

Gift of Gallang: Evaluation

Prepared by Dr Kirstine Hand, March 2018
on behalf of Mission Australia and
Communities for Children – Inala to Ipswich

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Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, and we pay our respects to Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, the culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land and we recognise the importance of the young people who are the future leaders.

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Background

The Gift of Gallang (GoG) program emerged in response to local needs, as identified by a number of community based organisations, including Mission Australia. The need for creating hope, resilience and wellbeing in the community of Inala was evident after a cluster of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and youth suicides occurred in 2016 among the local community. The wellbeing of individuals and families had been negatively impacted in the Inala region as a result of these deaths.

The community was additionally concerned that further suicide attempts may occur, with children as young as 8-11 years of age having expressed suicide

ideation. As a result, a need for a prevention program to foster resilience and wellbeing and reduce risk of suicide within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community was identified.

In 2018 the GoG was implemented in a local primary school in Inala. This represented the culmination of a three-year journey of ongoing community engagement and collaboration, which included the formation of the Committee of Hope (CoH), as well as the development of community engagement activities, such as cultural nights. The CoH consisted of several key stakeholders (see Figure 1) who oversaw the initial development of the GoG. The Communities for Children (CfC) cultural worker was an integral part of the co-ordination between stakeholders, and in the development of the GoG program.

Figure 1: The Committee of Hope Stakeholders



Background (con't)

Creating a community where children had a strong sense of culture and connection framed the GoG activities with the long-term aim of reducing risk of suicide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

This work was supported by a partnership approach between Mission Australia and several other key

stakeholders including Inala Wangarra, local Elders, other Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander community and health organisations, as well as a local primary school. Mission Australia funded the evaluation of this work in order to document key learnings. Data was collected from members of the CoH, facilitators, educators, parents and carers as well as school staff and families.



Program components and program delivery

Two main components of the Gift of Gallang program were established (see Figure 2), one being ongoing community engagement via cultural nights and the other a school-based prevention program targeted at primary school aged children (years 4-6).

Cultural nights were selected as a mechanism to ensure community engagement, allowing for ongoing relationships to be built between the CoH and the

community. It was envisioned that these cultural nights could be used for communication between the CoH and community members, as well as to build community capacity and relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children and community organisations. The collaboration between attending CoH members on the cultural nights would further strengthen partnerships between community organisations and referral networks.

Figure 2: Core Components of Gift of Gallang



The CoH also sought to identify effective evidence-based strategies that could be incorporated into a school-based wellbeing program. Early prevention was considered key, hence a decision was made to target Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in years 4-6. The program was framed around a strengths-based approach, with a focus on healing mind, body and spirit through cultural connection and self-determination. Given the potential age of children and the school-based context, it was decided that no reference to suicide or suicide ideation would be made, as this is not considered best practice or age appropriate.

The CoH contributed to the content and format of the program, which ran in Term 2 of 2018 in a local primary school. This primary school was an active member of

the CoH. The program duration was initially planned for one hour across ten weeks, however, this was adjusted to fit across nine weeks due to a conflict with a previously planned school excursion.

The school made accommodations so that the program could run during class time and ensured it also backed onto a lunch break, to allow for additional flexibility. Other accommodations included making space available and providing the significant investment of a staff member developing links from the GoG to curriculum across each grade level. This was to ensure students were still provided with opportunities to demonstrate learning across key learning areas and were not disadvantaged academically.

Program components and program delivery (con't)

The facilitators that delivered the sessions were local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, selected by the CoH. Some facilitators received additional training to build their capacity and ensure appropriate delivery of evidence-based content. This was provided by Pathways to Resilience who deliver evidence based training and/or programs which foster social and emotional wellbeing and resilience of children and families. The training provided focused on how the brain works, identifying emotions, self-awareness, self-regulation and emotional resilience.

Overall, content aimed to provide students with strategies to foster social and emotional wellbeing, as

well as a strong connection to community and culture, and confidence in their self-determination (Table 1). Activities were embedded in the program allowing the students to create and develop objects that had cultural significance to them, which they could keep as a reminder of the experiences after the completion of the program. These included designing and painting a pair of shoes and a set of clap sticks. Students were also involved in developing a rap by recalling words with significance to them from throughout the program. An artistic facilitator helped students to shape these words into a song, which formed part of a final showcase.

Table 1: Weekly Topic for Gift of Gallang – School-based Programs

Week	Topic
Week 1	Cleansing and healing ceremony
Week 2-4	Emotional regulation; understanding the brain
Week 5-7	Identity, spirituality and connection to land
Week 8	Grief and loss
Week 9-11	Strong community: review of program content and working towards the Showcase

In addition to the scheduled weekly program, some facilitators returned in Term 3 to work with students during lunch breaks to finalise preparation for the GoG showcase. As part of the showcase, students performed a dance and the rap which they created during the program, while wearing the shoes and using clapsticks they had painted. Families of students who participated in the GoG and other key stakeholders

were invited to celebrate the learnings and experiences they had as a result of the program. As an additional follow up activity, a GoG camp was planned for the end of 2018, however, this unfortunately needed to be postponed due to adverse weather conditions.

Findings

The evaluation findings focused on three key areas: partnerships, community engagement and ownership and the implementation of the school-based program and program outcomes. From the evaluation, it is clear that programs such as these need a strong community focus, with partnerships playing a critical role in the success of the project.

Getting the right people involved at the right time was a key factor of success in the GoG program. Consultation was essential to give the community opportunities to be involved in the program that allowed feedback and input into the program. The evaluation also found that not all families in the area were aware of the GoG when first implemented, and that more could have been done to ensure community buy-in. This would need to be addressed if further roll out is considered.

From the school's perspective, there was a commitment made to the program in terms of resourcing and accommodating the program into the everyday running of the school. While more lead up time would have been appreciated, the school managed the physical resources

(such as room bookings), with curriculum planning, ensuring the program was implemented efficiently and pupils were not disadvantaged by attending the GoG. Once the program was implemented school staff reported high levels of engagement with the project by pupils, demonstrated by not only their participation in the program, but also improvements in school attendance and a lessening of behavioural referrals.

It was also reported that the program embedded a strong cultural identity in the young people attending, with a sense of belonging being developed as a result of their attendance. Skills which were taught in the program, such as conflict resolution, were also noted to be put into practice by the attendees outside of the program, with improved self-esteem and an embracing of culture being notable outcomes. Schools, in recognising the importance of the program noted that this should be offered across years 4-6 and with more monitoring of the students to take place to ensure that the skills they learnt were transferred into everyday life.

Parents felt the wellbeing of the children who participated in the program was being built, and that the program aligned with their beliefs. Parents noted that the children had an increased sense of school enjoyment and better relationships with the school staff. However, it was also noted by parents that there could have been better transparency around the program content and further involvement of the Yuggera Elders to ensure a cultural fit.

Overall, the evaluation showed that the program had been successful in strengthening cultural identity, pride and sense of connection for families attending the cultural nights and students who participated in the Gift of Gallang program. For the program to have long terms outcomes, its ownership needs to be remain within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and be progressed from being a pilot to an on-going project. A summary of the key findings and recommendations are provided below and a more detailed report can be found [here](#).



Findings (con't)

Partnerships

- There were pre-existing relationships and partnerships between many of the stakeholders, including the program coordinator (previously Mission Australia's cultural worker) and other Mission Australia Communities for Children (CfC) staff.
- The strength of the relationships the program coordinator built with stakeholders was seen as a fundamental reason for the successful collaboration between the community organisations and school involved.
- CoH members felt that all relevant services had been invited to be part of the GoG. Organisations with stronger connections to the local community were more likely to dedicate time and resources to be involved.
- CoH members also indicated they had ample opportunity to participate in the development of the GoG through regular contact (meetings, emails, phone calls), enabling them to provide suggestions and feedback.
- Measures were taken to ensure the content developed for the school-based program was culturally appropriate and informed either by experts, Elders or evidence on what is regarded as best practice.
- The upskilling of facilitators of the school-based program was seen as a strength as this resulted in capacity building of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members currently employed in local services.

Suggestions for improvements on partnerships recognised that this had been a pilot program, that emerged in response to community need and had been a learning process. Feedback for improvement focused on having clear documentation of roles, responsibilities and expected resource investment for all organisations wanting to engage in future.

Community Engagement and Ownership

- Community consultation with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families impacted by youth

suicide was conducted prior to establishing the CoH and the GoG program.

- The majority of CoH members and all of the GoG school-based program facilitators were local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members.
- Regular cultural nights were established to facilitate community engagement and provide opportunities to offer information and obtain input and feedback from community members.

To maintain this as an ongoing process, the continuation of the GoG and the cultural nights were viewed as paramount by CoH members, however, it was acknowledged that future funding would be needed for these to carry on, with the continuation of a program coordinators role being essential in further projects.

Program Outcomes and Opportunities for Future Directions

Common themes emerged across interviews with CoH members, school staff and parents and carers. Overall, the program was viewed as being successful in strengthening cultural identity, pride and a sense of connection for families that attended cultural nights and students who participated in the school-based program. Perception that the program needs to stay within ownership of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to continue to be successfully embraced by community were strong. Concerns were held across the stakeholders about funding sustainability of the program with recognition that long-term impact requires a broader scope than a one off program in a single primary school.

Gift of Gallang Facilitator and School Staff Perspectives

- A key factor in the successful implementation was the level of partnership provided by the school with the program providers and facilitators. This was important before implementation to determine how the program would meet the needs of the community, as well as being able to identify the resources needed. The local connections, knowledge and skills held by the GoG program co-ordinator and facilitators were viewed as being important factors for the success of the pilot.

- Several accommodations and investments were made by the school in order to ensure the GoG program could be implemented during school time. This included engagement of staff and families, making links to curriculum and modifying assessment tasks to align with the Gift of Gallang content, and co-ordinating classes across three different grade levels amongst others, and scheduling facilities for GoG use.
- Challenges were expected given GoG was a pilot program, and included the short notice of the start date and some changes to the week by week planned structure.
- School staff reported that students demonstrated high levels of engagement in the GoG sessions, as well as the final showcase, as demonstrated by attendance, lack of behaviour referrals, as well as comments made to staff by students.
- GoG facilitators noted a sense of students being embedded with a stronger cultural identity, a sense of belonging, and awareness that they were cared about by community members as a result of the program.
- Both facilitators and school staff were able to provide examples of where they either directly observed or were informed about instances where students had recalled knowledge or skills learnt throughout the program.
- Other impacts noted by school staff included a sense of improved student self-esteem, embracing of culture, strengthened relationships between students, staff and families, and the pride at an individual, family and broader school level.
- An unexpected outcome was the higher rates of school attendance, including from students with typically high absentee rates.
- Suggestions made by school staff included ensuring sustainability of the program and broadening the scope so that students receive it multiple times, refining timelines to avoid changes during implementation and providing all required consent forms in an initial information pack to parents/carers.
- Future considerations noted by school staff included wanting to ensure students transferred knowledge into their everyday lives, wanting to maintain the stronger connections made with parents/carers moving forward, and incorporating measurement of the longitudinal impact by tracking social-emotional outcomes over time using tools available to state schools.



Findings (con't)

Parent and Carer Perspectives

- Parents/carers expressed having little knowledge about the GoG prior to commencement, with not all parents/carers being aware of the cultural nights, despite their feeling of being well connected to the Inala community.
- A lack of parental support for events held throughout the school-based program, such as a smoking ceremony, was noted with the suggestion made that more information about the program and what it was trying to achieve at the start may have encouraged attendance as well as provided parents with adequate time to take leave from work if required.
- Parents/carers generally viewed the GoG as aligning with their beliefs around the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children having strong connections to culture and community and the role these play in fostering wellbeing and resilience.
- The GoG was seen as providing an opportunity for children to either be more aware of and strengthen their connection to culture or as an opportunity to express and confirm their prior knowledge and experiences of culture.
- All parents/carers felt building wellbeing in their children was important and had strategies that they used for this, including discussing values, ensuring children know cultural knowledge, spending time together as a family and modelling wellbeing behaviours. Because of these pre-existing strategies, parents/carers did not feel children's discussion of wellbeing increased as a result of GoG participation.
- Positive impacts were noted, however, including increased confidence and help seeking behaviour, increased school enjoyment and relationships with school staff and use of wellbeing strategies learnt throughout the program.
- Suggestions included improving the transparency of the program content and the staff involved so that families can make informed decisions about the cultural fit of the program, including more parents/carers from the school community in initial consultations, and having further involvement of the Yuggera Elders to distinguish between customs and protocols of the traditional land custodians of Inala and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The importance of embedding culture and wellbeing into daily life and actions was also noted.



Recommendations

These recommendations provide an opportunity to build upon and strengthen the framework and strategies used to establish partnerships, community engagement and ownership for Gift of Gallang moving forward, as well as providing points of consideration for refinement of implementation and evaluation processes. These recommendations may also have application to any work undertaken by Mission Australia in the future. A more detailed list of recommendations can be found [here](#).

While the risk of suicide remains so high for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, the importance of dedicating further funds towards implementing programs such as the Gift of Gallang and evaluating them in order to determine what is effective in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health and wellbeing should remain a national priority.

Partnerships, community engagement and ownership

- 1 Adopt co-design approaches to community consultations, program development, implementation and evaluation, with ongoing governance and ownership of programs being placed within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations.
- 2 Provide support to acquiring ongoing funding to increase the likelihood of sustainability.
- 3 Plan for flexible timeframes which enable the building of trusting relationships, connections and genuine collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, as well as ensuring the involvement of appropriate staff.
- 4 When initial collaboration results in a plan to develop school-based programs, additional community consultation should occur which specifically targets the families, parents and carers of students attending participating schools.

Recommendations (con't)

- 5** A Memorandum of Understanding should be developed for use between partnering organisations and schools, outlining timeframes, roles, responsibilities and contributions.
- 6** Preparation of facilitators and school staff involved in the delivery programs, should include cultural sensitivity awareness to ensure cultural safety for all participants.
- 7** Comprehensive information should be provided to parents and carers of students invited to participate in programs, providing transparency of key dates, program content and who will deliver it, to increase family engagement and ensure cultural safety.

Future Evaluations of School-Based Programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

- 8** Establishing partnerships between Mission Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, along with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, to develop and implement evaluation frameworks, ensuring the methodology is culturally appropriate and follows local protocols, this will strengthen future work and contribute towards building the evidence base on effective suicide prevention programs.
- 9** Establish timeframes for pilot program implementation and evaluation that allow adequate time for any external ethics approvals required, which also enable appropriate engagement strategies and relationship building with potential participants.
- 10** Explore partnerships with the Department of Education and Queensland based state schools for longitudinal tracking of student social-emotional wellbeing after participation in school-based prevention/intervention programs.



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with Australians in
need, until they can
stand for themselves**

Contact us

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