



# Executive Summary: Evaluation of the Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR) program pilot

The Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR) project is a major research study focused on understanding and addressing experiences and attitudes to racism and racial discrimination, and bystander responses to racism and racial discrimination in Australian schools.

SOAR consists of two components:

- **SOAR survey** – a population-representative survey ( $n = 4664$ ) on the experiences, attitudes and intended behaviours of year 5–9 students in New South Wales (NSW) and Victorian government schools, and their teachers, in relation to racial discrimination, prosocial behaviour, bystander responses, health and wellbeing, and school connectedness.
- **SOAR program** – piloting and evaluation of a school-based bystander intervention program in six primary schools across NSW and Victoria to encourage students and teachers to act when they witness racism and racial discrimination.

This report presents findings of SOAR's second component.

SOAR was funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant. It is led by the Australian National University, together with Western Sydney University, the University of Melbourne, the University of Technology Sydney and Deakin University, in partnership with the NSW Department of Education, the Victorian Department of Education and Training, and the Australian Human Rights Commission.

SOAR is a multilevel program comprising six components:

- **Teacher training and professional development.** Two days of face-to-face training for classroom teachers, followed by teacher coaching sessions via email and online.

- **Curriculum and classroom materials.** An 8-week unit of work for years 5 and 6.
- **Student support and development.** After the unit of work was completed, student leaders and influencers were selected from participating classes to form Team SOAR. Team SOAR was a student-led group that planned how to promote SOAR principles to their peers, parents and the wider community.
- **Parent and community involvement.** Team SOAR developed activities to engage their parents and the wider community in SOAR.
- **School audit tool.** Schools were provided with an audit tool to facilitate leadership review of policies and practices regarding racism and racial discrimination, and to develop a school-wide action plan.
- **Monitoring and reporting of racial discrimination.** Schools were given the opportunity to access school-level data from the SOAR survey.

The SOAR program was piloted across six primary schools in New South Wales and Victoria to assess feasibility and acceptability. Four schools received the program, and two schools were comparison schools. Comparison schools provided a way of considering whether the changes were occurring within schools anyway or could be attributed to the program. Student surveys were collected in each of the six schools before (February) and after (August) the program. Focus groups and interviews were held in program schools in August.

**This summary is based on the main report Evaluation of the Speak Out Against Racism (SOAR) program pilot by N Priest, O Alam, K Dunn, J Nelson, R Sharples, D Cronin, M Truong, K Francis, Y Paradies, P Curry and A Kavanagh.**

## Key findings

- Staff and students reported the **SOAR program was engaging, effective, structured well and supported**, and were **enthusiastic about it being expanded to other schools**.
- Staff and students felt the **SOAR program raised teacher confidence to discuss and address racism, student peer prosocial norms and school climate, students' racial literacy, awareness of racism, and knowledge and confidence to intervene proactively to address racism at school, as well as reduced racial discrimination at school**.
- Student survey data showed **statistical evidence of change over time in student prosocial skills and student perceptions of the teacher inter-ethnic climate** for schools receiving the SOAR program compared with schools that did not receive it.
- Survey findings also provided no statistical evidence of harm in terms of increased racial discrimination or total mental health difficulties, which can be unintended consequences of anti-racism programs with children.

## Qualitative data highlights

Findings indicated that SOAR provided schools with an opportunity to proactively engage with the topic of racism, created space for discussion, and equipped teachers with skills and resources to address a topic that was potentially intimidating:

*The lessons probably went beyond our expectations once we got going with them, because we really weren't sure how the kids were going to respond or we weren't really sure whether the kids would have enough knowledge to understand a lot of the concepts (NSW School B, Interview 2, school leadership staff).*

*I didn't think they'd take to it like this, I thought they'd be very quiet on the matter ... would just go through the motions of it, but they seemed to have a lot of opinions about it and thoughts (Victorian School A, Interview 1, teacher).*

Students and staff indicated that SOAR increased their confidence to speak out against racism, with some students stating it increased their confidence and self-esteem generally:

*It's building up professional practice in teachers where they can talk about an issue that's important. It's helping empower children, with the teams and the ideas they have so you're looking at making a safe space to talk about racism. You're upskilling teachers to deal with racism as an issue and then you're empowering children to be drivers of the cause, so I don't think there's a teacher out there that wouldn't think those are good things to have (Victorian School A, Interview 3, school leadership staff).*

Students described that SOAR equipped them with concrete skills to do something about racism. They appreciated that SOAR gave them safe ways to respond to racism:

*Just gave us more like solutions, just like kind of small situations that we could kind of – just in our own way we could kind of just like stop it ... it just showed us way we could deal with it in our lives, not just the whole big thing of racism sucks and we need to get rid of it (Victorian School B, Focus Group 3, student).*

*Student: Everybody is nicer to everyone. They're treating them equally but before the SOAR program people are just pushing each other and fighting but then after the SOAR program they just learned that everyone has their own rights and that ...*

*Student: Everyone is an equal (NSW School B, Focus Group 2, student).*

*Doing playground duties, you can definitely see the different interactions of kids in terms of issues happening, a lot of them seem to be a bit more involved positively to try and fix it, which was cool to see (NSW School A, Interview 1, teacher).*

*Student: I've learned that it's not okay to be bullied just because you eat a different food to someone else or you have a different colour of skin or what you wear to someone else, we should all be treated the same because we're all humans.*

*Student: I definitely think it's very important because, as she said, we are all humans and*

*we all have a right to be ourselves and to be okay with that and nobody should be able to take it away. It's a really great and comforting program for those that have a different ethnicity or race to know that they're being supported by people. (NSW School A, Focus Group 3, student).*

Student-led activities via Team SOAR were positively evaluated by staff and students, although some expressed a need for more support to guide students through this process. Further enhancing Team SOAR may be one way of maximising the sustainability of SOAR:

*The ideas have just flown about how to get the word out and about how to develop the team so my – the kids have just been – inundated with ideas, it's been amazing. They brought out the 'SOAR patrol' logos and that sort of stuff and say why they are against racism, how they would get the message out through the school and how about going through the community, like community radio (Victorian School A, Interview 2, teacher).*

*It was so good because when we came back out people were saying good job and clapping and when they put it on Facebook everyone all around the community saw it and they were moved by it and our teacher said that she knew we had done a good job because of that (NSW School B, Focus Group 2, student).*

Limitations for implementing SOAR included a lack of time and a full curriculum, as well as maintaining sustainability of program impacts and outcomes over the long term.

The qualitative data provided some evidence that SOAR reached parents and the broader community, primarily through Team SOAR activities but also through students discussing the classroom activities with their parents. Further exploration of ways SOAR can connect further with parents and the wider community may be an important area for development.

## Quantitative findings

Quantitative data showed statistical evidence of change over time in student prosocial skills and student perceptions of the teacher inter-ethnic

climate for the intervention group compared with the comparison group. These findings are consistent with the qualitative findings, which also suggest that SOAR had impacts on a number of areas not captured by the student survey – for example, racial and racism literacy, acceptance of difference, empathy, family conversations about racism and anti-racism, general confidence, and commitment to anti-racism action.

Key factors that may explain the lack of quantitative change on some measures include a) already positive levels of some outcome measures in schools with little further change possible, b) high levels of missing data on some of the bystander measures, c) a need for more sensitive and specific measures to capture changes described in the qualitative findings, and d) insufficient sample size to allow examination of effects across different types of schools and student demographics. Findings from the SOAR Student Survey (Priest et al. 2019), and repeated collection of this survey could be used to identify schools for the SOAR program.

It is also important to note that quantitative findings showed no evidence the program increased racial discrimination or mental health difficulties, which are identified unintended consequences of some anti-racism programs among children (Bigler & Wright 2014).

## Recommendations

- Further development of the SOAR program incorporating findings from this pilot study is needed. Implementation and testing of the program effectiveness at scale via a larger trial are then recommended. This is the next step in building rigorous evidence of effectiveness for complex multi-component programs such as this one.
- Evaluation findings should be interpreted as related to implementation of all five elements of the SOAR program together, as occurred in this pilot. They should not be interpreted in reference to individual program elements in isolation. Future implementation studies could help determine which program elements are most effective.
- Future effectiveness studies should incorporate measurement tools that capture some more proximal measures of change and domains highlighted by the qualitative findings, and include schools across a wide range of sociodemographics.
- Enhancing uptake of the school audit tool and maximising parent and community connections with the SOAR program are also areas for development in future implementation initiatives.
- Exploring ways the SOAR program can be embedded in, and complementary to, existing curriculum and school programs related to social emotional learning, mental health and resilience is also an ongoing priority.