

# Koora the Kangaroo: Violence Prevention at Woorabinda State School



## Evaluation Report

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Context for the project.....	2
Program description.....	6
Implementation of the Koora Program at Woorabinda State School.....	8
Evaluation process.....	10
Evaluation findings.....	11
Impacts of program on children.....	11
Teachers resource package.....	16
Conclusion.....	22
Summary of findings.....	23
Recommendations.....	24
Appendix 1. Pre-Program Teacher Survey.....	25
Appendix 2. Post-Program Teacher Survey.....	26
References.....	29

# Koora the Kangaroo: Violence Prevention at Woorabinda State School

A collaborative project between the creator of “Koora”, Mrs Ailsa Weazel;  
the Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research; and  
the Woorabinda State School.

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## Introduction

In late 2002, Ailsa Weazel, Co-ordinator of Gumbi Gunyah Women's Shelter met with Heather Nancarrow who was working on a project concerned with justice strategies to deal with family violence. Ailsa expressed her grave concerns about increased violence in Woorabinda and a lack of respect for culture and elders among the community's children. Ailsa saw this as a consequence of violence, including family violence, being an accepted 'norm' in the community and she identified a desperate need for intervention to bring peace and hope for the children's future and that of their community. Ailsa had a vision of a program for young children incorporating traditional story-telling methods to communicate community values and respect for culture to respond to the need she had identified.

In early 2003, Heather became the Director of the Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research (CDFVR), Central Queensland University, and in this role, she offered Ailsa assistance to develop and evaluate the program she envisioned. This offer resulted in a collaborative project between Ailsa, Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research and the Woorabinda State School (WSS). Initial project planning and development was undertaken by Ailsa, Heather and CDFVR's Education Officer, Michelle Bradford.

The purpose of the project was to develop, trial and evaluate a violence prevention strategy that was based on Ailsa's vision and culturally appropriate to students at Woorabinda State School.

## Context for the project

### *Nature and prevalence of Indigenous violence in Australia*

Disturbing levels of family violence and the associated impacts on families, children and community life are not unique to Woorabinda. Data from numerous quantitative and qualitative studies show that the incidence and prevalence of Indigenous family violence is widespread and disproportionately high when compared to non-Indigenous violence in Australian society (Memmott, 2001).

The homicide rate among Indigenous Australians, for example, is approximately ten times that of the national average, as illustrated in findings from an Australian Institute of Criminology study of homicide data for the eleven-year period of 1989 – 2000. The study revealed that Indigenous people represented 15.1% of victims, and 15.7% of offenders in homicide incidents recorded in Australia, although they constitute only about two per cent of the Australian population (Mouzos 2001). Further, a comparative analysis of recorded Indigenous and non-Indigenous homicides in Australia during 1989 – 2000 indicated that 33% of non-Indigenous homicides occurred between family members, compared with 61% of Indigenous homicides occurring between family members (Mouzos 2001).

Mouzos found that:

just under half of all Indigenous homicides occur as a result of a domestic altercation (45.0% versus 23.7% for non-Indigenous homicides)...[suggesting] that Indigenous homicides are qualitatively different from non-Indigenous homicides in Australia. Indigenous homicides were found to occur predominantly within the family environment, with a

high proportion of female involvement as either victims or offenders (2001:5).

Similar rates of serious assaults and hospitalisation arising out of family violence are also indicated. Blagg (2000) reports that violence towards spouses represents 39.5% of serious assaults and violence directed towards 'family' constituted 17.2% of serious assaults in Aboriginal communities in Western Australia. Queensland Health data (1998 – 1999) indicates that rates of hospitalisation for injuries due to interpersonal violence are 1,964 per 100,000 for Indigenous males (10.5 times higher than non-Indigenous males) and 1,728 per 100,000 for Indigenous females (36.7 times greater than non-Indigenous females). (The Next Step: Qld Government Response to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence Report 2000:9)

Many Indigenous people prefer the term "family violence" to "domestic violence", as it better recognises the numerous layers and forms of conflict and aggression that take place around relationships and because it recognises the role of racial oppression where many other approaches have only focussed on women's inequality and oppression (Blagg 2000; Nancarrow, 2003).

Consultations in the Northern Territory (The Aboriginal Family Violence Strategy 1995) and in Western Australia (Blagg, 1999) identify that Aboriginal family violence:

- is "situated within the dynamics of community violence, feuds and conflicts;
- is fed by and feeds broader community conflict;
- affects a wide range of kin and community members;
- has multiple causes; and
- includes a range of abusive, degrading and violent behaviours" (Blagg 2000:6).

Indigenous family violence is seen to be caused by a combination of three factors: *Precipitating causes* (events that trigger violence eg jealousy, payback, unpaid debt); *Situational factors* (contribute to the violence but don't trigger it, eg family problems, financial problems, unemployment, psychological problems, anger, alcohol intoxication); and *Underlying factors* (deep historical circumstances that make Indigenous people vulnerable to perpetrating violence or being victimised) (Memmott 2001).

Atkinson (1998) argues that family violence, suicide, crime, and drug and alcohol abuse are symptoms of trauma that are passed from generation to generation and are caused by both historical and present-day colonising processes. She says that violence towards Aboriginal women and children cannot be seen as a private, family or Aboriginal community problem. Rather, it reflects the racial, sexual and economic inequality in the broader structures in society and a breakdown in Aboriginal social order (cited in Blagg, 2000:4).

#### *Attitudes toward Violence*

Understanding family violence in the context of colonisation and trauma is important, but it must not be used to justify, nor expect family violence as a normal way of life for Aboriginal people. The forms of family violence occurring today have no valid position in traditional or contemporary Aboriginal culture (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence Report 2000).

Programs that challenge these expectations remind Aboriginal people that issues like unemployment, alcoholism and family violence are "often the legacy of historical and

sociological processes and **not the legacy of being Aboriginal**" (Sarra, 2003a:11). Such programs aim to empower Aboriginal people enough to create new expectations of strength, pride and protection and make personal choices about the extent to which systems will positively and negatively impact on them (Sarra, 2003a).

### *Children and Family Violence*

Literature on the impacts of *witnessing* domestic and family violence for children, indicate that these children often show more aggressive and antisocial behaviours, as well as post-traumatic stress symptoms, fearful and inhibited behaviours and show poorer social skills than other children. Such children are also more likely to develop attitudes that justify and normalise the use of violence in relationships (Edleson 1999).

Research that looks at factors that protect children against stress says that: nurturing, affectionate and secure relationships with adults and at least one parent; positive environments and a sense of 'connectedness'; personal mastery; participation in pro-social peer groups; and a positive temperament, all contribute positively to a child's ability to cope with hardship (Raphael 2000).

The information referring specifically to Indigenous children's experiences of family violence says that the impacts include:

- The denial of children's rights to, and sense of, personal safety;
- The presentation of role models, encouraging violence or victimhood;
- Learning to use aggression as the main problem-solving strategy;
- Becoming fearful and withdrawn – increasing the likelihood of further victimisation;
- Self blame for the anger, violence and harm inflicted;
- Self blame for not being able to stop the violence;
- Detachment from feelings and associated difficulties in forming relationships;
- Difficulty learning in the school environment - anxiety creates major distraction and negatively affects concentration;
- Post-traumatic stress and feelings of helplessness;
- Inadequate physical and emotional care – resulting in poor nutrition, ill health, inadequate sleep and severely compromised self-esteem;
- Feeling embarrassment or shame, pushing these feelings down and pretending they are not affected;
- Youth suicide; and
- Repeating the cycle of violence.

(SNAICC 2002:19; PADV Attitudes to Domestic and Family Violence in the Diverse Australian Community: Cultural Perspectives 2000)

### *Schools as a site for addressing violence prevention and early intervention*

In recognition of the school system's potential for influencing students' moral and social development, the Koora program used story-telling and activities with groups of children in the Woorabinda State School to challenge attitudes and beliefs that tolerate violence.

Effective school-based programs for Indigenous children are those developed in consultation with the community and draw on the four fundamental principles for successful Indigenous education: respect, culture, good teaching, and consistent attendance (McRae 2000; WADU).

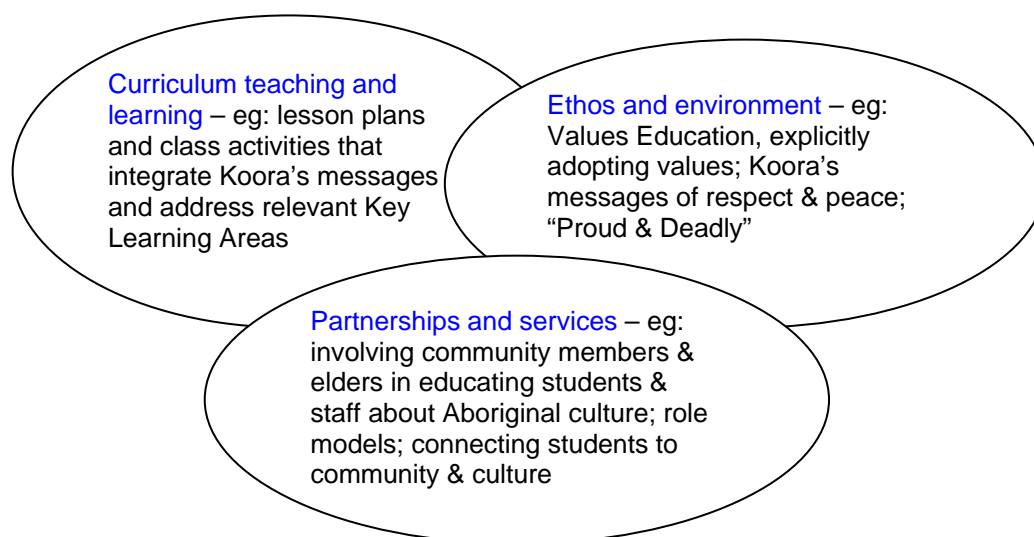
School-based violence prevention programs generally aim to create a safe, proactive environment and a school culture of non-violence. Several school-based programs have integrated the four fundamentals for successful Indigenous education, including, Cherbourg State School. Like Woorabinda, Cherbourg School's student population is entirely Aboriginal. The philosophy behind the violence prevention program at this school is called 'Strong and Smart' and is based on the core concept that Aboriginal identity is a positive life-force that underpins successful social and educational practices (Sarra, 2003b).

Evaluation of Cherbourg School's Strong and Smart program shows improved relationships between the school and community; dramatic improvements in students' literacy and academic performance; dramatic increase in school attendance rates; improvement in students' behaviour; increased pride and respect in the students themselves and in their school; and increased community support for and involvement in the school. This program has been integrated across the entire school system, creating new expectations, new experiences for students and staff and a new school culture (Sarra 2003a).

The principles of the World Health Organisation's Health Promoting Schools model can be found in Woorabinda's Koora program and the Cherbourg Strong and Smart program. This model recognises that:

- physical, social and psychological factors contribute to "health";
- behaviours, rather than knowledge, determine health; and
- in a school setting, positive health and well-being is best achieved through a whole school approach.

The approach strives to address health promotion through activities in the three interconnecting domains of curriculum, school ethos and partnership with the broader community.



Health promoting schools approaches health from a 'whole school' perspective. This includes safety in the school environment (eg school rules, values, expectations); integration of health promotion into curriculum (eg messages about non-violence etc); linking with outside world (eg involving elders, community and culture); and encouraging autonomy (Weare, 1998).

## Program Description

The Koora program comprised of four components:

- 1 Koora the Kangaroo violence prevention mascot, which also had a broader role in the community;
- 2 Series of original stories authored by Ailsa Weazel<sup>1</sup>;
- 3 School-based visits by community members:
  - Story-telling by Ailsa Weazel;
  - Follow-up with an activity (eg traditional dance; drawing) dance led by Patsy Murray; and
- 4 Teachers' resource package.

Children's attitudes toward violence were primarily challenged through their contact with the series of original Koora stories and the community members who told the stories and facilitated the activities. The series of original stories was written by Mrs Ailsa Weazel and is intended to comprise of six stories. To date, four (4) stories have been written, illustrated and produced in A2 and A4 size. These stories have not yet been formally published, instead, they were compiled and printed by CDFVR specifically for use in the program. All teachers at Woorabinda State School received a copy of the A4 size books.

These stories are titled:

- Winnie's a Winner!;
- Rog's Bad Day;
- Narook's Lesson; and
- The Big Test.

The stories follow the experiences of a number of joeys belonging to a group of kangaroos living around Woorabinda. This kangaroo group is led by the big buck and elder, called Koora. Through the wisdom of Koora and other elders, the joeys are guided to learn, understand and practise a range of values that are consistent with traditions and practices of Aboriginal cultures. These practices include: co-operation; respect for elders; respect for self and others; respect for land and nature; respect for culture; forgiveness; and sharing.

Objectives inherent in the Koora program's stories and community members' visits include: challenge and change children's attitudes toward violence; explore respectful and cooperative ways of solving problems; emphasise themes of respect for self, culture and elders; encourage reconnection with culture; share cultural knowledge; and support children to develop a strong sense of pride in being Aboriginal and a strong sense of hope for a positive future.

Examples of key statements in the stories that explicitly link Aboriginal culture with values and behaviour include:

- "We must not let violence destroy our family. We must look after each other and talk and work things out";
- Koora asked the elders to talk about old times and the respect that each member of the family should show in order to one day be a wise leader of their own families and to live in peace and harmony;

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<sup>1</sup> Negotiations to publish and distribute Ailsa's storybook series are currently underway.



- "Violence does not help us at all. Hitting, punching, pushing, bullying, or any other sort of abuse is violence. Violence is not our way Rog";
- "I know what's wrong with you - you lack self esteem! ... self esteem is when you can be proud of yourself for just being you, 'cause no one else is just like you"; and
- "Our way is to look after each other and take care of ourselves. When you are older, others will look up to you and ask for your wisdom and guidance. That's why it is important to listen and learn from elders, parents and teachers - they will help you learn how to make good decisions and be a wise leader".

During 2003, Woorabinda State School adopted a values education program and the school motto: "Proud and Deadly". The Values Education program aims to reinforce the school's culture and ethos of non-violence by explicitly identifying and exploring with students the range of values and behaviours that stem from the core human values of: Righteousness; Peace; Truth; Love; and Non-violence.

The Koora stories explore and locate these values in the wider context of Aboriginal culture. Each story observes a dilemma and a set of choices and consequences for the characters. As the elder and leader of the kangaroo group, Koora imparts wisdom and guidance in accordance with Aboriginal culture that challenges characters to observe respectful and co-operative ways to solve problems.

A draft of the teachers' resource package, called *"Koora: Our way! Promoting respect through school and community partnerships"*, was distributed to teachers prior to the commencement of the Koora program. This package aimed to support teachers' awareness of culturally sensitive practice; offer curriculum activities that emphasised attitudes and values of non-violence; provide teachers with strategies for incorporating the Koora messages into regular classroom activities; continue the presence of Koora's messages beyond community members' school visits; and complement existing school strategies to consolidate a school ethos of non-violence.

Specifically, the resource package contained the following elements:

- Koora's stories; and
- Resources for Teachers:
  - Suggested follow-up activities that draw on a Multiple Intelligence<sup>2</sup> framework and fit with the key learning areas of Queensland's education syllabus;
  - Three A3 size posters of Koora: "Koora Cares"; "Respect Rocks"; "Proud and Deadly";
  - "Children are Sacred" – information about traditional practices in child rearing;
  - The Role of Storytelling in Aboriginal culture – suggested classroom activities;
  - Understanding Traditional Aboriginal Art; and
  - Useful websites.

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<sup>2</sup> Multiple Intelligence theory was devised in 1983 by Dr Howard Gardner and identifies at least seven different kinds of intelligence and learning styles that are important to understanding human potential. These include visual/spatial, bodily/kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences. ([http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/mi/front\\_mi.htm](http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/mi/front_mi.htm)).

Examples of activities that draw on a Multiple Intelligence framework and fit with the key learning areas of Queensland's education syllabus include<sup>3</sup>:

#### Verbal/Linguistic

- Koora told Rog, "Violence is not our way". Debate this statement.
- Write an acrostic poem about Koora/Winnie/ one of the other story characters.
- Prepare a talk to explain why we must respect our elders.

#### Logical/Mathematical

- Koora is a member of the Woorabinda community. Make a facts chart about Woorabinda.
- How is Narook's/Winnie's life similar or different to yours? Write about it.
- Do a PMI (plus, minus and interesting aspects) about what happens in the story.

#### Visual/Spatial

- Design and produce a poster that encourages young children not to bully others.
- Make a photographic display that shows people in the Woorabinda community working together. Add a commentary to your pictures.
- Make puppets of the characters from the story. Use them to retell the story.

#### Bodily/Kinaesthetic

- Choreograph a dance that could be used to tell this story.
- Dramatise the story.
- Mime a sequence of events from the story.

#### Musical/Rhythmical

- Write a chant about the characters in the story.
- Compose a percussion score to go with the dance you have choreographed.
- Using percussion instruments, perform your musical composition.

#### Interpersonal

- In groups prepare an advertising campaign to promote Koora's message "Violence is not our way".
- Interview a member of the local community to find out what they know about the role of elders in Aboriginal communities.
- Find out about bush tucker in the Woorabinda area.

#### Intrapersonal

- Devise a list of values that you think would be important to Koora.
- You have just been selected to represent Woorabinda in your favourite sport. Record in your journal how you feel about being given this honour.

### **Implementation of the Koora Program at Woorabinda State School**

The implementation of the program was monitored and adjusted at various stages to meet the needs of children and respond to the competing demands on Ailsa.

Originally, the program was structured to draw on the time honoured method of oral story-telling and the children's enjoyment of being outdoors. The first visit to the school involved Ailsa telling a Koora story to the entire school population in the open

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<sup>3</sup> The revised version of the Teachers' Resource Package has not yet been finalised for publication.

assembly area. Following this, the children were divided into two groups and led by Ailsa, Patsy Murray and some teachers in activities such as discussion, dance and song to explore Koora's messages. This first visit demonstrated that this approach did not fit well with the children's learning styles or concentration spans.

At the suggestion of teachers, the program was adapted to deliver four 30-minute story-telling and activity sessions to smaller groups of students in a classroom setting. Also at the suggestion of teachers, the stories were illustrated and made into large A2 size books. Smaller, A4 size books were also made and given to all teachers. Engaging local artists to illustrate the stories within the time available was not possible. Consequently, two Aboriginal women from Mackay were contracted to produce the illustrations.

The stories, activities and community members' visits also created opportunities for the children to connect with Aboriginal practices. For example, Ailsa frequently interwove her story-telling with other culturally relevant information that told the children about traditional practices:

In Murri culture, we call women Nana or Aunty as a sign of respect. So you can call me and Patsy "Nana" or "Aunty"; and

Aboriginal culture was never violent. We never just went and punched somebody 'coz we were mad. If someone did the wrong thing, they were dealt with by just one man.

Ailsa also spoke forcefully to the children and made her expectations about respectful behaviour and attitudes very explicit:

You respect your elders, your parents and teachers! It's important to listen to your teachers and learn so you can get a good education and good job and you boys can provide for your families.

During a dance session with a group of older children, Ailsa said forcefully to the children:

Uncle Kruga has played the didgeridoo on tape for us. You know Uncle Kruga's music? Well, he has played some just for you because you know about his music. Uncle Kruga is your elder, it's important that you show respect to him and dance to his music.

The children's verbal and behavioural responses to these statements were positive.

Further, Ailsa said to the children:

Corroboree is Aboriginal dance. This is your culture, this is your dance. **You own corroboree**, be proud! Your school motto says 'Proud and Deadly', be proud to be Aboriginal, be proud to dance!

In response to these statements, all but three students stood up and danced corroboree. The energy in the room was electric as all of the children clapped their hands and stomped their feet in time with the music and cheered those who danced into the circle. Many of the boys seemed very focussed and serious during their dancing. As they finished, they smiled and laughed and cheered the others who were

still dancing. Ailsa's attempts to end the session (another group of students were waiting for the story-telling session) were met with pleas from the children and teachers for "just one more, please!" Pride, enjoyment and co-operation levels were strongly evident during this session.

Once the school-based program commenced, Ailsa and Patsy planned to visit the school at the same time each fortnight and conduct the program over the course of one school term. However, it soon became evident that planning for these visits required flexibility. For example, other school activities including school camp and field trips occasionally took priority; and for Ailsa, prior commitments or other community activities including Community Justice Group and Governance training occasionally required the Koora sessions to be rescheduled.

An unscheduled break of approximately eight weeks occurred half way through the program. Factors contributing to this included significant training commitments that took Ailsa out of the community, "sorry business" arising out of the deaths of some community members, and Ailsa's rethinking of how the program's delivery could adopt more flexible approaches. This break arose naturally in the process and challenged the partners to view this as an opportunity to rest, review and renew rather than a sign of defeat or lost commitment. Ultimately, the six school-based sessions took place at irregular intervals over a six-month period.

## **Evaluation process**

Broadly, the goal of the Koora program was to implement a culturally-based program that challenged attitudes and assisted teachers with the implementation of Woorabinda School's Values Education program.

Evaluation explored the impacts of the program on the students in terms of their recollection of and responses to Koora's messages. Further, the evaluation investigated teacher's perceptions regarding the usefulness and relevance of the teachers' resource package. The evaluation was informed by data from the following sources:

### Information provided by teachers

- Baseline and post-program survey<sup>4</sup>:
  - Incidents of aggression between students in the classroom;
  - Two most commonly displayed forms of aggression;
  - Level of confidence (hope, belief that improvement is likely) in relation to maintaining a safe and supportive classroom environment; and
  - Level of competence (strategies, access to resources) in relation to maintaining a safe and supportive classroom environment.
- Staff group discussions exploring perceptions of:
  - Usefulness and relevance of the Koora program teacher's resource package;
  - Effectiveness of activities in package and follow up to the sessions;
  - Usefulness and relevance of the Koora program's stories and visits from community members;
  - Uptake of the Koora program messages by students; and
  - Effectiveness of the Koora program to compliment existing values education program.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendices 1 and 2 for the pre and post-program teacher surveys.

- Case studies;  
A total of four teachers participated in individual case studies. One participant had regular teaching contact with all students and the remaining teachers were drawn from lower, middle and upper primary school teaching areas. The case study data was collected through semi-structured telephone interviews that explored the participants':
  - Perceptions of the implementation and processes surrounding the presentation and children's experiences of the Koora program; and
  - Experiences of using Koora's stories and the materials from the teachers' resource package in their classrooms.

#### Woorabinda School students

##### Preschool – Year 4

- Baseline and post-program surveys that identify students' perceptions of safety at school.
- Observations of group discussions with students in relation to their recollection and understandings of Koora's messages.

##### Year 5 – Year 7

- Baseline and post-program surveys that identify students' perceptions of safety at school and sources of worry experienced by students.
- Observations of group discussions with students in relation to their recollection and understandings of Koora's messages.

##### Field notes by CDFVR Education Officer

- Made through contact with Ailsa Weazel and other Woorabinda community members, Woorabinda State School staff and observations of classrooms for visible evidence of Koora specific materials and observations of students made during the community members' presentation of stories and activities.

### **Evaluation Findings**

#### *Impacts of program on children – attitude, pride, connection with culture*

Despite the irregularity of contact with the community members' visits, the children were still able to express their recollection of Koora's messages. The younger children offered: "Koora doesn't want "spitting, fighting, swearing or punching each other"; and the older children recalled "no swearing, no fighting, respect elders". Similarly, teacher feedback suggests that younger children have been seen and heard to refer to the Koora posters and books, saying "Koora doesn't like..." During a drawing activity with the Years 1 and 2 class-groups, that followed Ailsa's storytelling, one child was observed to refer to the story to challenge another child about her inappropriate behaviour, that is, taking all of the coloured pencils and not sharing: "You're like that emu [from the story] taking things!"

Pre and post survey data from teachers (see Table1) suggests a perception that the frequency of aggression between students in the classroom has generally decreased.

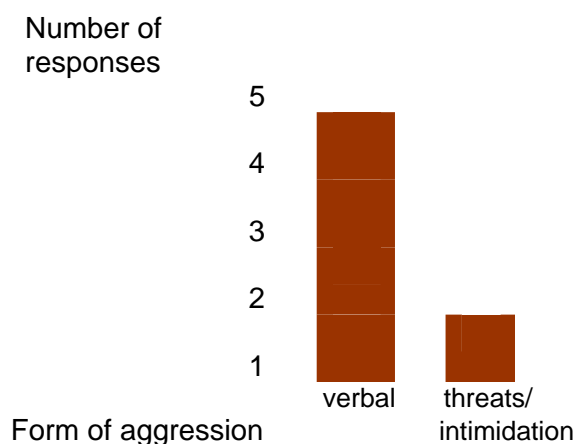
**Table 1 Pre-program teacher survey responses – March 2004**  
**Post-program teacher survey responses – October 2004**

Survey Question	Pre-program survey responses = 5 Post-program survey responses = 6				
	Many times daily	Daily	Regularly	Occasionally	Rarely
Generally, incidents of aggression between students in my classroom occur:					
<b>PRE-PROGRAM</b>	0	0	2	3	0
<b>POST-PROGRAM</b>	0	1	0	5	0

The comparison of the pre-program and post-program surveys produced mixed results. Overall the teachers reported some indications of a reduction in the frequency of aggression in the classroom (from regularly to occasionally). In the post-program survey, one teacher reported aggression in the classroom on a daily basis, whereas there were no reports of aggression in the classroom on a daily basis in the pre-program survey, suggesting an increase of aggression in one classroom. However, due to anonymity of participants, it is not possible to know whether this teacher (one of six participating in the post-program survey) was one of only five teachers who participated in the pre-program survey.

Teachers were asked to consider the forms of aggression displayed by students in their classrooms in the following categories: physical; verbal; threats/intimidation; harassment; or other. Graph 1 (below) indicates that overall, the pre-program survey responses identified verbal aggression between students as the most frequently occurring form of aggression in the classroom.

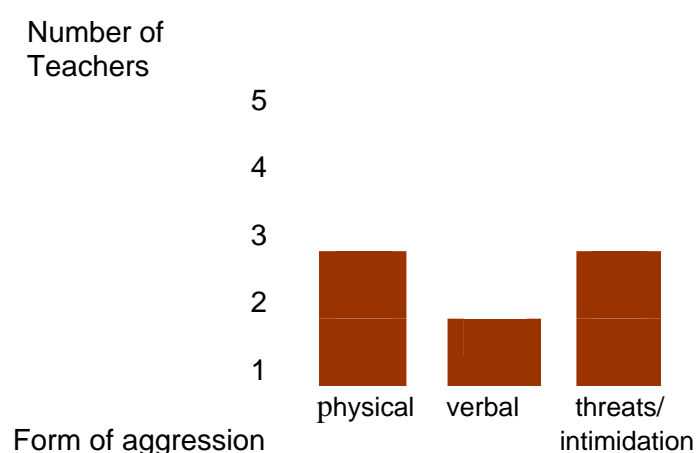
**Graph 1: Pre-program teacher survey responses**  
**Most common form of aggression between students in the classroom**  
**Number of responses = 5**



Teachers identified the second most common forms of aggression in the classroom to be threats / intimidation and physical aggression, in equal amounts, followed by verbal aggression (see Graph 2 below).

Teachers were also asked to rate their perceived levels of confidence (hope, belief that improvement is likely) and competence (strategies and access to resources) in maintaining a safe and supportive classroom environment. In both the pre-program and post-program surveys, all teachers expressed 'reasonable' to 'extremely high' levels of such confidence and competence.

**Graph 2: Pre-program teacher survey responses**  
**Second most common form of aggression between students in the classroom**  
**Number of responses = 5**



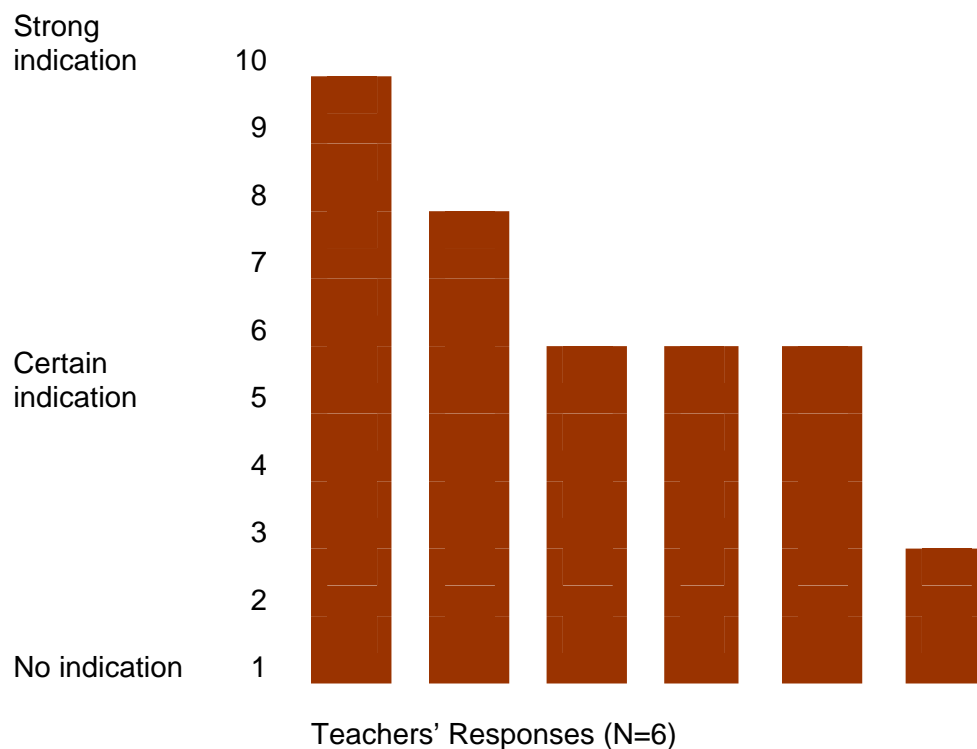
Invalid responses from three participants to the post-program teacher survey in October 2004, makes it impossible to establish the perceived most common forms of aggression between students in the classroom, post-program. However, participants consistently identified across both surveys that verbal forms of aggression in the classroom environment exceed physical displays of aggression.

The school's Values Education program systematically and explicitly focussed on reducing aggression between students. As such, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the Koora program contributed to this perceived reduction. However, given the Koora program's specific focus on Woorabinda and Aboriginal culture, its complementarity to the Values Education program, and teacher feedback, it is reasonable to assume the Koora program made a positive contribution.

The post-program teacher survey asked participants if they had observed any indications that Koora's messages were being considered by the students (eg. language used, decisions made, attitudes, behaviours). A ten point scale, with one being "no indication" and ten being "strong indication", was used to measure their observations<sup>5</sup>. See Graph 3.

<sup>5</sup> See post-program teacher survey at Appendix 2.

**Graph 3: Post-program teacher survey responses**  
**Observations of Koora's messages being considered by students**  
**Number of responses = 6**



Five of the six responses were spread across ratings of 5 (certain indication) to 9 (strong indication):

The children love the Koora stories and I believe the message within the story gets through to them; and

After visits you would hear the language used for a day or so after. They would also remember key messages during back-up lessons.

The remaining response identified a rating of 2 (little indication):

Not really, I think there were problems with the delivery and consolidation of lessons.

This particular comment referred to the infrequency of the community members' visits and a perception that follow up activities were often not explicit enough in exploring Koora's messages.

Data collected during contact with teachers over the course of the program indicated that teachers had observed some evidence of Koora's messages being recalled by the children:

Children refer to Koora all the time. Some talk about "who was in that suit? - it's not a real kangaroo is it?";



Younger children refer to Koora whenever they talk about animals or see a kangaroo;

Preschoolers talk about the Koora posters, for example “Koora doesn’t like...”;

Children are getting good at listening, they are able to say what the message or lesson from the story is and they are linking the message to their own experiences at school and in their families; and

Children have been asking about when Ailsa is going to return.

Conversely, teachers commented on specific occasions (eg. a documentary in which two kangaroos were fighting) where they expected Koora to be remembered by the children, but was not. Another post-program comment raised questions regarding children’s generalisation of Koora’s values to their own actions:

When children are observing teasing, bullying etc, they recognise the situation and tell the children involved to stop fighting or not use swear words etc at school. However, the same child will show no indication of these values if they are in the fight – giving or receiving bullying. They know the message but don’t yet act it out.

Teachers commented that the unexpected irregular timing of the school-based visits created difficulties for children retaining the messages:

I feel that more regular / consistent visits would have been a benefit. These students have to depend on consistency for behaviour reasons and a lesson here or there can be disruptive to them.

It is noteworthy however, that despite Ailsa’s final visit being some seven weeks after her previous visit, the children were observed to quickly recognise her and call out “Where’s Koora?” During this visit, Ailsa shared a story with each group of children and asked them:

- What is the message of this story?
- Who can remember the other Koora stories?
- Koora has important messages about behaviour. What are they?

All of the groups were observed to easily identify the messages in the Koora story. When asked about the other Koora stories, the younger children did not remember the names of the stories, but some could name two of the other characters. Some of the older children (with prompting) were able to name the titles of some of the other stories.

Also notably, the children quickly offered their thoughts when questioned on Koora’s messages about behaviour. The younger children (Years 1–4) said that Koora doesn’t want “spitting, fighting, swearing or punching each other”; and the older children (Years 5-7) offered “no swearing, no fighting, respect elders”.

The children’s demonstration of respect for the visiting community members was observed to improve quickly over the sessions. The vast majority of children from the

younger grades, (Preschool to Year 4) actively participated, listened quietly, attended to the story, and answered questions raised by Ailsa. Many of these children enjoyed sitting close to the story book; they would read out words from the text and look closely at the illustrations, interpreting the characters' non-verbal expressions and making statements about the feelings and motivations of the characters, for example, "Kooras mad...."

Older children (Years 5 -7) also demonstrated increased respect for the community members over the course of the program. The majority of these children were observed to sit quietly, take direction from Ailsa, respond to questions, show interest in the illustrations and text and actively participate in the dance activity that followed the story-telling session. However, compared to the groups of younger students, the noise and distraction levels in these class groups was noticeably higher and required greater intervention from the community members and teaching staff.

The Kooras program provided a setting for children to experience enjoyment, pride and success in activities that connected them with Aboriginal culture. A case study participant who was a teacher of younger children, reflected on her attempts to support the children's pride by talking with the children about how "special" their culture is and how "lucky" they are, "This is your special dance. We don't have a special dance in my culture". This same teacher referred to her observations of the children's increased pride in themselves, "They want to respect each other and adults", indicating that the children are now listening, settling and participating, sharing and communicating respectfully. "They are demonstrating pride in their learning. One child said to me 'Hey, we're getting clever aren't we?'"

### **Teacher's resource package**

#### *Kooras: Our Way! Promoting respect through school and community partnerships*

The resource package contained culturally relevant information and suggested classroom activities that are designed to support teachers to explore, reinforce and integrate Kooras's stories and messages into wider classroom activities. This package aimed to: support teachers' awareness of culturally sensitive practice; emphasise attitudes and values of non-violence in curriculum activities; provide teachers with strategies for incorporating the Kooras messages into regular classroom activities; continue the presence of Kooras's messages beyond community members' school visits; and complement existing school strategies to consolidate a school ethos of non-violence.

#### *Culturally sensitive practices and partnerships*

A number of teachers commented that the information contained in the resource package improved their awareness about Aboriginal cultures, specifically: family structures; the value and positioning of children; Aboriginal lore; language / use of some words; various traditions; and traditional art. As one participant expressed, "It helps me to understand what I'm seeing in the children".

One case study participant shared various examples of teachers seeking guidance from an Aboriginal school staff member about culturally appropriate ways of teaching the children. These teachers reportedly showed openness to the suggestions and resources made available by this staff member.

Similarly, teachers consistently verbalised great support for the concept of community members presenting the Koora program in the school:

These children automatically think white people are smarter than them...they look at their limitations first and say 'I can't...'; they need to know of Aboriginal people who have succeeded and hear from one of their own; and

...you know the very best thing you [Ailsa] can give these kids, is to keep coming back and talking stories.

Comments made throughout the period of program implementation shed some light on the challenges confronting the school and the community in building a positive and productive partnership.

The community members and school shared a number of goals in relation to the Koora program however, there were generally different perceptions about how to best achieve these goals. The highly structured and organised environment of the school system emphasised expectations of a "well-organised", "well-prepared", structured, consistent and carefully timed delivery of the Koora program.

By contrast, local knowledge suggested that the planning and organising of activities need only occur shortly before the program begins, and that the most effective way to involve community people in a local program like "Koora" is to "grab them" on the way to the program's venue. Further, local knowledge identified that organising community members' involvement in advance generally results in growing feelings of anxiety and "shame", thus increasing the likelihood of withdrawal or non-attendance.

The mismatch of approaches appeared to contribute to school frustration and conclusions that community members were unreliable:

This is what happens when you invite community members to participate in the school; they don't show up.

Whilst Ailsa always advised the school in advance if she was unable to deliver the Koora program, an end of program evaluation comment still included, "It's disappointing when people say they're going to come and they don't show up".

Various community members revealed that some community members express shame, embarrassment and reluctance to visit the school. One speculated that community members:

Often don't become involved in the school for fear the teachers will ask them questions that they can't answer, like, 'What's your tribe? Tell me about your culture / language / Aboriginal practices'.

These fellas are lost; they don't know who they are, where they come from, who are their family. It's hard to be proud of who you are when you don't know who you are.

This anxiety appears well-founded, as one teacher expressed, "I recently participated in cultural awareness training and I expected to hear from the children information like: 'I am from this family and this is my totem'".

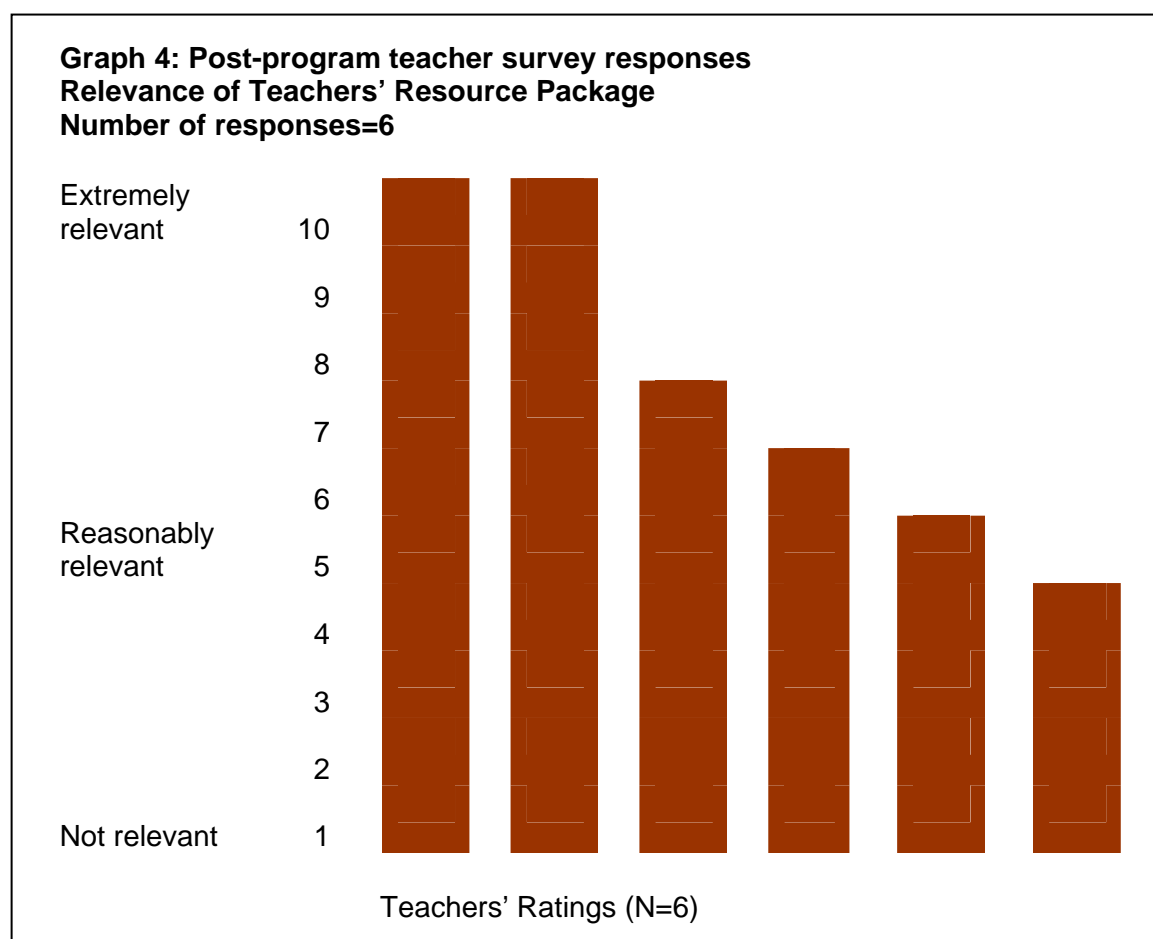
The evaluation evidence highlights the potential for the school system to extend its cultural sensitivity toward recognising and understanding the cultural and environmental issues and anxieties that feature for the program's visiting community members as well as for others in the community. Juggling the objectives and interests of both partners in the Koora program challenges those involved to negotiate ways to value and accommodate each other's expectations.

#### *Utility of the teachers' resource package*

Values of respect, peace and non-violence feature strongly in the Koora stories and many of the follow up activities contained in the resource package were designed to support and integrate this emphasis in the classroom.

Feedback indicated that the activities in the resource package were "very soundly structured and valid to KLAs [Key Learning Areas], especially SOSE [Study of Society and Environment], English and Health".

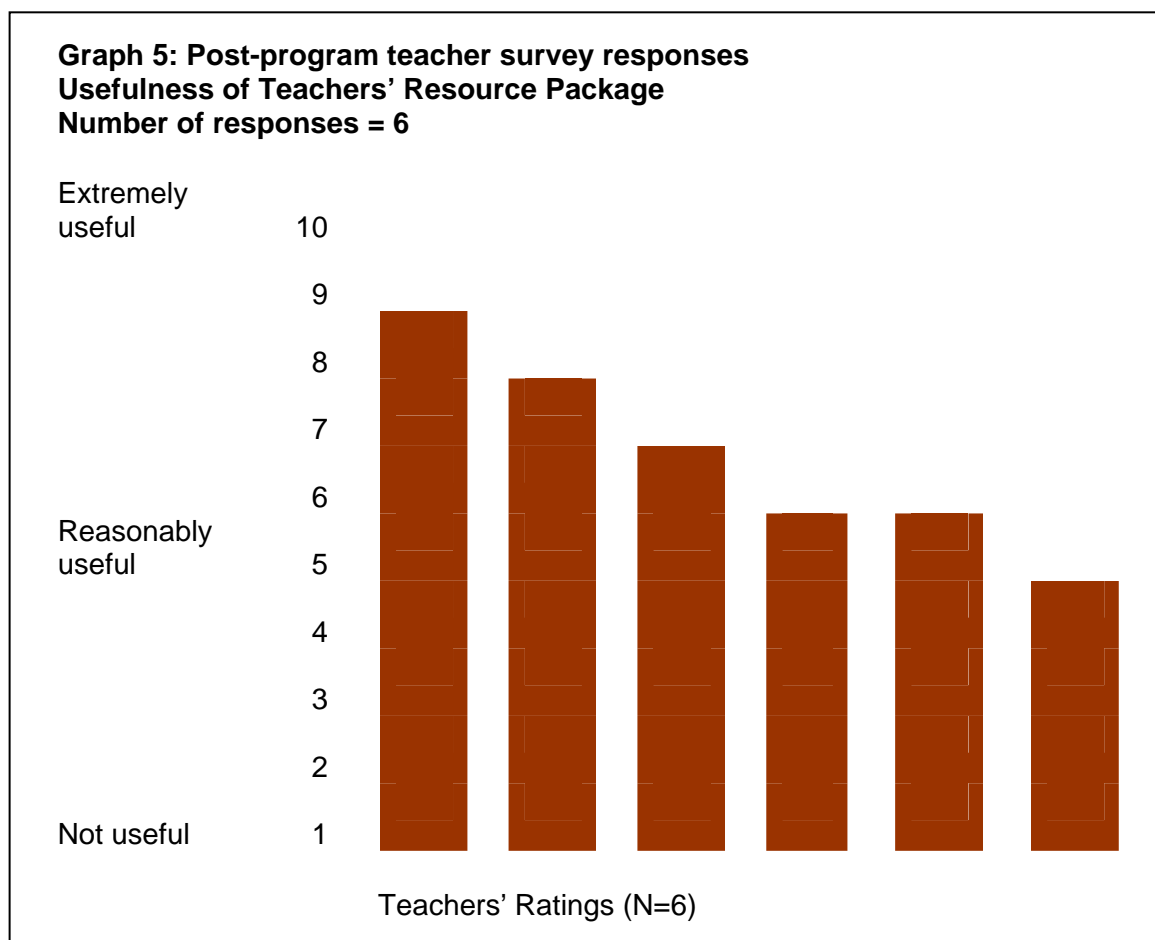
The post-program teacher survey (see Graph 4) asked participants "How relevant do you think this resource package is to the work you do with your students?" A ten point scale, with one being "not relevant" and ten being "extremely relevant", was used to measure responses.



Four of the six responses identified reasonable to high relevance with ratings between 4 and 7. The remaining two responses indicated extremely relevant with a rating of 10 (see Graph 4 above):

I think it is a very useful resource, I think it would be most useful when used during values education lessons.” “The stories were of [sic] content and message appropriate to the children. Local content was seen as important. Illustrations were helpful and well done. The way Ailsa spelled out the message specifically was helpful.

The post-program teacher survey question asked participants “How useful did you find the information and activities for the work you do with your students?” Again, a ten point scale, with one being “not useful at all” and ten being “extremely useful”, was used to measure their responses. Four of the six responses rated the package as ‘useful’ (ratings between 4 and 6) and two responses indicated a high degree of usefulness with ratings of 7 and 8 (see Graph 5).



The strongest demonstrations of using strategies contained in the package came from teachers engaged in early childhood education, Values Education and learning support:

It's easy to incorporate the stories and message information into my usual teaching;

It is more useful after the Koora visits as it promotes more discussion. Teachers already have to do a great deal of planning, so it is good to get something as well prepared as this; and

The little book is great. It is an excellent tool to use to re-visit the story's theme and messages and prompt discussions with the children.

Some teachers also referred to using the Koora storybooks with children for reading support and word recognition activities. Other feedback indicated the strategies and activities were not specific enough:

Teachers like worksheets created for them, it's easier than designing one for themselves;

More blackline masters<sup>6</sup> stuff would be good. Game ideas etc to be included;

It gave good ideas but still required a fair bit of teacher planning to implement; and  
Most of the activities weren't anything that I couldn't have thought of myself, I was wanting some creative and different activities.

Some teachers reflected on how the stories and activities had inspired them to create other activities such as poster making and brainstorming sessions in class. One teacher identified "the resource package complements the Values Education program very well" and saw potential for activities to combine the Values Education approach with the Koora program. "The stories are especially useful as they are Indigenous friendly. This is something the values education program lacks".

Despite the package's attempts to support teachers to integrate Koora's presence and messages into the full range of key learning areas, some teachers expressed a perception of the Koora program as operating separately to core curriculum areas of numeracy and literacy:

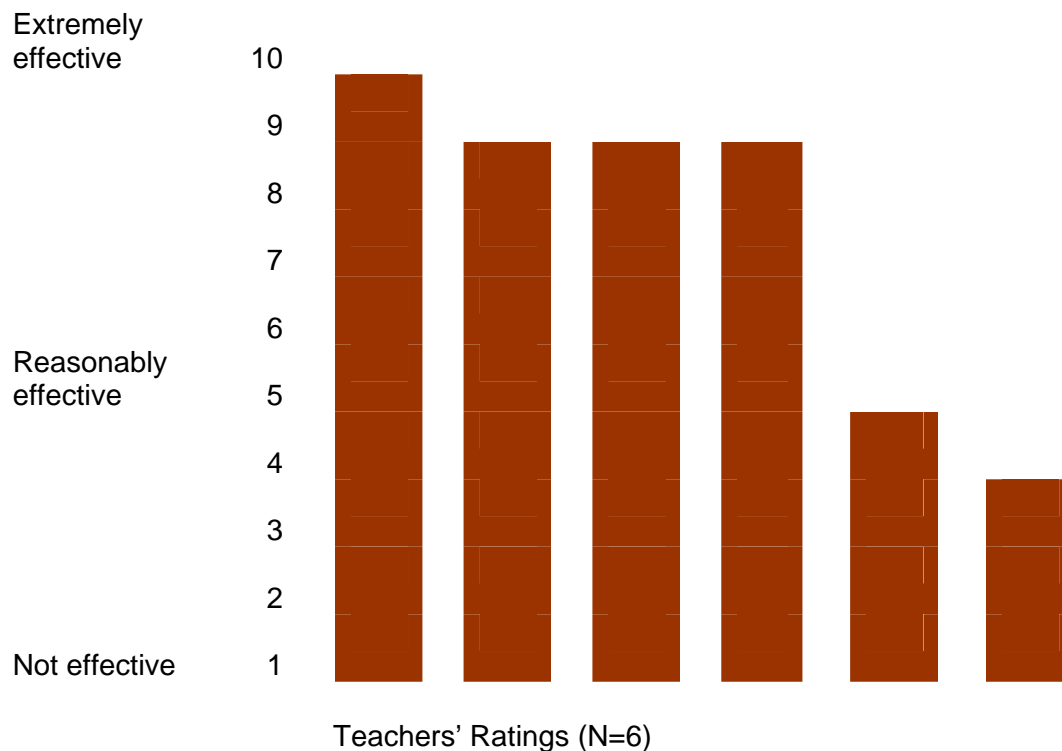
When I look back, I think I probably didn't use the resource as much as I should have – prioritising English and Maths.  
However, given the Woorabinda context, it is probably of more value to sort out the domestic issues as a way to improve literacy and numeracy.

The post-program teacher survey asked teachers "How effectively do you think this teaching resource package complemented Woorabinda School's Values Education approach?" A ten point scale, with one being "not effective" and ten being "extremely effective", was used to measure responses. The six responses reflected contrasting views (see Graph 6).

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<sup>6</sup> Blackline masters are templates of activities that can be photocopied for students to complete, eg find-a-word; sentence completion exercises.

**Graph 6: Post-program teacher survey responses**  
**Effectiveness of the Resource Package Complementing Values Education**  
**Number of responses = 6**



Two participants indicated ratings of 3 and 4 (limited effectiveness):

Having Koora and values lessons separate was possibly a mistake. An alternative would be the values teacher working with Ailsa to deliver the lessons...This could then be consolidated by the values teacher in following lessons (as well as in the homeclass).

It appears that the perceptions of limited effectiveness are linked more closely to the program's lack of positioning in the school's education agenda than to the actual contents of the resource package.

The remaining four responses indicated ratings of 8 and 9 (highly–extremely effective):

Very complementary; and

Both of them are similar. It would be good to see the two programs run a bit closer together rather than two separate programs.

## **Conclusion**

In 2003, Woorabinda State School implemented a Values Education program and a school motto “Proud and Deadly” as a means of supporting children to improve their behaviour and academic performance. In support of the Values Education program, the Koora Program aimed to introduce a culturally relevant agenda that challenged children to practise respectful and peaceful problem solving and further develop the children’s pride in being Aboriginal.

In 2005, the new Principal of Woorabinda State School decided to restructure the Values Education Program from having a dedicated teaching position to integrating values education activities into all teachers’ daily practice and focussing on particular values education topics in the Key Learning Areas of Study of Society and the Environment (SOSE) and Health. In addition to this, Woorabinda School has commenced a Culture Program that is being co-ordinated by the school’s only Indigenous teacher.

The Koora program comprised of a community mascot, a series of original stories, visits to the school by community members and a resource package for teachers. The evaluation summary refers to a six-month period during which the Koora program was trialled at Woorabinda State School. The program is guided by a Health Promoting Schools framework, which highlights the connection between curriculum, school ethos and community partnerships and promotes the development of personal and social action competencies through exploring values prioritised by the school community.

For many, Woorabinda community’s history has produced a legacy of lost identity and disconnection from culture. Unfounded non-indigenous assumptions that there is just one Aboriginal culture or that all Aboriginal people know all aspects of Aboriginal cultural practises may create unnecessary embarrassment for Aboriginal people. The activities led by the community members drew on their own experiences and understandings of culture, particularly the cultural values that centred on respect, cooperation, mutuality and non-violence. Expertise in other cultural practices such as ceremonies and producing and reading various forms of art was not available to the Koora program, but feedback suggests that these could be valuable additions to the program should relevant expertise be available in the future.



## Summary of Findings

- Teachers generally perceived the Koora Program to be separate and unrelated to core curriculum subjects:

When I look back, I think I probably didn't use the resource as much as I should have – prioritising English and Maths. However, given the Woorabinda context, it is probably of more value to sort out the domestic issues as a way to improve literacy and numeracy.

- Teachers perceived value in the Koora Program and believed its contributions would be best made in conjunction with the school's Values Education program:

Having Koora and values lessons separate was possibly a mistake. An alternative would be the values teacher working with Ailsa to deliver the lessons...This could then be consolidated by the values teacher in following lessons (as well as in the homeclass);

The resource package complements the values education program very well; and

The stories are especially useful as they are Indigenous friendly, this is something the Values Education program lacks.

- Some teachers required blackline masters and activity sheets to facilitate their use of the resource package:

Teachers like worksheets created for them, it's easier than designing one for themselves;

More blackline masters stuff would be good. Game ideas etc to be included; and

It gave good ideas but still required a fair bit of teacher planning to implement.

- Teachers perceived that the irregular nature of the community members' visits negatively impacted on the effectiveness of the Koora program:

I feel that more regular / consistent visits would have been a benefit. These students have to depend on consistency for behaviour reasons and a lesson here or there can be disruptive to them.

- Despite the irregularity of community member visits, children demonstrated awareness of Koora's messages.
- Koora appeared to maintain some presence in the school environment between the story-telling and activity session – for example, a number of classrooms were observed to have a Koora poster on the wall and teachers reported observations of children taking the Koora books from the shelves to read.

- Incorporating community member visits into the Koora program was shown to be an effective strategy for delivering Koora's messages and increasing contact with culture.
- Teachers perceived a reduction in the frequency of aggression between students in the classroom environment – this reduction is also linked to the school's Values Education program.
- Children's behaviour toward the visiting community members was observed to improve during the six program sessions.
- Community involvement in the school remained limited for a range of reasons, including community members' embarrassment and anxiety about potential questions from teachers, over-commitment to existing activities, lack of motivation, and lack of confidence.

## **Recommendations**

- Support teachers to draw on Koora's messages in their daily contact with students and integrate the Koora program and activities into classroom lessons that target the Key Learning Areas of SOSE and Health. This strategy increases the likelihood of consistent and regular contact between the children and Koora's messages. Koora and community members can then feature as 'special visitors' to the classrooms.
- Integrate the Koora program and activities into Woorabinda School's Culture Program.
- Specifically target the Koora program at students in the early childhood education years, that is, Preschool, Preparatory year and Years 1-3.
- Continue activities that evaluate the value and effectiveness of the Koora program resources. For example, ask children and school staff to participate in PMI<sup>7</sup> activities to monitor and adjust the program's implementation.
- Review opportunities for the school staff to understand and influence community members' perceptions and experiences of engaging with the school system.
- Review teachers' levels of cultural awareness and expectations of community members – understand that community members too may experience some disconnection from their culture; and may also be overcommitted to a range of other activities. Review opportunities for school staff to work with community members to influence (where possible) those issues that constrain participation.

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<sup>7</sup> PMI is an activity in which participants are asked to identify aspects of their contact with the program that are positive (Plus); negative (Minus) and Interesting.

## Appendix 1: Pre-Program Teacher Survey

### Woorabinda Primary School Teacher Pre-Program Survey 2004

1. Generally, incidents of aggression between students in my classroom occur:  
(please tick appropriate box)

☐

Rarely

☐

Occasionally

☐

Regularly

☐

Daily

☐

Many times a day

2. The two (2) most commonly displayed forms of aggression between students in my classroom are: (mark boxes with a 1 and 2 to indicate the first and second most common forms of aggression)

☐

Physical

☐

Verbal

☐

Threats/  
Intimidation

☐

Harassment

☐

Other\_\_\_\_

3. (a) In relation to maintaining a safe and supportive classroom environment,  
I rate *my level of confidence* (ie hope, belief that improvement is likely) at: (*please circle*)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
not confident				reasonably					extremely
				confident					confident

3. (b) In relation to maintaining a safe and supportive classroom environment,  
I rate *my level of competence* (ie strategies, access to resources) at: (*please circle*)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
not competent				reasonably					extremely
				competent					competent

## Appendix 2: Post-Program Teacher Survey

### Woorabinda Primary School Post-Program Teacher Survey 2004

With the completion of the trial period of Koora's stories and Ailsa Weazel's visits, we'd like to ask you about your impressions of the program. Questions 1, 2 and 3 ask you to reflect on your experiences as a teacher in your classroom. Question 4 asks you to reflect specifically on the effectiveness or otherwise of the "*Koora : Our Way! Promoting respect through school and community partnerships*" resource package for teachers.

1. Generally, incidents of aggression between students in my classroom occur:  
(please tick appropriate box)

☐

Rarely

☐

Occasionally

☐

Regularly

☐

Daily

☐

Many times a day

2. The two (2) most commonly displayed forms of aggression between students in my classroom are: (mark boxes with a 1 and 2 to indicate the first and second most common forms of aggression)

☐

Physical

☐

Verbal

☐

Threats/  
Intimidation

☐

Harassment

☐

Other\_\_\_\_

3. (a) In relation to maintaining a safe and supportive classroom environment,  
I rate *my level of confidence* (ie hope, belief that improvement is likely) at:  
(please circle)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
not confident				reasonably					extremely
				confident					confident

3. (b) In relation to maintaining a safe and supportive classroom environment,  
I rate *my level of competence* (ie strategies, access to resources) at:  
(please circle)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
not competent				reasonably					extremely
				competent					competent

4. The following questions refer to the resource package for teachers called “Koora : Our Way! Promoting respect through school and community partnerships”.

(a) How relevant do you think this resource package is to the work you do with your students? *(please circle)*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
not relevant				reasonably relevant					extremely relevant

Comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

(b) How useful did you find the information and activities for the work you do with your students? *(please circle)*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
not useful at all				reasonably useful					extremely useful

Comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

(c) How effectively do you think this teaching resource package complemented Woorabinda School's values education approach? *(please circle)*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
not effective				reasonably effective					extremely effective

Comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

(d) Did you observe any indications that Koora's messages were being considered by the students? (eg language used, decisions made, attitudes, behaviours)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
no indication				some indication					strong indication

Comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

*Thank you very much for taking the time and effort to respond.*

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