

11 August 2023

RE: Reconciliation Australia's submission on the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation Paper.

Dear Expert Panel,

Reconciliation Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation Paper. We acknowledge the Department of Education's work to seek to realise our shared goals for reconciliation within and across the Australian education system.

In appreciating the distinction yet interrelationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and reconciliation-in-education, Reconciliation Australia sees:

A **fairer** education system as one which actively honours the rights and self-determination of First Nations students, families, and communities towards improved school-based experiences and,

A **better** education system as one which is culturally responsive and actively recognises the business and benefits of reconciliation for all members of educational communities.

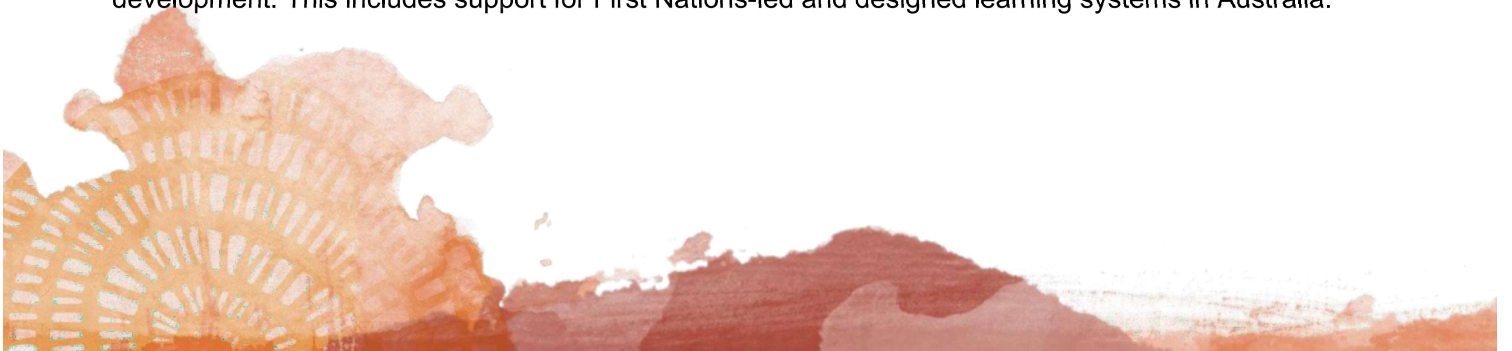
In response to this Review, and in alignment with our earlier [submission](#) to the Productivity Commission's Review of the National School Reform Agreement-Interim Report - Reconciliation Australia recommends:

Recommendation 1: An embedded focus on reconciliation at the individual teacher, whole-school institution, and education sector/system levels alike.

Recommendation 2: Increased support for anti-racism programs and pedagogy across all levels of education to support both the wellbeing and academic outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Recommendation 3: Government and Education sectors must advocate for the development and implementation of Reconciliation Action Plans and activities, including resource commitments to support schools and early learning services to administer and advance these activities. Support for the growth and sustainability of the Narragunnawali program is simultaneously recommended. Ideally, a partnership should be forged between the Department of Education and Reconciliation Australia to demonstrate and sustainably deliver on a shared commitment to reconciliation in education.

Recommendation 4: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander right to self-determination is respected, and First Nations people and perspectives are included in all areas of education policy and program development. This includes support for First Nations-led and designed learning systems in Australia.



Recommendation 5: Ongoing support for initiatives that ensure education systems and institutions have processes and policies in place – as well as clear success and accountability measures – to educate the next generation in ways that are consistent with, and promote the principles outlined in the UNDRIP.

Embedding key principles of the UNDRIP within the education system will enhance the unique rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The ongoing failure to close the gap in areas of disadvantage between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians, underscores a clear need to lift our national effort in protecting the rights, and supporting the self-determination of First Peoples as outlined in the UNDRIP.

In alignment with the Mparntwe Declaration's call for *"All young Australians [to] become... successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community [who] possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians"*, we envisage a better and fairer education system leading to a more just, equitable and reconciled Australia.

About Reconciliation Australia

Reconciliation Australia is the national organisation promoting reconciliation between the broader Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We believe a reconciled Australia is one where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participate equally and equitably in all areas of life, and the distinctive individual and collective rights and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are universally recognised and respected. That is, we have closed the gaps in life outcomes, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are self-determining. To do so, we are dedicated to building relationships, respect and trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians.

As the reconciliation movement progresses our research shows that the skills and knowledge gained on the journey thus far must now motivate us to 'braver' action. That is, "we need to move more of our effort from focusing on the preconditions for reconciliation, to focusing on more substantive change."¹

In the education context, while a good portion of Australian schools and early learning services have achieved many of the 'safer' actions relating to reconciliation, the time has come to engage the broader Australian community in educational initiatives and deepen engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in which educational institutions are located.²

Such a focus is central to the continued work of Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education program and aligns to the Commission's request for "views regarding whether the current education and research evidence base sufficiently incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and community perspectives and Aboriginal knowledge".

Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali Program

Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education provides tools and resources to support schools and early learning services to contribute to the reconciliation movement. *Narragunnawali* (pronounced narra-gunna-wally) is a word from the language of the Ngunnawal people that means alive, wellbeing, coming together and peace. The word *narragunnawali* is used as the program title with the permission of the United Ngunnawal Elders Council.

¹ Reconciliation Australia, "2021 State of Reconciliation in Australia Report", Pg. 4, accessed at https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/State-of-Reconciliation-2021-Full-Report_web.pdf

² Biddle, N (2021) "Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education - Paper #15 - The State of Reconciliation in Education, from safe to brave", ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, pg.16. accessed at https://cssn.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/7/Narragunnawali_evaluation_and_monitoring_-_Paper_15_-_The_State_of_Reconciliation_in_Education_-_For_web.pdf

Our Narragunnawali program supports schools and early learning services to champion reconciliation and develop environments that foster a high level of knowledge and pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and contributions. Via a free-to-access online platform, the program provides professional learning and curriculum resources to Australian educators and a tailored Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) development process for schools and early learning services across the country that is aligned to national frameworks and professional standards in education.

The Narragunnawali program's vision is for self-determination to be at the centre of education systems, which actively engage the hearts and minds of future generations to contribute to the reconciliation movement.

The vision is underpinned by four strategic goals, which articulate the impact the program seeks to have on reconciliation in education:

1. Teachers, educators, and school leaders champion reconciliation
2. Schools and early learning services are holistically and actively committed to reconciliation.
3. Education institutions actively collaborate with local communities and broader reconciliation networks.
4. Education sector has optimal measures, resources, and policy commitments to drive effective reconciliation practice.

The program has gained momentum across the education sector and is now more supported than ever before. Over 40% of all schools and early learning services in Australia have registered to develop a RAP on the Narragunnawali online platform, which also has a user base of over 150,000 individual school leaders, educators, students, parents, carers, and community members.

The following sections respond to questions posed by the consultation paper with a focus, on ways to foster optimal learning environments and experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and, through a focus on reconciliation, for all members of educational communities.

A Better Education System

A **better** education system is one which is culturally responsive and actively recognises the business and benefits of reconciliation for all members of educational communities.

Q2. What are the evidence-based practices that teachers, schools, systems and sectors can put in place to improve student outcomes, particularly for those most at risk of falling behind? Are different approaches required for different at-risk cohorts

Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have been disadvantaged and marginalised within Australian education institutions that are designed around the values, practices, and worldviews of the dominant Western culture³ ⁴

Culturally responsive teaching can assist to rectify this issue and is increasingly recognised as key to improving outcomes and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students⁵. However, action is required across the individual teacher, whole school, and system/sector levels to effectively embed cultural responsiveness in and through Australian education. Cultural responsiveness should simultaneously operate at the individual, inter-personal and institutional levels alike but, in considering the role of individual teachers, can be well conceptualised and enacted through a focal lens of relational practice, encompassing:

- Teachers' relationships with themselves and their own positionality, and the imperative for critical self-reflexivity.
- Teachers' relationships with their students, families, school/local communities, and the imperative for strengths-based, high expectations relationships.
- Teachers' relationships with, and position within, the education (and wider) systems, and the imperative for stronger systems literacy.
- Teachers' relationships with First Nations knowledges, and the imperative to support teachers to draw relationships between knowledge systems.
- Relationships with place/context, with the imperative to support teachers to understand that everything happens within a context, whether a cultural context more specifically, or indeed wider (e.g., historical, geographical, social, political) contexts.

While there is a range of approaches and practices that can be engaged to promote cultural responsiveness in learning environments, it has been highlighted that to be truly effective a collaborative approach between the learning institution and the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community is required. This involves respectful relationship building with the local community to foster

³ Krakouer, J (2015) Literature review relating to the current context and discourse on Indigenous cultural awareness in the teaching space: Critical pedagogies and improving Indigenous learning outcomes through cultural responsiveness'. Australian Council for Educational Research, accessed on https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=indigenous_education

⁴ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2022), 'Building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce', pg.1 , accessed at https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/comms/cultural-competency/aitsl_indigenous-cultural-competency_final-report.pdf

⁵ Krakouer, J (2015) Literature review relating to the current context and discourse on Indigenous cultural awareness in the teaching space: Critical pedagogies and improving Indigenous learning outcomes through cultural responsiveness'. Australian Council for Educational Research, accessed on https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=indigenous_education

authentic understanding of the unique history, culture, and worldview of each First Nations student, to then be reflected and incorporated in teaching and learning experiences^{6 7}.

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's *Building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce* report notes that this community relationship building process is a specific area where education institutions are likely to need additional support⁸. Evidence-based strategies to support such activity include Reconciliation Action Plans, which have been demonstrated to "provide a whole-school approach to building strong community relationships and an increased awareness and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, histories and cultures".⁹.

Engagement with the Narragunnawali program and RAP development process has also been found to encourage the forging of new relationships between schools and services, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities"¹⁰ all the while increasing teachers' and educators' confidence in addressing reconciliation and driving meaningful change within their school/service communities more generally¹¹.

Culturally responsive teaching practices should also align with the Stronger Smarter approach which proposes that schools need to develop High Expectations Relationships and cultures within their school environments as a key way to improving Indigenous education experiences in Australia. The Stronger Smarter Institute has developed an evidence based High Expectations Relationships framework that challenges teachers and school leaders to move beyond deficit thinking and teaching practices by understanding their personal assumptions, creating spaces for dialogue, and engaging in challenging conversations¹²

"High-Expectations Relationships understand historical backgrounds but then move beyond cultural assumptions to understand the context of the individual student or family. Cultural

6 AITSL (2022), 'Building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce', pg.1 , accessed at https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/comms/cultural-competency/aitsl_indigenous-cultural-competency_final-report.pdf

7 Krakouer, J (2015) Literature review relating to the current context and discourse on Indigenous cultural awareness in the teaching space: Critical pedagogies and improving Indigenous learning outcomes through cultural responsiveness'. Australian Council for Educational Research, accessed on https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=indigenous_education

8 AITSL (2022), 'Building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce', pg.1, accessed at https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/comms/cultural-competency/aitsl_indigenous-cultural-competency_final-report.pdf

9 Ibid pg.16.

10 Biddle N, Ellen L, Mortreux C & Waite C (2019), Narragunnawali*: Reconciliation in Education. Research Report #11 Hearing from schools and early learning services' ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, Accessed at https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/5/Narragunnawali_Research_Report_11_-_Hearing_from_Schools_and_Early_Learning_Services_-_August_2019.pdf.

11 Ibid

12 Stronger Smarter Institute Limited (2014). High-Expectations Relationships: a foundation for quality learning environments in all Australian schools. Stronger Smarter Institute Limited Position Paper. Accessed at [SSI_position-Paper_High-Expectations-Relationships- 2018.pdf](https://strongersmarter.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SSI_position-Paper_High-Expectations-Relationships-2018.pdf) (strongersmarter.com.au) https://strongersmarter.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SSI_position-Paper_High-Expectations-Relationships-2018.pdf

*differences are celebrated, and strength-based conversations and a relational view of culture provide a basis for group members to work together to co-create solutions."*¹³

Respectfully embedding First Nations histories and cultures, and a focus on reconciliation

While it has been made clear that, "teachers must do more than simply know and deliver Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural content," ¹⁴ the continued and strengthened embedment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and perspectives, across all school levels and curriculum areas, is key to advancing reconciliation in education.

Findings from our latest (2022) Australian Reconciliation Barometer (ARB) shows there is widespread support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures to be taught in schools, with 81 % of the general community believing it is important to teach First Nations histories and cultures as a compulsory part of school curriculums. ¹⁵

This suggests that public will, and intention, stands behind teachers, educators and school leaders across the country who are prioritising reconciliation and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in their work, classrooms, and communities.

Findings from the 2022 ARB nonetheless show that, while a very high proportion of Australians also believe it is important to know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories (84%) and cultures (85%), only a minority of Australians know what they can do to help improve reconciliation (30%)¹⁶.

These sentiments have been consistent over the past three Australian Reconciliation Barometers ¹⁷ ¹⁸ with implications for the responsibilities of the education system. That is, Biddle and Priest (2019) have suggested that these key ARB findings:

¹³ *ibid* pg.19

¹⁴ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2022), 'Building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce', pg.1 , accessed at https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/comms/cultural-competency/aitsl_indigenous-cultural-competency_final-report.pdf

¹⁵ Reconciliation Australia, 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer., accessed at 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer - Reconciliation Australia

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ Reconciliation Australia, 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer, accessed at <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/publication/2022-australian-reconciliation-barometer/>

¹⁸ Reconciliation Australia 2020 Australian Reconciliation Barometer, accessed at https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Australian_Reconciliation_Barometer_2020_Full-Report_web.pdf

¹⁹ Reconciliation Australia 2018 Australian Reconciliation Barometer, https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/final_full_arb-full-report-2018-1.pdf

"demonstrate a very important role for the education system in encouraging teachers and educators to critically engage in their own ongoing learning, 'un-learning' and 're-learning' with regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, while giving young Australians the skills and insight to make an informed and direct contribution to the reconciliation process" ²⁰

A Fairer Education System

A **fairer** education system is one which actively honours the rights and self-determination of First Nations students, families, and communities towards improved school-based experiences.

More must be done to achieve equality and equity in educational opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Our 2022 ARB results show 74% of First Nations respondents and 61 % of the general community believe more must be done by government departments to close the gap in education outcomes for First Nations Australians. While 69% of First Nations respondents and 57% of the general community believe education institutions need to do more to close the gaps in education.²¹

Most recent Closing the Gap data (June 2023) indicates that *Target 5*, which aims to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20-24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96 per cent by 2031, is not on track to be met by 2031.²²

And a key childhood development outcome is worsening; *Target 4*, which aims to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census to 55 per cent by 2031.²³

However, we emphasise the limitations of the Closing the Gap Targets regarding the focus that is placed on the characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people while there are "no targets related to the attitudes, awareness or actions to be demonstrated among non-Indigenous peoples, including recognition of, or respect for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, languages or

20 Biddle, N and Priest, N (2019) 'The importance of reconciliation in education' Accessed at <https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2019/5/CSRM-WP-RECONCILIATION-1-2019.pdf>

21 Reconciliation Australia, 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer, pp 154 , accessed at 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer - Reconciliation Australia

22 Australian Government Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap Information Repository Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential - Dashboard | Closing the Gap Information Repository - Productivity Commission (pc.gov.au)

23 *ibid*

cultures".²⁴ Consequently, we draw attention to the changes required of teachers, education leaders and the systems they work within to meet the education needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Embedding UNDRIP principles:

Self-determination is a key underlying principle of the UNDRIP. To support self-determination in education, governments must actively support First Nations rights to teach and learn in Indigenous languages, with culture at the centre of these processes²⁵.

There are renewed calls from First Nations educators for a First Nations-led and designed learning system - with culture, Country and language at its core.²⁶ Internationally, there is strong evidence that learning in First Nations ways and, where possible, in First Languages, improves not only education outcomes for First Nations students but broader wellbeing and economic outcomes.^{27 28}

The recent *M.K Turner Report: A Plan for First Nations-led and designed Education Reform in Australia*²⁹, states that to achieve educational equity for First Nations students, an education system that is run and governed by First Nations educators is required. This report calls for the establishment of a First Nations model of education called Apmerengentyele (meaning "from the land"), commencing with early childhood education, which would support language, cultural immersion and pedagogy across all education levels.

Existing educational institutions also have an important role to play in embedding the principles set out in UNDRIP into our education systems and curriculum.

Educating all Australians about the truths and injustices of our nation's histories since colonisation is critical to building understanding of the importance of recognising and promoting the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Education systems across all levels and sectors must also ensure

24 Biddle, N (2021) Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education - Paper #16 - Engaging in the broader policy discussion, ANU Centre for Social Research and Method, accessed on https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/12/Narragunnawali_evaluation_and_monitoring_-_Paper_16_-_The_broader_policy_discussion_-_For_web_0.pdf.

25 Ibid

26 Turner, M.K. & Children's Ground (2023) Apmerengentyele. The M.K. Turner Report: A Plan for First Nations-led and designed Education Reform in Australia

27 UNESCO (2012) 'Why language matters for Millennial development goals'. Accessed on Why language matters for the Millennium Development Goals - UNESCO Digital Library

28 World Bank (2021) Loud and Clear: Effective Language of Instruction Policies for Learning. Accessed on Loud and Clear: Effective Language of Instruction Policies for Learning (worldbank.org)

29 Turner, M.K. & Children's Ground (2023) Apmerengentyele. The M.K. Turner Report: A Plan for First Nations-led and designed Education Reform in Australia

that education reflects the richness and diversity of First Nations cultures, experiences, contributions and aspirations.³⁰

The Narragunnawali program supports education institutions in implementing the UNDRIP and achieving its aims in education. *Recognise and Respect Rights* is among the suggested Actions for schools and early learning services to commit to within the wider Narragunnawali RAP framework. This Action focuses particularly on the equality and equity dimension of reconciliation and encourages school and early learning service communities to actively consider the relationship and yet distinction between shared rights (such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) and unique rights (such as the UNDRIP). While there are a range of Actions within the Narragunnawali RAP framework with connections to the UNDRIP, the dedicated *Recognise and Respect Rights* has perhaps the most direct connections.

As a minimally required Action, the *Build Relationships with Community* RAP Action further aligns with the UNDRIP's foundational principles of consultation and cooperation, and the imperative for community relationship-building processes to be strengthened within the Education ecosystem.

QB. What does it look like when a school is supporting student mental health and wellbeing effectively? What is needed from schools, systems, government and the community to deliver this?

We believe there is an urgent need for improved action to address both interpersonal and systemic racism in education. Our 2020 ARB results showed that 75% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (18-24 years) had experienced racial prejudice in the past six months³¹.

There is an increasing body of Australian evidence demonstrating that racism has a direct, negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their education outcomes and experiences.³² The significant impact for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who experience racism includes higher risk of disengaging from, and feeling hopeless about, school; having lower achievement outcomes; and suffering from stress, depression, anxiety, and psychological distress.³³

Schools can be viewed to effectively support the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, when they prioritise and respectfully embed reconciliation and anti-racism programs and create environments that promote a high level of knowledge and pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and contributions.

30 UNDRIP Articles 15 and 16

31 Reconciliation Australia, 2020 Australian Reconciliation Barometer, pg. 55 accessed at https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Australian_Reconciliation_Barometer_2020_-Full-Report_web.pdf

32 Priest N, Paradies Y, Gunthorpe G, Cairney S and Sayers, S (2011), "Racism as a determinant of social and emotional well being for Aboriginal Australian youth" *Med J Aust* 2011; 194 (10)

33Ibid

Prioritising actions that create and support an ongoing sense of belonging and inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education systems is critical. This will require schools and the broader education system developing, in collaboration with First Nations peoples, culturally responsive professional learning, pedagogies and curricula, along with adequate resourcing to effectively implement these.

Q9. What evidence-based wellbeing approaches currently being implemented by schools and communities should be considered as part of a national reform agenda?

The Narragunnawali program goals strongly align with many of the outcome areas and priorities of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap particularly those which relate to the cultural safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and children, many of whom access Government, Catholic or Independent schools and early learning services (for example, Outcome 3: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years).

Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) have been evidenced as important tools in the education system for improving the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and indeed all students, and members of educational communities.³⁴ The Narragunnawali program provides a scaffolding for these groups to use, which research has found "increased their confidence in addressing reconciliation and driving meaningful change within their schools and early learning services. Engagement with Narragunnawali provided a formalised means of delivering students, staff, and families with regular opportunities to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. Engagement with Narragunnawali also encouraged the forging of new relationships between schools and services, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities"³⁵

Data from the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) also showed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who attended a school where their parent or carer knew the school had a RAP were less likely to report that they did not want to go to school, and were more likely to report that their school understood their needs and was good for them.³⁶ So too has the Evaluation of Narragunnawali highlighted a strong positive association between parents' and carers' awareness of the concept of

34 Biddle N, Ellen L, Mortreux C & Waite C (2019), 'Hearing from schools and early learning services' ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, Accessed at https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/5/Narragunnawali_Research_Report_11_-_Hearing_from_Schools_and_Early_Learning_Services_-_August_2019.pdf

35 https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/5/Narragunnawali_Research_Report_11_-_Hearing_from_Schools_and_Early_Learning_Services_-_August_2019.pdf

36 Biddle, N (2022) Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education - Paper #18 - Capturing the impact of Narragunnawali, accessed at https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2023/2/Narragunnawali_evaluation_and_monitoring_-_Paper_18_-_Capturing_the_impact_of_Narragunnawali_-_For_web.pdf

reconciliation, and their support for, and personal engagement with, school-based reconciliation activities.³⁷

Tumut Community Preschool, joint winner of the Narragunnawali Awards 2021 in the early learning category, is an example of an education institution that has driven strong engagement and impact through its reconciliation commitments. The Preschool has demonstrated its commitment to targeting anti-racism and fostering social justice through dedicated support for staff cultural competency development and self-reflection training, and through fostering embedded learning experiences about anti-discrimination for the children.

As a result, this preschool has developed a culture with zero tolerance to racism.³⁸ Since starting their Reconciliation Action Plan journey in 2015, when First Nations student enrolments did not reflect the 5% of those within the wider local community who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, more than 10 per cent of enrolled students at Tumut Community Preschool identified as being from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in 2021, with this number continuing to grow.³⁹

The Tumut case study⁴⁰ aligns with similar findings from the qualitative component of the external Evaluation of Narragunnawali, which includes reports of new parents looking to enroll their Aboriginal children at a particular institution, precisely because of its high visibility of reconciliation.

Q11. Would there be benefit in surveying students to help understand student perceptions of safety and belonging at school, subjective state of wellbeing, school climate and classroom disruption? Would there be value in incorporating this into existing National Assessment Program surveys such as NAPLAN?

We envision that there would be great value in undertaking a student survey that captures student - and perhaps their parents'/carers' and wider communities' - perspectives of safety, belonging and wellbeing, particularly to gain understanding of the current experiences of First Nations students in education settings.

37 Biddle N and Ellen L (2022) 'Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education - Paper #17 - Tracking engagement and views on reconciliation in education, ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods accessed at https://csnn.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2022/8/Narragunnawali_evaluation_and_monitoring_-_Paper_17_-_Tracking_engagement_and_views_on_reconciliation_-_For_web.pdf.

38 Awards 2021 - Early Learning Category Joint Winner - Tumut Community Preschool, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5wvZ5XLoTQ>

39 Education Services Australia, Creating space for Reconciliation-meet the early learning 2021 Narragunnawali Awards winners, accessed on <https://www.esa.edu.au/resources/news-articles/article-detail/creating-space-for-reconciliation-meet-the-early-learning-2021-narragunnawali-awards-winners>

40 https://csnn.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/5/Narragunnawali_Research_Report_11_-_Hearing_from_Schools_and_Early_Learning_Services_-_August_2019.pdf

Survey data could clearly define differences in experiences of First Nations students in comparison to other student cohorts across a large national sample. Importantly, it could inform and guide future approaches to reconciliation-in-education programs and strategies to strengthen opportunities for, and experiences, of First Nations students in school systems.

It may be important to consider a survey outside of the NAPLAN (or similar) context, not only because participation in NAPLAN has been evidenced as lower for Indigenous students in remote Australia ⁴¹, but also because conducting a Survey about safety as part of an assessment task may add to respondent stress and potentially skew responses too.

Based on recent critique that Australian research with First Nations students has been centred on Western social and psychological notions⁴², we note that the survey tool both in its design, content, and administration - should encompass First Nations concepts of safety, belonging and well-being. Ensuring that survey measures and processes are expanded beyond Western notions and worldviews will facilitate accurate, respectful understanding of the perspectives and experiences of First Nations students.

⁴¹ National Indigenous Australians Agency, Closing the Gap Report 2020, Literacy and Numeracy, accessed at <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/literacy-and-numeracy#:~:text=Participation%20in%20NAPLAN%20is%20lower,students%20in%20Very%20Remote%20areas>

⁴² Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews & Bronwyn Carlson (2016) The legacy of racism and Indigenous Australian identity within education, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 19:4, 784-807 Accessed on <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13613324.2014.969224>