

## Case Study: Thornbury Primary School Koorie cultural program



Wominjeka Wurrundjeri Balluck, yearnemm Koondee Biik

Welcome to the land of the Wurundjeri People

***Today we would like to acknowledge the custodians of this land, the Kulin nation and particularly the Wurundjeri Wilam people of this area. We would like to pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future, for they hold the customs, the culture and hopes for Australia. Beneath the asphalt, beneath the concrete, this is, was and always will be Aboriginal land.***

*Woiwurrung Welcome and school acknowledgement. The acknowledgment was developed by one of the teachers Campbell, inspired by the Koorie cultural approach at the school.*

### Background

Thornbury Primary School, nestled in Melbourne's northern suburbs on Wurundjeri land, is about to celebrate its 100 year anniversary. With 43 Koorie students, in a school population of 345,<sup>1</sup> the school has the highest number of Koorie students in the metropolitan area, and a long history of working with both Koorie students and Koorie educators; and incorporating Koorie culture within the school community and school curriculum. In more recent times, the school has also expanded to include a Steiner-method school, in effect providing two distinct but complementary education streams. For many families living in the area, and for many others beyond the zone – especially Koorie families - Thornbury Primary School is the school of choice because of its cultural and community emphasis, the rich Koorie cultural program it provides, and the reason for this case study.

The Australian Curriculum and through it the Victorian AusVELS curriculum,<sup>2</sup> highlights the need for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, and including Aboriginal or Koorie

<sup>1</sup> DEECD August 2014 Census

<sup>2</sup> See <http://ausvels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/CrossCurriculumPriorities/Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-histories-and-cultures>

perspectives. Many school policies additionally talk about being culturally inclusive and supportive. However what distinguishes Thornbury Primary School is the myriad ways it attempts to do this – environmentally, socially, spiritually/ethically and ultimately educationally.

Physically the school is adorned with Koorie images, symbology, messages, faces, artworks. Whether you enter the premises from the front or from the park-side at the back, you're greeted with *Wominjeka* - welcome in Woiwurrung - by the signed clay tile at the door created by mainstream art students or the super-sized colourful sign woven into the school fence by the Steiner students. You'll see the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags both on the flagpoles and in artworks along the corridors. Multi-coloured bark paintings created during NAIDOC day celebrations are framed as a collage and hang prominently in reception, also decorated with paintings, where families are greeted by Koorie reception staff. Life size drawings by previous grades show parts of the body labelled in Woiwurrung along the stairwell and key rooms – music, art, sick bay, staff room and more are named in Woiwurrung. On many days, students are drawn to assembly not by rock and roll or pop music (although this happens too) but by the haunting sounds of *East Journey* a NT band which performed at the school back in June, and one can walk into classes such as prep R and hear the roll called with the Woiwurrung greeting sung back and forth.. "Wominjeka Joey" - "Wominjeka Richard", "Wominjeka Ben" - "Wominjeka Richard" etc. These are the cultural expressions families, visitors and students see and feel.



Mural created from bark paintings made by students during NAIDOC Week 2014, hanging in reception office

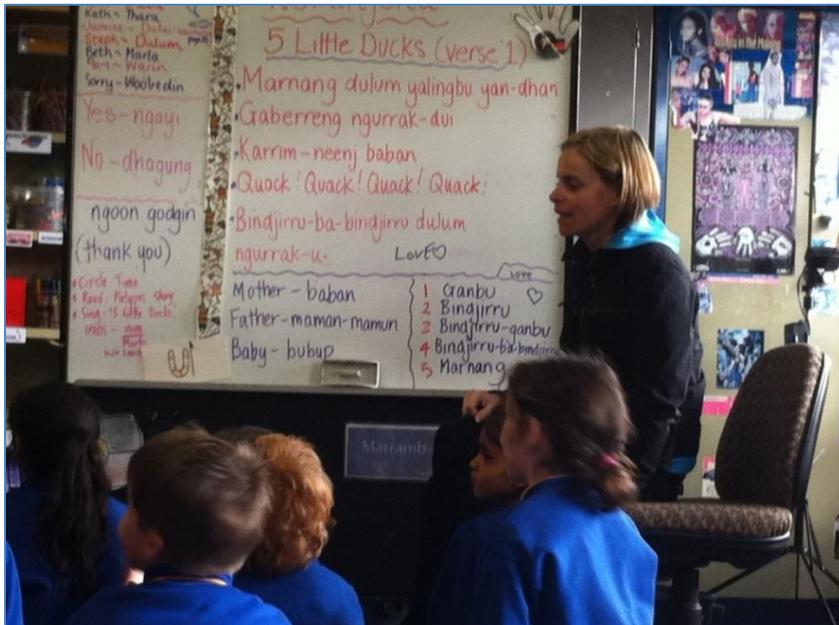
At the core of this physical expression however, is Thornbury Primary School's Indigenous Studies Program, and more recently the inspiring Woiwurrung Language and Culture Program. And at the heart of this core is the Koorie Educator, fulfilling the multi-functional role of education support, student and community engagement, and Koorie cultural educator to students, teachers and other education staff alike.

## Indigenous Studies at Thornbury Primary School

Taught by the Koorie Educator for many years, Indigenous Studies at Thornbury Primary School has been a discrete and separate subject. Until the introduction of the Woiwurrung Language and Culture Program in 2012 as a formal LOTE program, all students from P-6 participated in Indigenous Studies classes once a week. Historically, students in Years P-2 learnt about Wurundjeri land, people, culture and language – focusing at the local level first; Years 3 and 4 expanded their learning to include state-wide Koorie language-culture groups and perspectives; while Years 5 and 6 further broadened their knowledge by focussing nationally and including Torres Strait Islander cultures. When the Woiwurrung Language Program was first introduced, older students lobbied for the right to also participate in the Language and Culture classes and therefore those students not in the target classes learnt Woiwurrung through their Indigenous Studies lessons on a fortnightly basis.

Over the last three years the target group for the Woiwurrung trial has increased annually. This has in effect caused a reduction in the number of year levels being offered Indigenous Studies as a specialist discrete program. From 2015, due to the growth of the Woiwurrung Language and Culture Program across the entire school, and other factors, Indigenous Studies will no longer be offered as a separate subject at Thornbury Primary School. While the growth of the Language Program is extremely positive, the subsequent loss of Indigenous Studies as a specialist subject, focused on Koorie and broader Aboriginal histories and cultures, taught by Koorie Educators with focused and scaffolded learning from Koorie perspectives, incorporating Indigenous pedagogies is lamentable. The teaching of Koorie perspectives (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures) in accordance with AusVELS will supplement this to some degree, however approaches, methods and knowledge bases vary and are not comparable to a Koorie person teaching Koorie matters. As teachers become increasingly equipped to incorporate Koorie ways, through for example working with their Koorie colleagues, specialised professional development and further study; and working with local Koorie community members to bring knowledge, shared learnings and Koorie ways into the classroom.

## Woiwurrung Language and Culture Program



Mandy Nicholson, Wurundjeri artist and Woiwurrung Language specialist takes students through a Woiwurrung song at Thornbury PS

Thornbury Primary School students, initially P-2, now extended to P-4 and from 2015 P-6, have been learning Woiwurrung, the language of the Wurundjeri People on a weekly basis for the last 3 years, as part of a state-wide trial<sup>3</sup> with lessons extended to higher classes through the fortnightly Indigenous Studies program at the school. Additionally since term 4 of 2013, kindergarten students from the nearby Yappera Children and Family Centre (MACS) have been participating in regular language classes at the school, to aid with school transitions and introduce lessons to younger learners. This is particularly advantageous for those enrolling in prep at Thornbury PS the following year.

*I think it's so deadly because it helps with reviving culture and strengthening the identity of our Koorie students!*

– Daria Atkinson Melbourne Metro LAECG<sup>4</sup> Chair

In accordance with established Koorie education protocols and AusVELS Aboriginal Languages standards, permissions to teach Woiwurrung Language and Culture at Thornbury Primary School were sought and granted, prior to commencement of the Program. Permission needed to be granted by School Council, the Koorie community through the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (LAECG) and Traditional Owners of the land the school is situated on, in this case the Wurundjeri Tribe Land and Compensation Cultural Heritage Council. This process was facilitated by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc.

The Language Program strongly complements the school's culturally inclusive curriculum and established Indigenous Studies Program. Feedback from students, parents and teachers alike has been extremely positive, and it is not unusual to be welcomed at the school with 'Wominjeka' (welcome).

Language lessons are conducted by Koorie Educator and from 2015 Graduate Teacher, Phil Cooper, with the expert support of the school's Woiwurrung Language team – a group made up of Uncle Phil himself as the Language teacher, Wurundjeri Council member and Woiwurrung language specialist Mandy Nicholson, Leeann Sartorel the school's LOTE teacher and Vaso Elefsiniotis, experienced Community linguist and Research and Policy Officer at VAEAI. Lessons, which have a very strong cultural component, open with a yarnning circle and a talking stick (*djumbak*) teaching respectful ways of talking and listening, and focus on traditional lands and cultural practices of the Wurundjeri People, Woiwurrung language, creation stories, fun language games, greetings, introductions and goodbyes, family and Country, parts of the body and animals. Lesson plans are continually revised and improved, building on language knowledge. Colourful artworks by students, embellished with Woiwurrung language hang in classrooms and along the corridors, and songs are composed to assist with learning and remembering.

In 2014, students learn about traditional Woiwurrung ecological systems, the importance of the environment involving smoking ceremonies and paperbark canoe-making, Wurundjeri Creation stories such as 'Why Bats are Black', and the strong survival and life lessons passed on through generations of oral history; as well as about birds and animals, counting creatively and by composing songs. Students used their creative talents to recreate stories through storytelling, picture books, short movies, plays and more.

According to Phil Cooper, Woiwurrung Language and Indigenous Studies teacher, "Thornbury PS's Language and Culture program has greatly enhanced the learning capacity of students who can be found lacking in other educational areas. These students develop confidence in their learning abilities and this carries over into their classroom learning. I have also found that students, who may find it difficult to attend other specialist classes, attend their language and culture classes. This has enhanced their attendance at school over all. I know parents have used the "You have Uncle Phil's (L&C) class today!" to

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<sup>3</sup> For more information about the Koorie Languages in Victorian Schools trial see:

<http://www.vaeai.org.au/support/dsp-default.cfm?loadref=143>

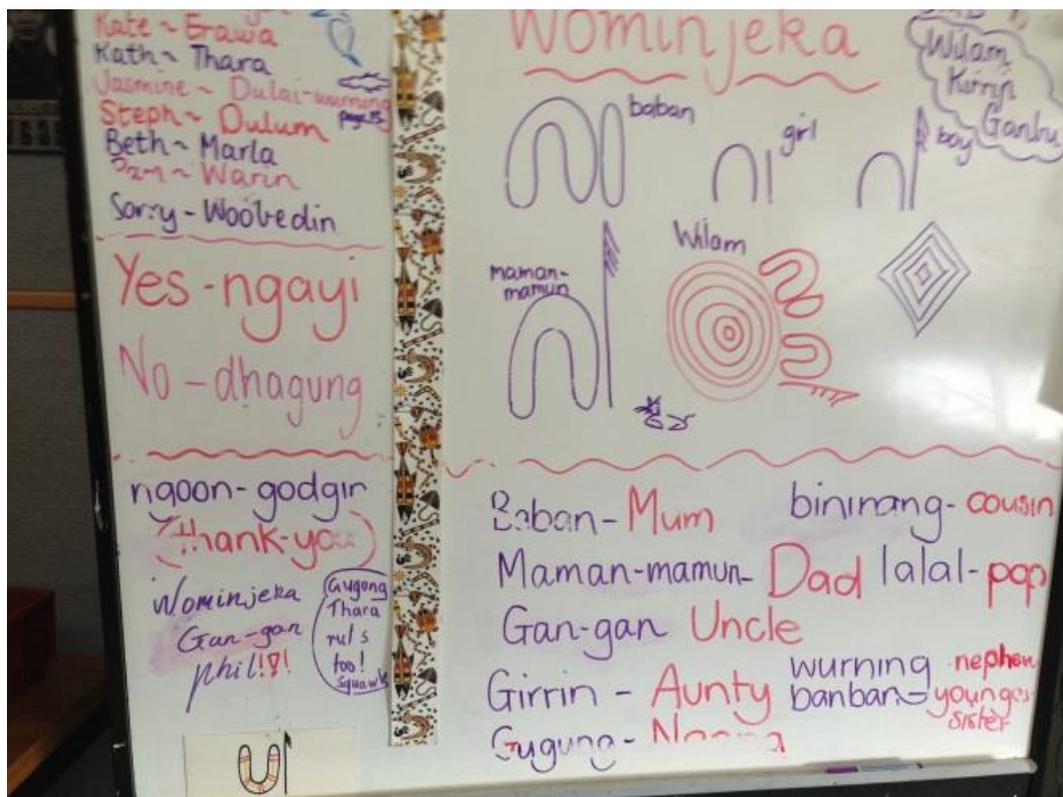
<sup>4</sup> Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group; see: <http://vaeai.org.au/who-we-are/dsp-default.cfm?loadref=14>

inspire and motivate their child/children to attend school. Parents being aware of when their child's class is on can also enhance that family's holistic approach to a student's educational development, and also a family's engagement with the school.

For Indigenous families who are aware that not only their own children are learning Koorie culture and language but other students are also, and other schools are also sharing culture, a great sense of pride, and a great sense of acceptance is felt. I believe parents feel that not only is our/their school doing it but others are too, which brings a sense of pride and greater self-worth. This can only be good for relationships between Koories and non-Koories."

A Koorie parent at Thornbury PS says she couldn't be happier with the Woiwurrung Language Program and overall strong Koorie cultural focus at the school, "When my son says hello to me in the morning and asks me how I am in Woiwurrung, 'Wominjeka mummy, biladu njan warr?' and dhagung or ngayi for no or yes when I say 'Answer me yes or no!' to something, tells me about tarnuks and the many uses of coolamons, and brings me a paperbark gurrong, a canoe he made after watching a film about traditional canoe making in class, I'm stoked! The other day he said to me 'You gotta listen to Bunjil's call Mum, he teaches you', and asked me about his cultural animal, his totem. Wow! He's only in prep, his first year and he loves being a Koorie kid at Thornbury Primary school!"

The Woiwurrung Language Program is also attracting a lot of attention and publicity, with students increasingly involved in public language performances and events, such as at the opening of the Puliima National Indigenous Languages Conference in August 2013; to a visiting Chinese delegation at the Royal Melbourne Zoo; a ministerial visit last year; a team of visiting Brazilian linguists first term, and most recently with an NITV crew filming a language class in May (broadcast December 2014) and performance of the Woiwurrung children's choir at the Winter Solstice festivities in the City of Melbourne.



## ***Reflections by a parent about the Woiwurrung Language & Culture Program at Thornbury Primary School<sup>5</sup>***

“Having worked as a classroom teacher and now in education research, it took me a little longer to choose a school for our son. It had to be close enough to ride to and offer languages and the Arts but most importantly we were looking for a school that had a commitment to teaching about our local place and the Aboriginal culture. Then we found Thornbury – a school that seemed to offer all of this as well as a specialist Woiwurrung Language & Culture program led by Yorta Yorta / Wurundjeri teacher Uncle Phil Cooper.

There is a terrific energy that permeates from the school, that seems to centre on the Koorie Community. Uncle Phil radiates a welcome and celebratory vibe to all members of the community and demonstrably builds self-esteem amongst the Koorie kids in particular, but also a mutually respectful relationship with all students and teachers and families.

The extremely effective approach to teaching the one-hour per week specialist Language & Culture program is taught in a team-teaching capacity with the class teacher from each class. This takes the learning back into the classroom to a much more intimate level than could otherwise be achieved, which results in teachers greeting their classes everyday with ‘Wominjeka’ and even dotting certain Woiwurrung phrases all through the classes each day. In a sense it provides teachers with ongoing professional development in the local language and protocols, as well as art and storytelling processes.

However, there is also a huge potential for the program to develop much more, and blossom into a truly whole-school-integrated approach, that includes all learning through the day centred around traditional ecological knowledge, cosmology and place-knowing; which would entail much more commitment to learning outside, learning by doing and a stronger precedent set by all members of the school, particularly the school leadership, to a more celebratory, communitarian commitment to these ways of knowing and learning.

I believe this program has so far made learning at school much more enjoyable for Koorie students and all students, but I think we can deepen and broaden it much further, to permeate all areas of the school, learning and teaching, the curriculum and engage more with how students, particularly indigenous students, learn in an authentic way – through integrated learning; making connections; in Country; with community; through the arts and outside in more gentle, fun and wholesome ways.

As far as I am aware this program is entirely unique in Melbourne and is an invaluable asset to the school – indeed, as a family, we would likely not be at the school if the Woiwurrung Program was not offered. I would like to see many more Koorie families come to the school and continue to build the heart of the school with a stronger, ongoing and intentional celebration of Indigenous Australians, Country and our place together far into the future. This school could grow into its potential to be a super amazing school that paves the way for schools all around Victoria, Australia and even around the world.

**Having Uncle Phil at the school as well as the many Koorie families, reminds us all that Aboriginal Australia is not a thing of the past and is not “out there” in the desert – it is also here and now, in this place with our friends, living and learning together in mutual respect and celebration.”** Alicia Flynn

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<sup>5</sup> Alicia Flynn pc 151214

Some feedback from students, teachers and parents about the Thornbury Primary School Woiwurrung Language Program:

- Students love the language program – lessons are fun, interesting, creative etc
- Class teachers are very supportive and try and use or incorporate language in their regular class – eg greetings and simple instructions
- NAIDOC Day huge whole school celebration with emphasis on local language and culture
- Language is taken home, spoken & shared.
- Students will correct teachers when English is spoken
- Culturally people feel empowered. Very positive feedback from students and parents/carers – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous
- Very positive feedback from the Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship and DEECD Dep. Secretary during class visits
- Positive feedback from Wurundjeri Community members (re Thornbury) involved in or hearing about the language program and other Koorie community members
- Positive feedback from the Director and staff of Yappera Children and Family Centre since the introduction of the program to the kindergarten cohort.
- Glowing reviews about the public performance at the opening of the Puliima Indigenous Languages Conference and positive media attention (local newspapers and ABC news)
- Surprise at the use of ICT and ipads in the Woiwurrung Language expressed during a parental class visit– expected a more traditional story telling model
- That parents are enrolling the children in our school specifically because of the language program, the Indigenous studies program and very involved Koorie Educator – increase in enrolments.



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