

13 February 2024

RE: Reconciliation Australia's submission on the Issues Paper: Education – Schooling

Dear Yoorrook Justice Commission,

Reconciliation Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the Yoorrook Justice Commission's Issues Paper: Education – Schooling. We acknowledge the important interrelationship between Education and truth-telling and see a stronger focus on historical acceptance within school settings and systems as a pivotal path towards shifting Education from being a structure of colonisation towards an enabler of reconciliation. Our submission will respond to questions posed by the Issues Paper with particular focus on:

- Racism and cultural safety;
- Curriculum successes and failures in teaching First Peoples' perspectives, histories and experiences; and,
- Effective engagement and cultural safety at a school level.

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.

Historical acceptance – the honest and holistic understanding of the colonial wrongs of the past and their often-intergenerational impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – is one of the five key dimensions of reconciliation in Australia. This dimension, with its focus on truth-telling, has an intricate interconnection with each of the other dimensions first identified in the 2016 State of Reconciliation in Australia report ¹ and used to measure progress against our nation's reconciliation journey: race relations; equality and equity; institutional integrity; and unity.

As the reconciliation movement progresses, our research shows that the skills and knowledge gained

¹ Reconciliation Australia (2016) The State of Reconciliation in Australia, Accessed at https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/State-of-Reconciliation-Report_FULL.pdf

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"². Indeed, the latest (2021) iteration of the State of Reconciliation in Australia report calls out the imperative to "Acknowledge our past through truth-telling, education and understanding" as a key action area.

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 located³. Place-based and relational approaches to truth-telling are therefore strongly recommended within individual school settings, while being complemented by continued Education system reform at the state and national level.

Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali Program

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 Reconciliation Australia's Education program title with the permission of the United Ngunnawal Elders Council.

Our Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education program provides tools and resources for schools and early learning services to teach about, and take action towards, reconciliation. The program comprises an online platform with professional learning and curriculum resources for teachers and educators, and a tailored Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) development process for schools and early learning services to drive change in the classroom, around the wider school/service environment, and with the community.

Ultimately, the program vision is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 process.

As well as contributing to both the national and Victoria-specific evidence base about the legacies, current state, and future directions of truth-telling in Education, this submission includes examples of effective practices in educational institutions, based on case studies of Narragunnawali Award-winning schools and early learning services – those that have committed to the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) development process and have demonstrated outstanding reconciliation initiatives.

2 Reconciliation Australia (2021) The State of Reconciliation in Australia, pg. 4, Accessed at https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/State-of-Reconciliation-2021-Full-Report_web.pdf

3 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://csrcm.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

The following sections respond to questions posed by the Issues Paper on Education-Schooling with a particular focus on:

- Racism and cultural safety;
- Curriculum successes and failures in teaching First Peoples' perspectives, histories and experiences; and,
- Effective engagement and cultural safety at a school level.

Racism and cultural safety for First Nations students, education staff, and families

There is an urgent need for improved action to address both interpersonal, institutional and systemic racism in education. The '[Importance of Reconciliation in Education](#)' literature review, published in 2019 as part of the external evaluation of Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali program, concluded that,

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are exposed to very high levels of racism and discrimination, and that this exposure appears to have detrimental effects on their [educational and wider] outcomes. Programs that seek to reduce such exposure and minimise the effects are vitally important for school and early learning systems and environments that value equity and education for all"⁴.

The latest Australian Reconciliation Barometer findings (2022) demonstrate the perceptions and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians, aged 18 + years, regarding education related racism and discrimination:

- 55% had personally felt racially discriminated against by school teachers and or principals ⁵
- 47% believe that the school curriculum is a reason why Australia is a racist country ⁶
- 76% agree that past race-based policies are a cause of education disadvantages among some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Of these, 48% **strongly** agree ⁷.

In addition to overt forms of racism and discrimination, there is increasing insight into the damaging impact of "the soft bigotry of low expectations" as a foundational cause of educational disparity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school children^{8 9}.

⁴ Biddle N and Priest N (2019), *The importance of reconciliation in education*, page 27, ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, Accessed at <https://csrm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2019/5/CSRM-WP-RECONCILIATION-1-2019.pdf>

⁵ Reconciliation Australia (2022), *Victoria Education Data ARB 2022*, Unpublished Raw Data

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Victoria Department of Education and Training (2016), *Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*, Accessed at https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/aboriginal/Marrung_Aboriginal_Education_Plan_2016-2026.pdf

⁹ Noel Pearson (2016), *The Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations (Speech)*, December 8, 2016, Accessed at <https://capeyorkpartnership.org.au/noel-pearson-the-soft-bigotry-of-low-expectations/>

Anti-racist and culturally responsive teaching practices should align with the Stronger Smarter approach, which has developed an evidence based High-Expectations Relationship 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 conversations¹⁰.

This demands strong emphasis on High Expectations relationships and cultures within school environments, as a key way to improve the education experiences and outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students, families, and communities, and indeed all members of educational communities. High-Expectations Relationships understand historical backgrounds but then move beyond cultural assumptions to understand the context of the individual student or family. "Cultural 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"¹¹.

We view cultural responsiveness development for teaching staff as most effective when it is not a standalone imperative but, rather, part of a systematic, whole-of-school approach to reconciliation in education. Developing and implementing a Reconciliation Action Plan is one recognised strategy for contributing to a culturally safe and responsive environment¹².

Submissions in response to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's *Building a Culturally Responsive Australian Teaching Workforce* project claimed that "developing a RAP provided 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. It was identified that, as a framework for action and accountability, a RAP is a useful starting point and continuing reference, reflection and guidance point if embedded alongside other culturally safe processes, frameworks and policies"¹³.

Examples of effective engagement and cultural safety at the school level

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 culture¹⁴.

¹⁰ Stronger Smarter Institute Limited (2014). *High-Expectations Relationships: a foundation for quality learning environments in all Australian schools*, Accessed at https://strongersmarter.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SSI_position-Paper_High-Expectations-Relationships-2018.pdf

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² 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 at https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=indigenous_education

¹³ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2022), *Building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce*, pg. 16, Accessed at https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/comms/cultural-competency/aitsl_indigenous-cultural-competency_final-report

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.

Now, more than ever, we must harness the powerful role that education has in engaging Australia's future generations to contribute to a more reconciled future between non-First Nations Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples - one which actively acknowledges the central role of truth-telling, and which centres the perspectives, aspirations and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Expert Panel's report on the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System noted that: Findings from the 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer suggest that public will and intention stands behind the teachers, educators and school leaders across Victoria who are prioritising a focus on reconciliation and respectfully embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in their classrooms and communities. For example:

- 83% of Victorians believe it is important to undertake formal truth-telling about our shared history¹⁵
- 84% of Victorians believe it is important for First Nations histories and cultures to be a compulsory part of the school curriculum¹⁶
- 89% of Victorians believe it is important for all Australians to learn about past issues of European colonisation and government policy¹⁷.

In the education system Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) are proven effective tools for improving the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and indeed all students, and members of educational communities¹⁸.

Using RAPs, the Narragunnawali program provides a scaffolding for Australian schools and early learning services to use, which research has found "increased their confidence in addressing reconciliation and driving meaningful change within their schools and early learning services [settings]. Engagement with Narragunnawali provides 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 encourages the forging of new relationships between schools and services, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities"¹⁹.

Findings from the Longitudinal Survey of Indigenous Children have also indicated that, where parents and carers were aware their child attended a school with a RAP, the child was:

¹⁵ Reconciliation Australia, 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer, p.186. accessed at <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2022-Australian-Reconciliation-Barometer-FULL-Report.pdf>.

¹⁶ *ibid* p.121.

¹⁷ *ibid* p.174.

¹⁸ 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://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/5/Narragunnawali Research Report 11 - Hearing from Schools and Early Learning Services - August 2019.pdf](https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/5/Narragunnawali%20Research%20Report%2011%20Hearing%20from%20Schools%20and%20Early%20Learning%20Services%20-%20August%202019.pdf).

¹⁹ *Ibid*

- Less likely to be reported as not wanting to go to school
- More likely to be reported as attending a school that understands their needs and is good for them²⁰.

CASE STUDY: TUMUT COMMUNITY PRESCHOOL

Joint winner of the Narragunnawali Awards 2021 in the early learning category, Tumut Community Preschool is an example of an education institution that has driven strong engagement and impact through its reconciliation commitments, centred on anti-racism and culturally responsive pedagogies and practice.

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 respectfully embedded learning experiences about anti-discrimination for the children. As a result, this Preschool has developed a culture with zero tolerance to racism.

"I went to school here in Tumut but there was no Aboriginal cultural content in my education. I went to school with Aboriginal people, but their culture was ignored. So personally, I've learnt and grown. The Narragunnawali program has had a huge impact.

Reconciliation and Indigenous perspectives have been embedded within our philosophy, in the way we work and how children are educated. We are known for this and this is what we are very proud of. The reconciliation program has also significantly increased the attendance of First Nations children at the preschool, with enrolments of local Aboriginal children lifting to 16-20% of all enrolments." Tess Herring, Tumut Community Preschool Services Manager

Reconciliation Australia ((2023) Narragunnawali Reconciliation in Education: Impact Statement, accessed at https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Narragunnawali-Impact-Statement_Sept-2023.pdf

²⁰ Biddle N (2022) "Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education – Paper #18 – Capturing the impact of Narragunnawali" ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, accessed at https://csrm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2023/2/Narragunnawali_evaluation_and_monitoring_-_Paper_18_-_Capturing_the_impact_of_Narragunnawali_-_For_web.pdf

As at the end of 2023, approximately 2,400 schools and early learning services in Victoria, and more than 12,000 nationally, had committed to the Narragunnawali RAP development process, with important scope to increase the breadth, depth, and sustainability of engagement with reconciliation action planning activities both within the state of Victoria and across the nation into the future.

Reconciliation Australia also works in partnership with Reconciliation Victoria to support schools and early learning services to engage in reconciliation. This partnership includes the facilitation of the STRIVE Committee (Strengthening Truth and Reconciliation in Victorian Education), a cross-sectorial network where members exchange learnings and insights about education-focused reconciliation initiatives across the state.

Curriculum successes and failures in teaching First Peoples' perspectives, histories and experiences, including teacher competency and commitment.

Historically, the formal education system in Australia has served as a tool of colonisation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, pedagogies and perspectives have been systematically excluded from, and silenced within, mainstream education institutions, policies, and frameworks.

As a result, generations of Australians have grown up with an inadequate understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and very limited awareness of the true histories of Australia. Education institutions have contributed to a lack of historical acceptance; deepening inequalities and inequities; and disrupting pathways towards strong relationship-building and unification processes across generations.

Despite majority support for promoting the significance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for Australia as a whole, only 30% of Australians know what they can do in practice to advance reconciliation²¹ and, indeed, the gaps and silences of the colonial education system has contributed to this uncertainty. This demonstrates an especially important role for the education system in:

- giving young Australians the skills and insight to make a direct and informed contribution to the reconciliation process; and,
- encouraging teachers and educators to critically engage in their own ongoing learning, 'un-learning' and 're-learning' regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures²².

²¹ Reconciliation Australia (2022), *2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer*, p.138. accessed at <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2022-Australian-Reconciliation-Barometer-FULL-Report.pdf>

²² Biddle N and Priest N (2019), *The importance of reconciliation in education*, ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, accessed at <https://csrm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2019/5/CSRM-WP-RECONCILIATION-1-2019.pdf>

Accordingly, education, including the reform of school curriculum, has been identified as an important process and platform for truth-telling activities²³.

CASE STUDY: KELLYVILLE PUBLIC SCHOOL

The students and staff at Kellyville Public School have been recognised for their efforts in teaching the true history of the First Nations people of Darug Country in Western Sydney.

Kellyville Public School's commitment to truth-telling, and the community consultation and engagement that has been fundamental to this process, was a key reason for its selection as a finalist for the Narragunnawali Awards 2023.

The school is located near the previous site of the Marella Mission and the local history of the Marella Mission and story of Stolen Generations survivors is used as a powerful teaching opportunity for students, staff and the broader community. Kellyville Public School has also shown meaningful community advocacy to rename a street that carried the name of the Mission manager.

There is great opportunity for the school community to continue to find innovative ways to respectfully engage with and share local (hi)stories into the future.

Conclusion

There is an imperative for an evidence base of the positive impacts of truth-telling and reconciliation both in and through education. Accordingly, there should be a cross-sectoral commitment to supporting and resourcing programs and professional development opportunities that assist with ensuring that schools approach truth-telling and reconciliation activities in anti-racist and culturally responsive ways.

Reconciliation Australia acknowledges the ongoing and significant work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies who have been advocating and contributing to education reforms in Australia over many decades. There have been some important shifts in the education landscape in the direction of a significant and more promising legacy that education institutions can leave for future generations.

23 The Healing Foundation and Reconciliation Australia (2018) 'Truth Telling Symposium Report', page 21, Accessed at <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Truth-telling-symposium-report-2018-web.pdf>

We thank the Commission for the opportunity to provide information and reflections on this Issues Paper.