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TITLE: Supporting bilingualism, multilingualism and language learning in the early years.

CAROLINA CABEZAS-BENALCAZAR, RESEARCHER & EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL: Victoria's home to a vibrant multicultural and multilingual society and one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the world, with more than 200 languages spoken, including Aboriginal languages.

The new resource is a practice guide that aims to support educators extend their understanding of the importance of multilingual teaching and learning. In Victoria, Aboriginal people are recognised as the primary guardians, keepers and knowledge holders of the oldest continuous living culture in the world. Victorians also claim ancestries from more than 200 different countries, with around half the population being born overseas or having at least one parent born overseas.

MELODIE DAVIES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FKA CHILDREN'S SERVICES: Early childhood education and care settings need to reflect the community in which we live, work and play, so that all languages are valued.

CAROLINA CABEZAS-BENALCAZAR: The resource extends on the guide titled Supporting Children Learning English As An Additional Language In The Early Years, written by Dr Priscilla Clarke, which offers relevant information about early childhood second language education.

In Victoria, the rich array of languages and cultures enables many opportunities for educators to value and strengthen children's multilingual capabilities, respecting cultural diversity, supporting common values, and building social cohesion.

HELEN KING, TEACHER: This year, I think we have something in the vicinity of 15 different languages spoken by families who use the service, and we probably have between 8 and 10 of those languages captured by the staff who work here. So it's an absolute joy to know that we're in a position to recruit people into this service that speak the community languages.

CAROLINA CABEZAS-BENALCAZAR: Research shows that emergent bilingual children who are immersed in education through the dominant language - for example, English - may experience a subtractive form of bilingualism, as the opportunities for them to use and extend their mother tongue are replaced by the learning of English only. This can lead to negative effects, such as:

* language shift,
* a loss of cultural and ethnic identity, and
* possible isolation.

To ensure that we respond to the needs and realities of all children, it is essential that educators reflect on how our practice supports children to:

* use their family language in the educational setting,
* express themselves freely and without reservations,
* communicate fully and be heard, and
* access an early-years education that does not discriminate, but rather upholds, protects and promotes their best interests.

MELODIE DAVIES: The sorts of things to think about and consider when shifting beyond the monolingual mindset are:

* how do our programs and curriculum decision making reflect the natural language environment?
* How do educators who do not have a shared language with a child support a child's agency, identity and sense of belonging?
* What strategies do we used to understand, complement and extend the rich knowledge and experience of multilingual children?

CAROLINA CABEZAS-BENALCAZAR: This resource is designed to provoke a critical reflection on planning, implementing and assessing curriculum and pedagogies that:

* sustain children's family-languages, literacies and cultural practices in the early childhood setting,
* support children to learn English as an additional language, and
* achieve equitable learning outcomes for all children.

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