



FACULTY OF  
EDUCATION



Psychologists for Peace



## **Enhancing Relationships in School Communities (ERIS)**

### **FINAL REPORT**

**Phase 1 (July 2004 - August 2006)**

This report provides a brief summary of Phase 1 of the ERIS Project. The ERIS project was a joint initiative of the University of Melbourne, La Trobe University and the Australian Psychological Society (Psychologists for Peace interest group), and was funded by the Scanlon Foundation. The management team consisted of four members representing the disciplines of education and psychology: Professor Eleanor Wertheim, Ms. Elizabeth Freeman, Ms. Margot Trinder and Professor Ann Sanson.

The project team acknowledges and thanks participating schools and staff for their committed participation over the two years of the Project, and the Department of Education and the Catholic Education Office Melbourne for permission to conduct the research in their systems.

### **Project Aim**

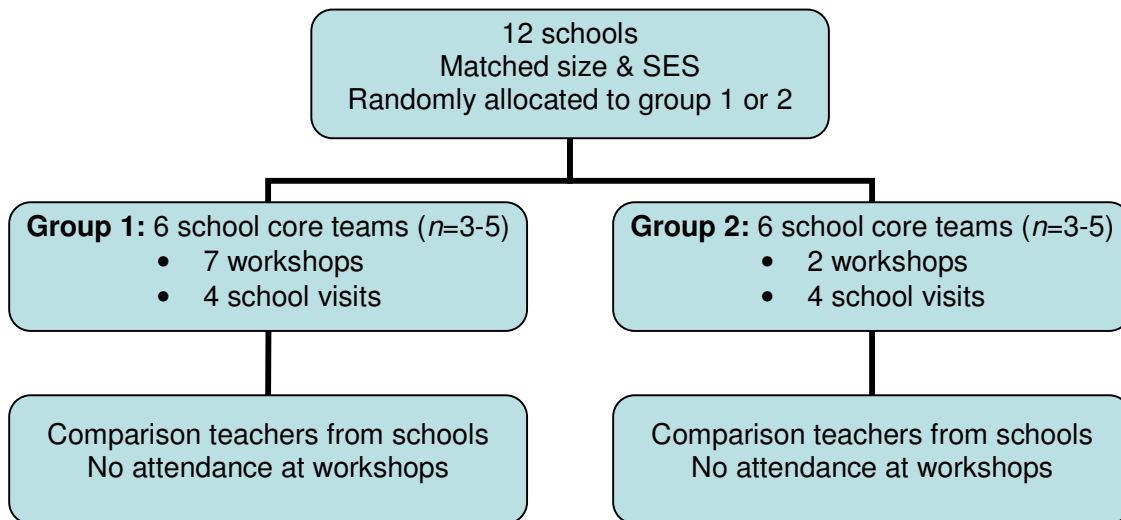
ERIS was designed to offer teachers, students and other members of school communities the opportunity to receive high-quality, long term professional development in the areas of conflict resolution and cultural diversity, and to enable them to build strong school communities where diversity is embraced and valued. ERIS aimed to work with primary schools to improve the processes for managing conflict and improving relationships among all members of the school community.

### **Rationale**

Conflict and differences between people are a part of life, and offer rich opportunities for developing awareness and understanding about others' values, needs, interests and cultures. However if handled badly, conflict can lead to negative consequences (i.e., damaged relationships, intolerance, racism, aggression, etc.) – and this is often exacerbated between various groups from different cultural backgrounds. The demonstrated benefits of conflict resolution skills training in schools are that intolerant, antisocial and violent behaviours are reduced, and the environment for learning is improved which leads to an increase in academic achievement and students' overall well-being. By beginning at an early age through an important social system (i.e., schools) ERIS aimed to encourage a more peaceful society which embraces differences between people and cultural groups and has the skills to integrate differing values, interests and needs in constructive ways.

## Who was involved?

Twelve Melbourne primary schools from the State ( $n = 7$ ) and Catholic ( $n = 5$ ) systems took part in the pilot project, each represented by a 3 to 5 person core team including teachers and principals/assistant principals. These schools were matched and randomly assigned to one of two groups: a full intervention group (attending 7 days of workshops over 18 months and receiving periodic in-school support by project staff) or a partial intervention group (attending 2 days of workshops with the same in-school support).



## Project Components

The project worked with core team staff from participating schools on conflict resolution and cultural diversity in a number of ways:

- Workshops/professional development program for core staff teams
- Consultant site visits to support school implementation (4 visits to each school)
- Curriculum resources in conflict resolution and cultural diversity
- Resources for core teams to deliver on-site professional development to their school staff

The project was designed to enhance implementation and maintenance and reduce potential barriers to change.

- the core teams, including school leaders, from each school:
  - undertook the program together
  - were given time to thoroughly learn the skills of conflict resolution and reflect on cultural diversity issues
- implementation of the project in each school was tailored to address the specific needs and issues of the individual school's students and community

## Evaluation

Core team and comparison teachers (staff from the project schools who were not part of the core teams) were compared to evaluate relevant teacher skills and attitudes; implementation of curricula; and use of skills in relating to children, staff and parents. The extent of professional development initiated by the Core teams with other staff in their schools was also investigated.

*Table 1. Teacher groups compared in the evaluation*

School Groups	Teacher Groups	Teacher Groups
Full intervention schools	1. Direct full intervention (7 days): Core teams	3. No direct intervention: Comparison teachers
Partial intervention schools	2. Direct partial intervention (2 days): Core teams	4. No direct intervention: Comparison teachers
<i>n=12 schools</i>	<i>n=33 staff</i>	<i>n=33 staff</i>

Findings:

**1: Both full and partial intervention formats of the ERIS program were successful in bringing about positive changes in teacher skills, activities and implementation of curriculum.**

We measured teachers' use of skills and their confidence in using skills before their school started in the program and 16 months later. The core team teachers improved in both use of skills and confidence in skills through their participation. At the end of Phase 1, we compared the core team to their colleagues who had not directly participated in the ERIS project (comparison teachers) and found the core team reported:

- more use of skills
- more confidence in skills
- more implementation of ERIS curriculum with students

**2. Full intervention schools made greater gains than the partial intervention schools in all areas of the project, including:**

- higher levels of skills development
- developing a more positive view of conflict and ways to address it
- placing a higher value on the teaching of cultural diversity programs to all students
- teaching more curriculum

**3. Core team participants were able to spread what they had learnt to their school community.** For example:

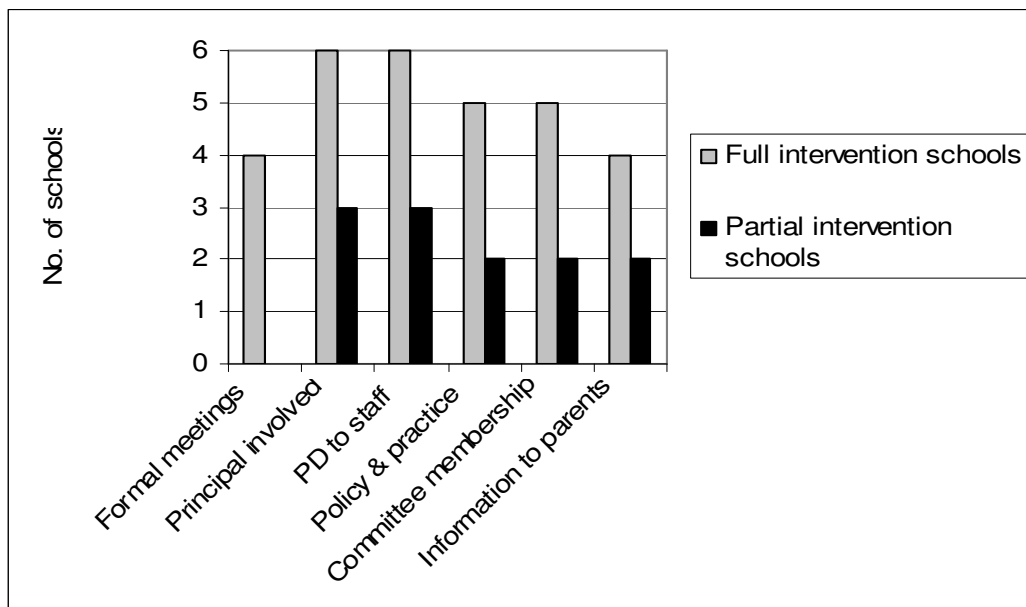
- by mid-project 65% of comparison teachers in the ERIS schools (who had learned from the core team in their school) reported using the ERIS skills at least 'sometimes' (compared to 97% of direct intervention participants)
- by the end of the project, some non-direct intervention teachers were teaching the ERIS curricula in their classrooms

**4. Full intervention core teams had a more extensive impact on their schools than did the core teams in the partial intervention who had only received 2 professional development days.** This was evident in:

- greater time spent on professional development for other staff
- higher percentage of staff using the skills and teaching curriculum to students
- placing a higher value on the teaching of cultural diversity programs to all students
- greater integration into school policy and practice
- greater degree of independent initiative by the team

**5. Full intervention core teams initiated more ERIS related activity in their schools than did the core teams in the partial intervention who had only received two professional development days.**

Figure 1 illustrates the patterns of reported ERIS-related activity in schools, indicating that more of the full intervention schools reported engaging in activities, including formal meetings with the professional learning (core) teams, principal involvement in the ERIS project, professional development for staff in the school, changes in policy and practice, committee membership relevant to ERIS activities, and information about the project being disseminated to parents.



*Figure 1: Information from School Visits Illustrating Patterns of Activity*

**6. Staff in full intervention schools taught more ERIS curriculum than those in the partial intervention schools**

As not all teachers in all schools were participating in questionnaire completion for the study, information from school visits by the ERIS consultant was also used to identify the percentage of classes in the school where the ERIS curriculum was being taught. The pattern of curriculum teaching observed in Figure 2 suggests noticeable differences between the full and partial intervention groups in each of the years of the project.

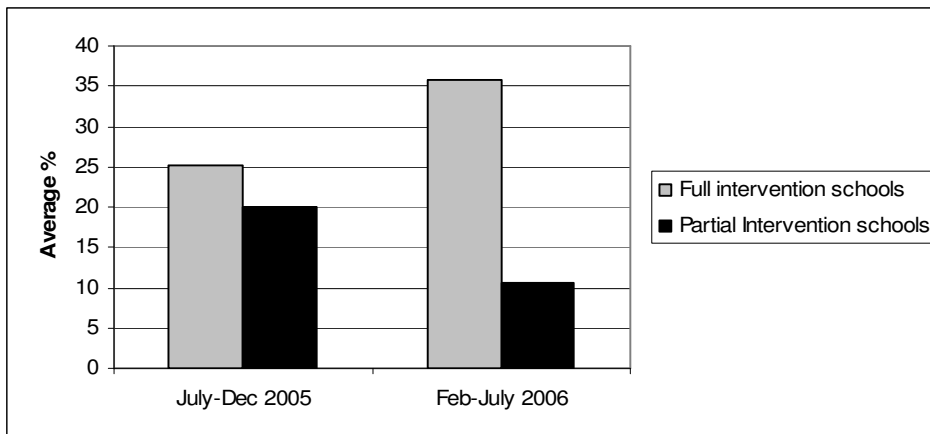


Figure 2: Percentage of classes in the school reporting teaching CR to students

## Conclusion

While both the full and partial program formats resulted in positive changes in schools, the full intervention appeared superior on a range of factors including teacher skill development and curriculum implementation. The study supported the position that to improve the ways in which conflict in school communities is managed, sustained professional development (7 days) for core teams results in better outcomes for both the individuals and schools, than does the more typical brief (2 day) intervention model.

Despite the lack of formal training in this area, teachers are required to manage a diverse range of conflicts (involving students, staff and parents). Schools are also mandated to teach students to manage conflict effectively (e.g., Victorian Essential Learning VCCA, 2004). The areas of conflict management or cultural diversity are less likely to be covered in pre and post service teacher education than traditional curriculum areas. In this project, consistent with reports from other studies, a lack of formal preparedness by school staff to manage these areas was evident in measured skills, attitudes and approaches to conflict prior to participation in the project. However this project has demonstrated that:

- 1. School staff respond positively to the challenge of learning more effective ways of resolving conflict, examining their own assumptions and actions in relation to cultural diversity, and enhancing relationships when the opportunity is provided to participate in sustained professional development.**
- 2. The development of a skilled core team within each school provides an effective mechanism to foster relationship-enhancing approaches and to embed these approaches in broader school structures, policies and processes.**
- 3. To promote positive relationships between all groups in school communities, not just to reduce existing conflict, requires investment in sustained, team-based professional development.**

## Challenges for schools

The project, consistent with previous research, highlighted the challenges that schools experience in implementing new initiatives. The pace of school change was influenced by a range of factors including staff changes over the life of a project and competing system initiatives that had to be given priority by the schools, e.g., the introduction of a new learning framework (Victorian Essential Learning Standards) and a new reporting and assessment system. Despite these challenges the ERIS project schools maintained their involvement in, and commitment to, the project over two years and many are continuing to implement new aspects of the project following completion of the formal program.

## The Future

The ERIS Project (Phase 1) has provided the foundation for further research on innovative approaches to assist primary teachers to create school cultures and curriculum through which children respect and value cultural diversity and address constructively interpersonal and inter-group differences. An Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (2007-09) has been received to undertake the project "*Creating Culturally Respectful Primary Schools: Enhancing Relationships through Strategic Professional Learning*" in partnership with the Scanlon Foundation, Catholic Education Office Melbourne, Australian Psychological Society, Haig Street Primary School, Heidelberg and St Anthony's Primary School, Alphington.

The ERIS team would also like to acknowledge and thank our Reference group and the organisations they represent.

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