

Intercultural understanding

Introduction

In the Australian Curriculum, students develop intercultural understanding as they learn to value their own cultures, languages and beliefs, and those of others. They come to understand how personal, group and national identities are shaped, and the variable and changing nature of culture. The capability involves students in learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognise commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect.

Intercultural understanding is an essential part of living with others in the diverse world of the twenty-first century. It assists young people to become responsible local and global citizens, equipped through their education for living and working together in an interconnected world.

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA 2008) recognises the fundamental role that education plays in building a society that is ‘cohesive and culturally diverse, and that values Australia’s Indigenous cultures’ (MCEETYA, p. 4). Intercultural understanding addresses this role, developing students who are active and informed citizens with an appreciation of Australia’s social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, and the ability to relate to and communicate across cultures at local, regional and global levels.

Scope of Intercultural understanding

Intercultural understanding combines personal, interpersonal and social knowledge and skills. It involves students in learning to value and view critically their own cultural perspectives and practices and those of others through their interactions with people, texts and contexts across the curriculum.

Intercultural understanding encourages students to make connections between their own worlds and the worlds of others, to build on shared interests and commonalities, and to negotiate or mediate difference. It develops students’ abilities to communicate and empathise with others and to analyse intercultural experiences critically. It offers opportunities for them to consider their own beliefs and attitudes in a new light, and so gain insight into themselves and others.

Intercultural understanding stimulates students’ interest in the lives of others. It cultivates values and dispositions such as curiosity, care, empathy, reciprocity, respect and responsibility, open-mindedness and critical awareness, and supports new and positive intercultural behaviours. Though all are significant in learning to live together, three dispositions – expressing empathy, demonstrating respect and taking responsibility – have been identified as critical to the development of Intercultural understanding in the Australian Curriculum.

For a description of the organising elements for Intercultural understanding, go to [Organising elements](#).

Intercultural understanding across the curriculum

Although Intercultural understanding focuses primarily on the development of skills, behaviours and dispositions, it also draws on students' growing knowledge, understanding and critical awareness of their own and others' cultural perspectives and practices derived from learning area content.

Intercultural understanding is more apparent in some learning areas than others, being most evident in those aspects of learning concerned with people and their societies, relationships and interactions, and in conjunction with the cross-curriculum priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and Sustainability.

Intercultural understanding is addressed through the learning areas and is identified wherever it is developed or applied in content descriptions. It is also identified where it offers opportunities to add depth and richness to student learning in content elaborations. An icon indicates where Intercultural understanding has been identified in learning area content descriptions and elaborations. A filter function on the Australian Curriculum website assists users to find where Intercultural understanding has been identified in F–10 curriculum content. Teachers may find further opportunities to incorporate explicit teaching of Intercultural understanding depending on their choice of activities. Students can also be encouraged to develop capability through personally relevant initiatives of their own design.

- [Intercultural understanding in English](#)
(www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/General-capabilities)
- [Intercultural understanding in Mathematics](#)
(www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Mathematics/General-capabilities)
- [Intercultural understanding in Science](#)
(www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Science/General-capabilities)
- [Intercultural understanding in History](#)
(www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/History/General-capabilities)

Background

This background summarises the evidence base from which the Intercultural understanding capability's introduction, organising elements and learning continuum have been developed. It draws on recent international and national research, as well as initiatives and programs that focus on intercultural understanding across the curriculum.

Intercultural understanding is a relatively recent addition to Australian school curriculums. It has its origins in several fields including cultural studies (Hall 1997), language education (Kramsch 1998; Liddicoat, Lo Bianco and Crozet 1999), multicultural education (Banks and Banks 2004; Noble and Poynting 2000) and more broadly in sociology, linguistics and anthropology. Given its diverse origins, it is not surprising that the nature and place of intercultural learning are by no means settled and the definition of the term 'culture' is itself not agreed upon.

The Intercultural understanding capability adopts the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages* (ACARA 2011) definition of culture as involving:

'... a complex system of concepts, values, norms, beliefs and practices that are shared, created and contested by people who make up a cultural group and are passed on from generation to generation. Cultural systems include variable ways of seeing, interpreting and understanding the world. They are constructed and transmitted by members of the group through the processes of socialisation and representation'. (p.16)

Drawing on this definition, Intercultural understanding focuses on sharing, creating and contesting different cultural perceptions and practices, and supports the development of a critical awareness of the processes of socialisation and representation that shape and maintain cultural differences.

Furthermore, in acknowledging the founding status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia, it is alert to the place of negotiation and boundaries in engagements at the cultural interface (Nakata 2007) and mindful of practices that both celebrate and protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage (Janke 2008). In recognising the importance for Australia of maintaining positive relations and communications in its region, it promotes recognition, communication and engagement with the different countries and cultures within Asia. It also supports the development of a strong vision for a sustained and peaceful global future.

Intercultural understanding assumes an integral connection between language and culture, acknowledging language as the primary means through which people establish and exchange shared meaning and ways of seeing the world (Scarino, Dellitt and Vale 2007). It works on the assumption that, in learning to live together in a world of social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, students need to look beyond their immediate worlds and concerns (Arigatou Foundation 2008) and engage with the experience and ideas of others (Appiah 2006) in order to understand the politics of culture on the world stage (Sleeter and Grant 2003).

Intercultural understanding identifies knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions that assist students in developing and acting with intercultural understanding at school and in their lives beyond school. At a personal level, Intercultural understanding encourages students to engage with their own and others' cultures, building both their sense of belonging and their capacity to move between their own worlds and the worlds of others (Kalantzis and Cope 2005), recognising the attitudes and structures that shape their personal identities and narratives.

At an interpersonal level, it considers commonalities and differences between people, focusing on processes of interaction, dialogue and negotiation. It seeks to develop students' abilities to empathise with others, to analyse their experiences critically and to reflect on their learning as a means of better understanding themselves and people they perceive to be different from themselves (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler 2003; Wiggins and McTighe 2005). It provides opportunities for students to question the attitudes and assumptions of cultural groups in light of the consequences and outcomes for others.

At a social level, Intercultural understanding builds students' sense of the complex nature of their own histories, traditions and values, and of the history, traditions and values that underpin Australian society (MCEETYA 2008). Students learn to interpret and mediate cultural inequalities within their own and other societies. They learn to take responsibility for their interactions with others, to act on what they have learnt and to become intercultural citizens in the world (Byram 2008).

References

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Organising elements

The Intercultural understanding learning continuum is organised into three interrelated organising elements:

- Recognising culture and developing respect
- Interacting and empathising with others
- Reflecting on intercultural experiences and taking responsibility

The diagram below sets out these elements.



Organising elements for Intercultural understanding

Recognising culture and developing respect

This element involves students in identifying, observing, describing and analysing increasingly sophisticated characteristics of their own cultural identities and those of others. These range from easily observed characteristics such as group memberships, traditions, customs and ways of doing things, to less readily observed characteristics such as values, attitudes, obligations, roles, religious beliefs and ways of thinking.

Students move from their known worlds to explore new ideas and experiences related to specific cultural groups through opportunities provided in the learning areas. They compare their own knowledge and experiences with those of others, learning to recognise commonalities, acknowledging differences between their lives and recognising the need to engage in critical reflection about such differences, seeking to understand them.

Strong intercultural relationships are built on mutual respect between people, communities and countries. Respect is based on the recognition that every person is important and must be treated with dignity. It includes recognising and appreciating differences between people and respecting another person's point of view and their human rights.

In developing and acting with intercultural understanding, students:

- investigate culture and cultural identity
- explore and compare cultural knowledge, beliefs and practices
- develop respect for cultural diversity.

Interacting and empathising with others

This element gives an experiential dimension to intercultural learning in contexts that may be face-to-face, virtual or vicarious. It involves students in developing the skills to relate to and move between cultures through engagement with different cultural groups. Through perspective taking, students think about familiar concepts in new ways, encouraging flexibility, adaptability and a willingness to try new cultural experiences. Empathy assists students to develop a sense of solidarity with others through imagining the perspectives and experiences of others as if they were their own. Empathy involves imagining what it might be like to ‘walk in another’s shoes’ and identifying with others’ feelings, situations and motivations.

In developing and acting with intercultural understanding, students:

- communicate across cultures
- consider and develop multiple perspectives
- empathise with others.

Reflecting on intercultural experiences and taking responsibility

The capacity to process or reflect on the meaning of experience is an essential element in intercultural learning. Students use reflection to better understand the actions of individuals and groups in specific situations and how these are shaped by culture. They are encouraged to reflect on their own responses to intercultural encounters and to identify cultural influences that may have contributed to these. They learn to ‘stand between cultures’ and mediate cultural difference.

To cultivate respect, students need to reflect on and to take responsibility for their own behaviours and their interactions with others within and across cultures. They understand that behaviour can have unintended effects on individuals and communities, and they identify situations requiring intercultural understanding. In developing responsibility, students learn to respect the human rights of others and the values of democracy, equity and justice (MCEETYA 2008).

In developing and acting with intercultural understanding, students:

- reflect on intercultural experiences
- challenge stereotypes and prejudices
- mediate cultural difference.

Intercultural Understanding Learning Continuum

Recognising culture and developing respect

Level 1 Typically by the end of Foundation Year, students:	Level 2 Typically by the end of Year 2, students:	Level 3 Typically by the end of Year 4, students:	Level 4 Typically by the end of Year 6, students:	Level 5 Typically by the end of Year 8, students:	Level 6 Typically by the end of Year 10, students:
Investigate culture and cultural identity					
share ideas about self and belonging with peers Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none">identifying the language(s) they speak, describing something special about themselves or their families	identify and describe the various groups to which they belong and the ways people act and communicate within them Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none">identifying who they are and where they are from	identify and describe variability within and across cultural groups Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none">identifying diversity within a cultural group, such as members who challenge expectations of the cultural make-up of that group	identify and describe the roles that culture and language play in shaping group and national identities Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none">exploring the idea that countries have national identities which can change over time	explain ways that cultural groups and identities change over time and in different contexts Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none">investigating the effects of time, relocation and changing ideas on cultural identity	analyse how membership of local, regional, national and international groups shapes identities including their own Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none">investigating the concept of multiple identities, and opportunities to operate across cultural boundaries
English ACELA1426 Mathematics ACMNA289 History ACHHK002	English ACELA1443 History ACHHK028	English ACELT1594 Mathematics ACMNA080 History ACHHS077	English ACELA1515 History ACHKS096	English ACELT1619 Mathematics ACMMG199 History ACDSEH043	English ACELT1633 History ACDSEH110
Explore and compare cultural knowledge, beliefs and practices					
identify, explore and compare culturally diverse activities and objects	describe and compare the way they live with people in other places or times	describe and compare a range of cultural stories, events and artefacts	describe and compare the knowledge, beliefs and practices of various cultural groups in relation to a specific time, event or custom	analyse the dynamic nature of cultural knowledge, beliefs and practices in a range of personal, social and historical contexts	critically analyse the complex and dynamic nature of knowledge, beliefs and practices in a wide range of contexts over time

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Typically by the end of Foundation Year, students:	Typically by the end of Year 2, students:	Typically by the end of Year 4, students:	Typically by the end of Year 6, students:	Typically by the end of Year 8, students:	Typically by the end of Year 10, students:
Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> comparing what foods are eaten at home or on special occasions English ACELT1575 Mathematics ACMNA002 Science ACSSU004 History ACHHK003	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> comparing how people in different places dress, where they live, their celebrations and daily activities English ACELT1587 Mathematics ACMNA040 Science ACSHE035 History ACHHK046	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> comparing media, texts, dance and music from diverse cultural groups including their own, exploring connection to place English ACELT1602 Mathematics ACMMG091 Science ACSHE061 History ACHHK060	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> comparing ways of celebrating births and marking deaths or 'coming of age' in different cultures and subcultures English ACELT1613 Mathematics ACMMG140 Science ACSHE099 History ACHHK094	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> examining gender roles, concepts of family or relationship to the land English ACELT1626 Science ACSHE119 History ACDSEH033	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring the complexities of traditional and contemporary cultures in a range of real and virtual settings English ACELT1639 Mathematics ACMSP228 Science ACSHE228 History ACDSEH149

Develop respect for cultural diversity

discuss ideas about cultural diversity in local contexts	describe ways that diversity presents opportunities for new experiences and understandings	identify and discuss the significance of a range of cultural events, artefacts or stories recognised in the school, community or nation	discuss opportunities that cultural diversity offers within Australia and the Asia-Pacific region	understand the importance of maintaining and celebrating cultural traditions for the development of personal, group and national identities	understand the importance of mutual respect in promoting cultural exchange and collaboration in an interconnected world
Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying cultural dimensions in familiar stories and events English ACELT1578 Mathematics ACMNA001 History ACHHK003	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing their participation in a range of cultural events at school or in their local community English ACELT1591 Mathematics ACMMG041 History ACHHK045	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> explaining the significance of a range of religious and cultural holidays and celebrations History ACHHK063	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing contributions that people from diverse cultural groups make to the community over time English ACELT1608 Mathematics ACMMG144 Science ACSHE099 History ACHHK116	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> investigating the complex relationship between language, culture, and identity and efforts to protect these English ACELA1540 History ACDSEH054	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> upholding the dignity and rights of others when participating in international online networks English ACELT1634 Science ACSHE228 History ACDSEH143

Interacting and empathising with others

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Typically by the end of Foundation Year, students:	Typically by the end of Year 2, students:	Typically by the end of Year 4, students:	Typically by the end of Year 6, students:	Typically by the end of Year 8, students:	Typically by the end of Year 10, students:
Communicate across cultures					
recognise that people use different languages to communicate	describe how the use of words and body language in interactions may have different meanings for various cultural groups	recognise there are similarities and differences in the ways people communicate, both within and across cultural groups	identify factors that contribute to understanding in intercultural communication and discuss some strategies to avoid misunderstanding	explore ways that culture shapes the use of language in a wide range of contexts	analyse the complex relationship between language, thought and context to understand and enhance communication
Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> learning and practising greetings in several languages 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> discussing the meanings of a range of facial expressions and whether these mean the same thing to all people 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying various ways that people communicate depending on their relationship 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> testing a range of strategies to overcome culturally based misunderstandings in given scenarios 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> understanding how culture influences what people do or do not say to express cultural values, such as politeness 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> engaging with texts to gain insight into the way culture shapes perspective
English ACELT1784 Mathematics ACMNA001 History ACHHK004	English ACELA1444 History ACHHK029	English ACELA1475 Mathematics ACMNA058 History ACHHK080	English ACELA1515	English ACELT1626	English ACELA1551 History ACDSEH088
Consider and develop multiple perspectives					
express their opinions and listen to the opinions of others in given situations	express their own perspectives on familiar topics and texts, and identify the perspectives of others	identify and describe shared perspectives within and across various cultural groups	explain perspectives that differ to expand their understanding of an issue	assess diverse perspectives and the assumptions on which they are based	present a balanced view on issues where conflicting views cannot easily be resolved
Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> sharing views on foods they like, or ways their families celebrate significant cultural events 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring a variety of perspectives on a specific event 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring a range of perspectives on an issue through role plays 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> presenting the case for a perspective that differs from their own 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring the factors that cause people to hold different perspectives 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> presenting multiple perspectives on complex social, environmental or economic issues

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Typically by the end of Foundation Year, students:	Typically by the end of Year 2, students:	Typically by the end of Year 4, students:	Typically by the end of Year 6, students:	Typically by the end of Year 8, students:	Typically by the end of Year 10, students:
English ACELT1578 History ACHHK004	English ACELT1589 History ACHHK029	English ACELT1602 Mathematics ACMMG140 Science ACSHS061 History ACHHS069	English ACELT1610 Mathematics ACMSP169 Science ACSHS099 History ACHHK115	English ACELT1619 Mathematics ACMSP206 Science ACSHS136 History ACDSEH076	English ACELT1634 Mathematics ACMSP227 History ACDSEH141
Empathise with others					
imagine and describe their own feelings if they were put in someone else's place	imagine and describe the feelings of others in familiar situations	imagine and describe the feelings of others in a range of contexts	imagine and describe the situations of others in local, national and global contexts	imagine and describe the feelings and motivations of people in challenging situations	recognise the effect that empathising with others has on their own feelings, motivations and actions
Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing how they might feel in the place of people in stories or events 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing how a new student might feel on their first day in their school 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing how children in a range of locations, such as urban or rural areas or in different countries, feel about their place 	Examples, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> presenting another person's story as seen through their eyes or as if 'walking in their shoes' 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing the possible feelings and motivations of people facing adversity, natural disasters or conflict 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> imagining and reflecting on the impact their words and actions have on others
English ACELT1783	English ACELT1582	English ACELT1596	English ACELT1610		English ACELA1564

Reflecting on intercultural experiences and taking responsibility

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Typically by the end of Foundation Year, students:	Typically by the end of Year 2, students:	Typically by the end of Year 4, students:	Typically by the end of Year 6, students:	Typically by the end of Year 8, students:	Typically by the end of Year 10, students:
Reflect on intercultural experiences					
identify and describe memorable intercultural experiences	identify and describe what they have learnt about others from intercultural encounters and culturally diverse texts	identify and describe what they have learnt about themselves and others from real, virtual and vicarious intercultural experiences	explain what and how they have learnt from a wide range of intercultural interactions and experiences	reflect critically on the representation of various cultural groups in texts and the media and how they respond	reflect critically on the effect of intercultural experiences on their own attitudes and beliefs and those of others
Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing the visit of an Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or other community elder to their class 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing what they have learnt about children in other places such as 'sister schools' 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying parallels between their own lives and the lives of others through a range of texts and media depicting diverse cultures 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> explaining ways that different cultural perspectives have influenced their work or their thinking 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> examining their responses to instances of cultural stereotyping 	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing how exposure to a diversity of views, ideas or experiences has or has not changed their thinking on an issue
English ACELT1580	English ACELY1655 Science ACSHE035 History ACHHK028	English ACELT1596 History ACHHS080	English ACELT1610 History ACHHK116	English ACELT1806	English ACELT1635
Challenge stereotypes and prejudices					
identify examples of the acceptance and inclusion of others in given situations	discuss the effects of acceptance and inclusion in familiar situations	explain the dangers of making generalisations about individuals and groups	explain the impact of stereotypes and prejudices on individuals and groups within Australia	identify and challenge stereotypes and prejudices in the representation of group, national and regional identities	critique the use of stereotypes and prejudices in texts and issues concerning specific cultural groups at national, regional and global levels

Level 1 Typically by the end of Foundation Year, students:	Level 2 Typically by the end of Year 2, students:	Level 3 Typically by the end of Year 4, students:	Level 4 Typically by the end of Year 6, students:	Level 5 Typically by the end of Year 8, students:	Level 6 Typically by the end of Year 10, students:
Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing what inclusion might look and sound like in the classroom or playground English ACELT 1575	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> role playing situations that explore varying outcomes of accepting and being accepted by others English ACELA1462	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> discussing the truth of statements about groups of people that begin with the word 'all' History ACHHS080	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing possible effects of prejudice on the daily life of a person from a minority group History ACHHK114	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> analysing the media representation of Australia's relations with countries in the Asia-Pacific region over time English ACELT1807	Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> assessing the use of stereotypes in the portrayal of cultural minorities in national conflicts English ACELY1749 History ACDSEH145
Mediate cultural difference					
identify similarities and differences between themselves and their peers Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying shared interests or hobbies with peers English ACELT1575 History ACHHK002	recognise that cultural differences may affect understanding between people Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> seeking to understand the words and actions of others which may at first seem odd or strange to them English ACELT1590	identify ways of reaching understanding between culturally diverse groups Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying common ground and shared interests, or developing shared projects with others English ACELA1488 History ACHHS080	discuss ways of reconciling differing cultural values and perspectives in addressing common concerns Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> describing ways of reaching understanding through dialogue English ACELA1501 History ACHHK114	identify and address challenging issues in ways that respect cultural diversity and the right of all to be heard Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> engaging with views they know to be different from their own to challenge their own thinking English ACELY1731 Science ACSHE136	recognise the challenges and benefits of living and working in a culturally diverse society and the role that cultural mediation plays in learning to live together Examples <ul style="list-style-type: none"> balancing the representation and defence of their ideas and perspectives with those of others in a range of social forums English ACELA1564 Mathematics ACMSP253 History ACDSEH146