. Aboriginal history in Australia has never been part of the school curriculum. Unless a person has a personal interest in Aboriginal history or
culture then people are none the wiser. Those with an understanding have embraced the strategy and have contributed to the positive outcomes and success.

9. What changes were suggested and/or made in the revised policy for 2014 and why? Can you explain why these changes were proposed?

There are no real changes to the new strategy (not policy). The focus has changed to early years rather than secondary. Tutoring assistance provided under the strategy is now targeted at early years rather than secondary school. This will have a considerable impact on the work our KESOs (Koorie Engagement Support Officers) undertake in that the work will be more proactive rather than reactive. All components of the old strategy are included in the new strategy, but the ‘focus’ is more significant in early years.

10. What components were not changed in the revised policy and why?

As above.

Appendix B:

VAEAI response to Auditor General
Audit of Services to Aboriginal Victorians 2013

AUDIT QUESTIONS

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF) and its effectiveness.
Aboriginal Affairs Victoria’s effectiveness in leading and coordinating VAAF and VIAF.

The VAAF was launched on 22 November 2012.

VAEAI has not seen an evaluation plan for the VAAF as yet, we would welcome an opportunity to provide input into an evaluation plan.

The VAAF is significant for VAEAI and the Koorie community in relation to education matters. This is because VAAF provides the formal instrument whereby the Victorian Government has made two strategy development commitments most important for our Koorie community.

- First, the VAAF on page 15 commits to developing a Victorian Aboriginal Economic Development Strategy, which will include “building stronger foundations through education and aspirations for success in jobs and business…”

- Secondly VAAF page 29 commits to “in 2013 the Government will release an integrated cross portfolio education strategy bringing together early childhood, schools and higher education and skills”.(this is set to be released by Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in 2014).
**Victorian Aboriginal Economic Development Strategy**

**Aboriginal Education Strategy**

VAEAI has commented on the first draft of the Victorian Aboriginal Economic Development strategy *currently in development.

VAEAI is also working on a new lifecourse education strategy with DEECD (Integrated Koorie Strategy). The strategy will link early childhood, schools and post-school education.

It is important that the economic strategy links to the integrated education strategy.

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**Which service areas the audit should focus on (e.g. education, health, justice).**

- VAEAI notes that the Victorian Auditor General’s Office conducted a review of the Wannik strategy in 2011.

- VAEAI would dispute that most of the services accessed by Koories are mainstream services. Dedicated services play a key role across the sectors.

- VAEAI believes that the current audit should look at whether services are successfully interacting across sectors.

  For example examining:

  - Maternal Child Health services that also support Koorie parents as first educators of their children, (education working with health). The In Home Support-Home Based Learning programs are a good example of this. These programs are working well and should be supported to expand (they are available in a limited number of sites across the State).

  - Koorie education support workers working with services in health and justice. (i.e is there appropriate training and networks in place for Koorie students to receive holistic support).

  - Education programs and support services in the secondary years of schooling that prevent disengagement or assist disengaged Koorie students re-enter into education.

  - Education and training programs for Koories who have been in contact with the justice system. For example the VAEAI schools representative provides advice to the education programs in juvenile detention centres at Parkville and Malmsbury.

  - The Australian Institute of Criminology found that for Victoria in 2007-2008, Indigenous young offenders were over-represented in detention at a rate of **14:1**.

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**AUDIT QUESTIONS:**

- Views on currently available services, their accessibility and their appropriateness.

- What is currently working well and areas where improvements are needed.
In Early Childhood

- Multifunctional Aboriginal Childcare Services (MACS) and Children and Family Centres (CFCs) have been successful in attracting high numbers of Koorie families and providing a supported, culturally welcoming pathway to schooling.

- Koorie pre-school attendance has significantly improved in the last few years, with 97.5 per cent of Koorie 4 year olds attending a pre-school program.

- The introduction of free kindergarten for all 3 and 4 year old Koorie children has had positive effects on participation rates.

- The Koorie population is a young one, over 40 per cent of the Koorie population are children (aged between 0 and 17 years). Koorie families need to be supported in helping their children to become school ready.

- VAEAI advocates expanding programs such as In Home Support and Home Based Learning. These programs provide Koorie families with resources to use in the home. Currently Home Based Learning in particular is only targeted to three sites: Bairnsdale, Swan Hill, and Gippsland.

In Schools

Personalised Learning Plans

- The Wannik strategy (2008) was developed in partnership between VAEAI and DEECD. Wannik requires all Victorian schools to develop Personalised Learning Plans for children (among a range of actions).

- In 2012 VAEAI surveyed Koorie parents/caregivers in community forums across Victoria. VAEAI found that knowledge amongst Koorie families of Personalised Learning Plans varied widely, with some families very familiar with this learning and development tool and others not aware or minimally aware. The Wannik evaluation carried out by Synergistic in 2013 reported the same finding.

- For Koorie PLPs to have an impact on lifting Koorie student outcomes as a cohort they need to be used consistently and regularly (at least once per term) involving Koorie families. This should occur in all Victorian schools.

Koorie Education Workforce
Under Wannik the Koorie workforce has been expanded, and further professional development opportunities for Koorie Education Support Officers (KESOs). VAEAI is concerned however that there are a high number of vacancies across regions for KESOs. The issue of vacancies in the KEW needs to be addressed and the role needs to be promoted in Koorie communities.

VAEAI’s understanding is that the primary role of the KESO is to connect Koorie students and their families with education services and opportunities in school and also outside of school. The KECs function is to coordinate the education services and programs available to Koorie families in the region. The Position Description needs to keep Koorie students at the centre of KEW work. There should be consensus across regions about the function of the KEW.

Koorie Attendance and the Koorie Academy of Excellence

- Koorie attendance declines significantly in the secondary years as students move through to higher levels of schooling.

- It is clear that Koorie students require intensive support at the beginning of their secondary years to arrest this pattern of disengagement. The Koorie Academy of Excellence in the Northern Region of DEECD, which began in 2012, is showing promise in improving attendance. The Academy also links Koorie students to literacy and numeracy supports where this support is needed. VAEAI recommends expansion of the Academy following an evaluation of its work to date.

School Community Partnerships.

- VAEAI has run pilots of School Community Partnerships and developed a model for Schools to work with. We would like to see more schools taking up the opportunity to bring Koorie families into the school environment through the School Community Partnerships model.

Aboriginal Languages programs

- Aboriginal languages programs are operating in Thornbury, Heywood, Healesville, Mildura (Swan Hill to start this year). VAEAI has been providing assistance and support to these programs. We believe they have great potential to improve Koorie student self-confidence and connectedness to school. The long term stability (in terms of funding and school commitment) of these programs should be examined.

Literacy and Numeracy/ Tutorial Assistance

- The gap in literacy and numeracy outcomes for Koorie students has not improved significantly in Victoria since the beginning of the Wannik strategy (2008).

- VAEAI believes greater focus need to be put on tutorial assistance. VAEAI’s parent and community forums in 2012 found that tutorial assistance was the education support service Koorie parents most frequently wanted for their children.
VAEAI notes that in 2012 730 schools were supported through the Wannik Tutorial Program to provide tutoring for students. It would be valuable to know how many schools accessed the funding available. If there is a shortfall in schools accessing tutorial support for Koorie students who need it this issue must be addressed.

**Principal Accountability**

- With school autonomy being the model for education delivery in Victoria, VAEAI believes it is important to examine Principal accountability for Koorie targets.

- VAEAI does not consider it to be acceptable that retention rate of Koorie students moving from Year 11 to Year 12 within the school system is 20.4 percentage points lower than the non-Koorie rate. At the same time, there is progress in the Apparent Retention rate.

  In 1999, the Apparent Retention Rate from Year 10 to Year 12 has improved +4.8 percentage points (from 46.1% to 50.9%). The rate for non-Koorie students improved 2.3% (from 78.8% to 81.1%). To achieve parity however this movement towards closing the gap needs to be accelerated.

- The movement of Koorie students to the VET system is one important factor that should be considered in looking at grade progression. It is true that the VET model has proven successful in engaging Koorie students. However schools should not transfer their responsibility for Koorie students to the VET sector as it is important that Koorie students are able to access the same range of post-school pathways as non-Koorie students.

**In Post-School Pathways**

**VET sector**

- Recent years have seen steady increases in number of students going into the VET and Higher Education sectors and completing courses.

- Between 2009 and 2010 student numbers increased by 8%, while course enrolments increased by 4%. Course completion rates have risen by 145% since 2005, though it is worth noting this increase is from a low base of 431 in 2005 to 1,055 in 2010. The increase experienced between 2009 and 2010 was 11%. The 2010 data shows that Koorie VET students represented just over 1% of the total VET

- The Wurreker Strategy, launched in 2000, is the Vocational Education and Training (VET) strategy for Koorie students developed through VAEAI’s partnership with Victorian State Government. Wurreker was developed to bring local Koorie communities together with VET providers and industry groups so that they could exchange information and build partnerships.

- VAEAI has Wurreker Brokers based in 7 locations across the State. The role of the Broker is to assist Koorie students with getting into the VET system, completing courses and obtaining qualifications that will lead to employment and a career path.
Under the Victorian Training Guarantee, all students must pay fee for service if they are seeking to course in which the qualification level is one they have already obtained. VAEAI has received reports that this has become an issue for Koorie students seeking to expand their skill base for employment etc. (affordability issue).

Cuts to the TAFE sector have impacted on dedicated services to Koories. Swinburne TAFE and Gippsland TAFE have disbanded their Koorie units and now have. VAEAI anticipates that this will impact on Koorie enrolments in these institutions.

University

38% of Koorie year 12 graduates enrolled in university in 2012, up from 22% in 2008 and 30% in 2011.

The Toorong Marnong Higher Education Accord is jointly auspiced by VAEAI and the Victorian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (VCCC). The Accord is about getting the nine Victorian universities to work together with VAEAI to enhance their engagement with Koorie communities. It is about making the University system more flexible and easier to navigate for Koorie students. The aim of the Accord is to improve higher education retention rates and outcomes for Indigenous students.

In 2012 under the first Koorie Big Day Out (KBDO) community event was held as part of the Toorong Marnong Accord. The KBDO provided a forum for Koorie students to learn about the full range of courses, entry options, support services and scholarships available at universities.

The Toorong Marnong group have developed an interactive website that Koorie students can use. Students using the website can register interest in particular courses, and universities will send the student information on the course and how to enrol.

The universities represented are:

- Australian Catholic University
- Deakin University
- La Trobe University
- Monash University
- RMIT University
- Swinburne University of Technology
- The University of Melbourne
- University of Ballarat
- Victoria University

Data collection.
We need better data collection and analysis to inform our work in partnership with government. VAEAI can gather the views of Koorie people from across the state, but we need the assistance of government to get meaningful quantitative data to use in program development.
For example, for some years VAEAI has requested that the attendance data be disaggregated so that we get a clearer sense of attendance issues (i.e. is there a sub-set of the Koorie student population who are chronic non-attendees of school and is this overly skewing the data set?). It would be valuable to have richer quantitative data and be able to use it to target attendance programs.