

BUR07251 UNFINISHED BUSINESS: RE-IGNITING THE DISCUSSION ON THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS

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This paper discusses the role of education in building cross-cultural understandings between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities as part of Australia's reconciliation process during the life of the Council for Aboriginal reconciliation and the subsequent downgrading of Indigenous issues from the national political and educational agenda after 2000.

It draws on findings from a major research project conducted towards the end of the Council for Aboriginal reconciliation's ten year period, which concluded in December 2000, at a time when the discourse of what constitutes reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians was at its peak. It advances that while Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, aspire to a level of harmonious co-existence, and educators are at the forefront of this aspiration, what is less clear is the process through which this can be achieved. This exemplifies the different viewpoints and discourses existing in the community at large about what reconciliation entails for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians – from genuine substantive reconciliation which recognises Indigenous first nation rights to the practical reconciliation advocated by the Howard federal government.

The paper then engages in a discussion on the roles education policy makers and teachers should play in advancing reconciliation between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians in the current socio-political context. It

extrapolates that in a socially just Australia dealing with the ‘unfinished business’ of genuine reconciliation with Indigenous peoples has ramifications for the education sector and indeed, for all Australians. For teachers and teacher educators this implies that it is appropriate, (and some might say necessary), for them to adopt a Freirean critical pedagogy approach which is not afraid to raise the difficult issues surrounding the debates about reconciliation and what it means to Australians. In nurturing a critical consciousness of the key aspects of reconciliation, education can be transformative and have a positive impact on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in Australia today.

Background

As a formal ‘policy’ term *reconciliation* dates back to the Federal Labor government’s usage in speeches, policy documents and reports from the 1980s (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991; Hawke, 1988; Johnston, 1991) in the lead-up to the bicentenary.

Outside the policy context, the anthropologist CD Rowley used the term in 1971 in his three volume work *The Remote Aborigines*, when he called for ‘a patient attempt at reconciliation and negotiations’ (cited in Yardi and Stokes, 1998, p. 45). It was incorporated into Christian teachings by the heads of the Australian Christian churches in 1984 in a policy statement entitled *Towards reconciliation in Australian Society* (Gardiner-Garden, 1999, p. 7).

History shows that the Hawke Federal government embraced the term in 1988 as a political compromise, a solution to the impasse on a treaty that did not have full scale support from the State governments (in particular the West Australian Burke Government which was under pressure from mining interests). Hawke wrote at this time ‘The Government is committed to a real and lasting reconciliation, achieved through a full consultation and honest negotiation between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal citizens...’ (Hawke, 1988, p. 4). Other formal policy documents emerged during 1988 in response to the call by Hawke for a rapprochement with Aboriginal people in the guise of a

Makaratta – not a ‘treaty’ but a desire to come together in a declaration of mutual respect.

It can be seen that in this context, the very beginnings of the policy was shaded by pragmatic policy making, placing it, even at its inception, within the realm of symbolic representations of reconciliation. However, beyond this pragmatism and reluctance to follow through with a ‘treaty’, there was the genuine desire to create a new meaningful Indigenous policy strategy. The term reconciliation was then in the public domain for community consultation and debate, and in 1990 the Government announced in principle support for a reconciliation policy (CAR, 1994).

Commissioner Elliott Johnston’s Report of the Royal Commission into *Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991) devoted a chapter to the need for a policy of reconciliation and it was one of the recommendations of this report which was tabled in the Federal Parliament in May 1991. It was followed shortly after by the Council for Aboriginal reconciliation Bill 1991 in which Robert Tickner, then Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Aboriginal reconciliation, set out the terms of reference for the formation of the Council.

The Bill was passed with cross-party support – a rare achievement in the adversarial atmosphere of the nation’s legislature. This 25 member body with a majority of Aboriginal representatives, had a ten year mandate to consult widely with Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people throughout the nation to discuss the process of reconciling a difficult history of inter-cultural conflict of the previous 200 years. One crucial element of the process was the education of the Australian community on the key issues of reconciliation. Schools were seen as one logical starting point of this process. However, before engaging in discussions about reconciliation and education it is necessary to comment on the debates surrounding different perspectives of what constitutes reconciliation within the Australian community.

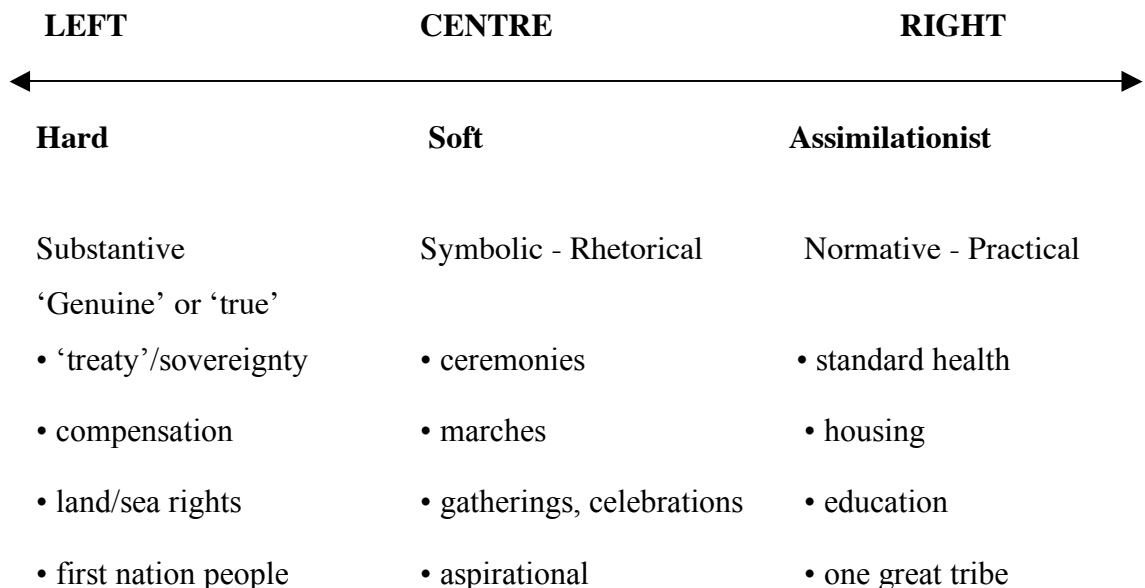
Defining Reconciliation

Reconciliation has proven difficult to define as individuals and groups ascribe to it differing meanings. Indigenous peoples, politicians, policy makers, church groups, the political lobbyists, media writers and the academics and ordinary citizens have different perspectives on what constitutes reconciliation. These meanings are often linked to their social, political and ideological orientation. Terms such as ‘practical’ reconciliation; ‘symbolic’ reconciliation; ‘genuine’ reconciliation; ‘true’ reconciliation; ‘substantive’ reconciliation; ‘soft’ reconciliation and ‘hard’ reconciliation were and are used in finding meanings for reconciliation. There is a high level of rhetoric in much of what has been spoken and written about the reconciliation process.

There is disagreement on the extent of support for the ‘hard /substantive’ issues of reconciliation such as a ‘treaty’ and just compensation for past injustices as opposed to the ‘soft’, more symbolic type of reconciliation that seems more acceptable to mainstream Australia. Increasingly, the Federal government has given credence to ‘practical’ Reconciliation as a viable alternative.

This framework represents the varying views on reconciliation:

Fig: 1 Reconciliation Typologies



‘Hard’, ‘genuine’, ‘true’, or ‘substantive’ reconciliation refers to the demands by Indigenous leaders for recognition of the unique rights Indigenous people possess that have to do with ‘native title’, customary laws, the right to just

compensation for past acts of dispossession, and a ‘treaty’ with non-Indigenous peoples.

‘Symbolic’ reconciliation is the most popular amongst mainstream Australians. The symbols of reconciliation are seen as ‘soft’ and non adversarial. At times symbolic acts are seen as superficial and tokenistic; though they are also seen as essential elements of the journey to a more substantive reconciliation.

The rhetoric of reconciliation refers to all the political speak of the policies, the hyperbole and the false aspirations, spoken or written which are not backed up by the authentic actions or deeds of reconciliation.

At the more conservative end of the reconciliation spectrum is found, the former Prime Minister, John Howard’s ‘practical’ reconciliation – referring to the programs and strategies designed to correct the level of social and economic disadvantage in health, housing and education faced by Indigenous communities throughout the nation. To the more conservative elements in mainstream Australia, reconciliation is about equality and assimilation rather than Aboriginal peoples possessing distinct political and cultural rights. In this mode reconciliation affirms the status quo. It is a point of interest and debate as to what the new Rudd Labor Government’s position will be on reconciliation.

Understanding these differing meanings of reconciliation and how groups in the Australian community interpret reconciliation should be an essential element of our secondary school curriculum.

Role of Education in the Reconciliation Process: The Research

It is one of the underlying premises of the policy of reconciliation, as articulated by both governments and organisations such as the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, that education is pivotal to any effective attempt at reconciliation programs, whether these exist in a school or the wider community. It is also an underlying premise of the policy documents that

reconciliation is a necessary and important aspect of curriculum programs as evidenced by this comment and by the policies themselves:

There is a strong belief among Australian educators that reconciliation begins in our schools and that achieving educational equality for Indigenous children is central to the process of reconciliation (Buckskin, 2001).

This paper will now consider the role of education, in particular, teachers and schools, in the reconciliation process. It will discuss one aspect of findings from a major research project undertaken at a time when reconciliation was at the forefront of community debate and attempt to link it to what still remains the ‘unfinished business’ of reconciliation and education’s role in addressing these. The complete study involved the analysis of 768 surveys from primary and secondary schools in NSW, mostly from the public school sector with only 50 coming from the private school sector. Semi-structure interviews were conducted with 33 key informants and 5 focus groups were conducted with Aboriginal elders and community members in different locations in NSW and 2 focus groups we conducted with students.

Aspects of the research project used in this paper relate to interviews with 20 of the key informants from the larger study. Twelve of these were educators while others were members of Aboriginal organisations such as the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG); Aboriginal parents or non- Aboriginal members of parents and citizens groups. Interviews with educators included school principals, Department of Education policy makers and teachers – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Questions sought to identify important aspects of the process of achieving reconciliation within the school context. In particular it sought to ask what *role* education played in the process and what best practice in curriculum strategies on reconciliation might entail.

The questions asked were:

To what extent does reconciliation depend on education?

Can reconciliation be taught and whose responsibility is it?

These were followed by questions designed to identify best practice and the challenges (social, political and cultural) that teaching reconciliation in the classroom might pose. The questions asked were:

How might a whole school or an individual teacher respond to the challenges of reconciliation?

Do you know of any individual teachers or whole schools that are doing interesting and exciting things?

Do you know of any individual teachers or whole schools which have been struggling to teach reconciliation in the face of barriers or difficulties?

What, in your view, is the best way to support schools and communities that want to be involved in reconciliation?

Interviews were semi-structured and questions were generally asked in sequence, though often answers were combined. Answers to the more specific questions of actual examples of best practice or specific difficulties some teachers might be facing were not answered in detail — examples tended to be of a generalised nature.

Aboriginal Education Policies and Reconciliation

In answering questions on the role of education in the reconciliation process key informants spoke in general terms about the importance of reconciliation without clear or direct references to curriculum programs or policy statements which inform the teaching of the policy in schools. One of the issues about teaching reconciliation in schools relates to the objectives and expected outcomes of such programs.

All States in Australia and the Federal Government have policy documents on the teaching of Aboriginal history and culture and the teaching of Aboriginal children.

NSW was the first State to introduce a comprehensive Aboriginal Education policy in 1982. This policy was revised in 1996 as a result of findings emerging from investigations into the implementation of the original policy.

The current policy was reviewed in 2004 and has been supplemented with other documents and programs. (Crawford, 1992, DET 2004)

At the Federal Level the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP) was first launched in 1989 – again it has been supplemented by other policy direction documents and programs such as the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) since this time.

The Catholic education system has its own policy derived from but different to the NSW Aboriginal Education policy. Independent schools, by their very nature do not have a general Aboriginal education policy document, though they must adhere to the curriculum requirements set by the NSW Board of Studies.

Reconciliation and the Curriculum

None of the Aboriginal education policy documents available in schools provide direction on definitions of reconciliation. The federal policy has not been revised and hence does not have a detailed and direct focus on reconciliation. The NSW 1996 policy does refer to the need to promote Reconciliation activities in schools and some commercial publishers are developing materials directly on reconciliation. However, official Department of Education support documents only marginally address the policy in any sample units of work or programs. Yet, reconciliation is seen to be integral to these policies as an ‘in-principle’ understanding which might underscore curriculum content. Despite particular clauses contained in the AEP, reconciliation is not addressed as a major identifiable unit of work in many support or curriculum documents. Hence, while reconciliation is an expected end-product or outcome of teaching there is an assumption that it will emerge from the teaching of Aboriginal studies or Aboriginal history and culture.

Many primary and secondary schools in New South Wales conduct cultural activities centred around Aboriginal history and culture as part of the curriculum and have done so for many years. National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Commemoration has evolved into NAIDOC week, celebrated during the first week of July every year.

The introduction of reconciliation week and Sorry Day events, in 1998 (and later as part of the Journey of Healing) connected these activities to reconciliation more closely — although as the research indicates, confusion still existed as to whether these activities are undertaken with developing an understanding of reconciliation as the primary goal.

Turning to the findings from the research, much of what was said by the key informants related to getting reconciliation into schools — “to educate young minds as the older minds have set prejudices” (KI:11).

There seemed to be the feeling that it was far easier to educate the young in our community about reconciliation than to attempt to change the minds of older members with more fixed attitudes. There is the identifiable link in the comments made between the role of education, the innocence of youth and the capacity to mould the young towards greater understanding and tolerance:

I think it depends on a lot on education, but the only trouble is that a lot of the people that we’re dealing with out of the community have these set prejudices and ideas. What we’re trying to do is work on this generation, this generation doesn’t have it (KI:22).

I believe it won’t happen without the education in the schools because reconciliation is coming, I believe, from the children (KI:13).

And from another principal:

Well, I believe, like anything, reading and writing you start young and you go through and the ideals you can establish in kindergarten and years 1 and 2 stay with the kids... you can mould it into a positive thing and is a learning experience that is developed... not imposed upon them (KI:5).

Given these comments from key informants it may be appropriate for educational policy to give greater emphasis to programs on reconciliation in the formative years of schooling.

Educational outcomes for the teaching of Aboriginal studies/history and culture are clearly stated in syllabus documents. Included in these outcomes are the goals of achieving reconciliation between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians. A point for discussion is what different educational outcomes are expected from teaching Aboriginal history and culture and teaching about reconciliation directly in the curriculum? Is the aim for both to promote reconciliation — one directly the other indirectly? And should not the discourse of what reconciliation means be incorporated quite specifically into the classroom discussions of native title and land rights, or the ‘stolen generations’? Often teachers identify but do not teach to that direct link between reconciliation and the facts of Australian history. As this quote notes, there is a direct link since much of the reconciliation process is about debunking the myths of the past:

Unless people are given access to information and that’s obviously through education then how can you be reconciled if you don’t know the facts, figures... You must have education with it (KI:16).

I think it’s intrinsically tied to education because, you know, those two processes go hand in hand. For me it’s about scraping away a lot of the myths (KI:11).

Some key informants stressed the need for wider programs which incorporated many of the school subject areas in a whole school approach, though often it was unclear whether the programs should be based on reconciliation directly or on Aboriginal perspectives.

Education in the broad sense, I mean education in the whole community... I would like to see more and more good programs done through the popular media... Within schools... through things like English, right from year 7 on... the humanities... the creative arts (KI:14).

The ideas in these quotes imply that teachers should be more direct in their approach to the teaching of reconciliation and that it should be more widespread in the curriculum. More importantly comments which allude to

‘scraping away the myths’ signify the development of a critical consciousness amongst some teachers that will challenge existing mindsets on the teaching of Aboriginal history and culture.

This critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Giroux, in Palmer, 2002, 1993) is necessary so that teachers become transformative educators and circumvent the cultural and social reproduction that occurs within our education system simply by the way schools operate to privilege those who are already advantaged.

Reconciliation and Improved Educational Outcomes for Indigenous Students

There is no doubt that effective and appropriate curriculum programs on Aboriginal history and culture may contribute to the reconciliation process by raising awareness of Aboriginal culture and an Aboriginal perspective on Australian history. In providing an accurate portrayal of Australia’s past and in teaching the complexities and contribution of Aboriginal culture to the Australian nation, students as a whole are more likely to be receptive to the notion of reconciliation. However, this may not necessarily transfer to a direct acceptance and understanding of what reconciliation means or entails — unless it is addressed directly as an issue within the curriculum content. In addition it may not necessarily follow that teaching about reconciliation will improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students yet there is a feeling that education is the answer to many ills.

The absolute necessity of raising the educational outcome of Aboriginal students — particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy is verified by the research. The statistics show recurring themes in educational results (Mellor & Corrigan 2004; HREOC, 2001; Buckskin, 2001).

Mellor and Corrigan in a 2004 report for ACER state

While 77% of Indigenous students met the minimum benchmark for reading in 2000, this compares unfavourably with the 93% of non-Indigenous students who achieve the benchmark. With regard to numeracy, 74% of Indigenous children met the benchmark in 2000,

whereas 93% of non-Indigenous students met this same standard. **Of greater concern is the increase in the gap which grows to 25% in reading and 27% in numeracy by Year 5** (emphasis added) (p.9)

Indigenous students are much less likely to continue education beyond the compulsory years — only 38% are likely to remain at school to complete their senior schooling compared to 75% of non Indigenous students (Buckskin, 2001). The impact of these statistics on employment opportunities and improvement of life chances is that Aboriginal people are at a constant social and economic disadvantage because they lack a sound educational base.

Educationalists note the vital links between education and reconciliation. The logic on the progression to reconciliation through education is natural — as Buckskin again notes: “I believe that as we all work together to achieve educational equality, we will build stronger Indigenous communities, a stronger Australian society and achieve reconciliation between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians” (Buckskin, 2001, p. 6).

The difficulty with the assumption that education will automatically lead to reconciliation is that while reconciliation is used as the ultimate goal of achieving educational equality for Aboriginal students and of teaching Aboriginal history and culture in the school curriculum, there has been no credible discussion of what constitutes reconciliation either by the expert educators who declaim it as a national goal of schooling or by teachers who teach Aboriginal history and culture in the curriculum. Reconciliation is the convenient ‘buzz’ word, the marketing slogan for education policies to aspire to but without the substantive debate of what it might really mean or entail.

Achieving improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students is in keeping with the goals of ‘practical’ reconciliation as aspired to by the former Prime Minister, John Howard and is a laudable goal for reconciliation in itself. However, it should be noted through the words of Mick Dodson uttered at Corroboree 2000 in terms of what ‘true’ reconciliation is about: ,

...And also don't be distracted by notions of practical Reconciliation, because they mean practically nothing. Now although issues of health, housing and education of indigenous Australians are of course of key concern to us as a nation, they are not issues that are at the very heart or the very soul of Reconciliation. But they are, to put it quite simply and plainly, the entitlements every Australian should enjoy...

Reconciliation is about deeper things, to do with nation, soul and spirit. Reconciliation is about the blood and flesh of the lives we must lead together, and not the nuts and bolts of the entitlements as citizens we should enjoy (Dodson, M., 27 May 2000).

In education these deeper goals of reconciliation also need to be addressed. They will only be achieved if schools and the policy makers within departments of education write curriculum documents with reconciliation as a teaching area of the curriculum.

Can Reconciliation Be Taught?

Can reconciliation be taught, and whose responsibility is it? This question was designed to pinpoint the more concrete aspects of reconciliation and then to ascertain whether there was a sense of obligation or responsibility amongst teachers to do it. It sits within that critical pedagogy framework where teachers are seen as active agents for a socially just society. Answers were largely reflective of this fact that there is a moral imperative in a just and civil society to adhere to principles of justice and fairness. To some this implied that it was everybody's role in the school to teach. Others felt that while the aim was just, you could not teach because you could not make people reconcile:

I believe that in the school setting it's everybody's role. Now everybody comes from the principal down to the last on the staff, all

ancillary staff and most of all work as a team with the parents (KI:28).

Efforts to pressure people into changing their views may well be counter-productive according to some responses:

You can't legislate to change people's attitudes. While you can mandate change in education, if people don't believe it, then they resent being told what to think and it all becomes counter-productive (KI:13).

Reconciliation is often difficult to teach because it's how people choose to relate to others. You can however focus on notions of respect for individuals:

It can't be taught exclusively... it's a philosophy more than a curriculum (KI:11).

I don't think you can teach people how to reconcile. I don't think you can teach people how to do it, but I think you can teach them the reasons, the history, the reasons why there needs to be reconciliation (KI:10).

I think reconciliation can be taught by teaching... attitudes and that of acceptance and cooperation between each other and I believe in the school setting it is everybody's role (KI:15).

When you say you can teach it I think you have to be careful there with the word 'teach' because I don't mean standing up and telling them you've got to believe this and this. It's all the strategies that you use in getting kids to address issues and develop their own views in a context of knowledge. You have to make them feel it (KI:2).

There is a feeling amongst some teachers that the political sensitivity of reconciliation may cast some programs advocating for reconciliation as social engineering and that it is not the role of teachers to be agents of change. To some teachers their role is to be objective rather than subjective, emotional or

perceived to be political in their teaching. From this point of view the role of teachers is to present factual information:

All you can do is give people the information and let them form their own opinions. It must be education, not indoctrination. reconciliation is founded on education but can't be achieved solely this way (KI:14).

People have to see that reconciliation is relevant to them and their community:

We are really teaching the information that undergrids (*sic*) a set of values and attitudes — but we can't teach values and attitudes. If we do, it could have the opposite effect to what we want (KI:21).

Well, I don't think that it can be taught. I mean we can present the facts, but it's got to be a feeling that's got to come from within... As educators it is important that we can present the facts to them (KI:14).

Yes, yes it can be taught... but there is resistance there. You find that some of the teachers are prepared to go a certain distance, but no further (KI:8).

I think reconciliation is lived... I don't think you can see... But to answer your question... the answer is yes in the end. Because you can teach enough about history and the background to get people around wanting acceptance (KI:11).

The above statements illustrate the paradox in seeing education as a key factor in the reconciliation process. Comments point to an underlying sense of angst at the idea that reconciliation can be taught. Yes there is a moral imperative to achieve justice for Indigenous people, yet there is anxiety about politicising the classroom. Though it is evident from the sentiments expressed that the facts of history can be taught - and the underlying aspiration of teachers is that from this reconciliation will flow.

Reconciliation and Valuing Cultural Diversity

Some educators see reconciliation in a wide context of promoting a culturally diverse community, while at the same time recognising Aboriginal peoples' unique place within the broader multicultural landscape that is Australia.

I mean the message teachers have to give in the classroom is that all cultures are accepted... whether its Aboriginal, multicultural or what it is (KI:24).

You know it's a philosophy more than a curriculum. It's just that understanding that diversity is good, and I think we need to concentrate on us because we're the first nation of people here (KI:22).

For some key informants education required some sense of objectivity in providing the facts; educators should not present a position in order to change attitudes of the wider community:

Education plays a critical role in the transmission of accurate information to students. Schools don't have a role in arguing things out in the community. We have to leave parents and the general community to have their own opinions (KI:14).

It's a little bit by little bit, you know you can't stand up here and say to children, this is what you will believe. There's no way that teachers are going to believe that either... (KI:23).

The message from the key informants is that education has an important role to play in the process of reconciliation, but sensitivity is needed in the approaches applied in schools and classrooms. Furthermore, there is often a perception that by teaching about Aboriginal history and culture you are fulfilling the objectives of the reconciliation process.

More direct focus on meanings of reconciliation will provide avenues for discussion on the types of reconciliation which exist and which citizens from a

variety of cultural backgrounds are willing to accept. This discussion would equate or relate to the differences between ‘practical’ reconciliation and the deeper notions of what reconciliation might really mean to different people — Aboriginal and non Aboriginal alike, including those from backgrounds other than Anglo-Saxon.

Research on meanings of reconciliation illustrates that most people are largely positive about reconciliation (Burrige, 2006) . Their views are aspirational, embodying the hopes of a just and fair Australia for all and a desire to live in harmony. Many of us comfortable with the ‘soft’ and ‘symbolic’ type of reconciliation. Findings from the education sector research pointed to a greater awareness amongst the education community of the harder issues of reconciliation as indicated by their survey responses and in their interviews. They wrote or spoke of land rights, social justice issues and the need for a treaty and a formal apology more frequently than focus group members in the wider community (Burrige, 2006; Newspoll, 2000).

Given this higher level of understanding there is the potential to develop curriculum documents and strategies which address far more specifically reconciliation and its various interpretations in the classroom.

Comments on Findings

Key informants well understand the importance of teaching for reconciliation within the context of a civil society. Many felt that the role of education is to teach the facts of history about Indigenous and non Indigenous relations. From there, it was their feeling that a sense of truth would prevail and reconciliation might follow from that. While there was substantial support for reconciliation as a policy, it was less clear-cut that such a policy should be taught directly in schools with some key informants recognising the sensitivity of the issue for some teachers. It can be said that there is the well meaning desire for teachers to be agents of change in the classroom, but they are less willing to engage in critical debates which might in their view ‘politicise’ the debate.

On the question of whose responsibility it is to meet the challenges of reconciliation— the answers varied amongst individuals. Some noted that it was the school's responsibility, someone committed the community to take on the responsibility saying "it's the whole community's responsibility... It's Australia's responsibility." (KI: 11).

Reconciliation, Education and a Just Society

In November 1972 Gough Whitlam then leader of the Australian Labor Party noted in his election speech:

We will legislate to give aborigines land rights - not just because their case is beyond argument, but because all of us as Australians are diminished while the Aborigines are denied their rightful place in this nation.

Forty years after the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum and Indigenous disadvantage, despite some gains, is still one of the most pressing issues that Australians face as members of one of the world's wealthiest nations.

According to one of the latest reports *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators*, (2007) commissioned by the Council of Australian Governments these following statistics are a reality for Aboriginal people:

The number of indigenous women in jails has increased by a third since 2002, and the number of indigenous men by one-fifth.....In a decade the median household weekly income has risen 10 per cent, to \$340, compared with \$618 for non-indigenous people.....There were mixed findings on indigenous health, where a 17-year life expectancy gap between black and white Australians has been called an international scandal.....

The chairman of the committee responsible for the report, Gary Banks, said this year's results "should challenge all Australians to do whatever is necessary to remedy the causes of indigenous disadvantage" (Gibson, J. *SMH* 1/06/07).

It is clear that Whitlam's comments so many years ago are still valid today.

This paper posits the view that in a first world nation such as Australia, which on many indicators ranks as one of the world's wealthiest (June 2007, News.com) it must address the reality of the level of indigenous disadvantage at all levels of government.

In a socially just society the education sector must share a significant part of the responsibility for improving outcomes for Indigenous students which ultimately will result in a better life chances for Indigenous people. It must instigate pedagogical practices which critically examine how school and teachers teach Indigenous issues and approaches to reconciliation. Perhaps it is time for teacher educators and teachers to be more proactive in establishing a classroom environment that has as its basis the Freirean principles of emancipatory education which challenge entrenched traditional teaching methods and traditional attitudes to Aboriginal Australia. As Giroux notes "Schools are sites for constituting subjectivities, and I have and will continue to argue that we need to make them models of critical learning, civic courage, and active citizenship".

He continues to argue that teachers are transformative intellectuals ' who connect critical ideas, traditions, disciplines, and values to the public realm of everyday life. But at the same time, educators must assume the responsibility of connecting their work to larger social issues, while raising questions about what it means to provide students with the skills they need to write policy papers, be resilient against defeat, analyse social problems, and learn the tools of democracy, and learning to make a difference in one's life as a social agent." (Giroux, retrieved 23/11/07).

According to Giroux and those of the critical pedagogy tradition, "knowledge and power should always be subject to debate, held accountable and critically engaged" (Giroux, retrieved 23/11/07). It is not ideological propaganda – it is designed to ask questions about why teachers do what they do and whose interests schooling serves. It is through this critical debate that more socially just communities emerge.

The Future for Reconciliation

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation ended its term on 31 December 2000. The formal policy of Reconciliation, having been voted into existence by the Federal Parliament with full bipartisan support, had been in operation since 1991. The year 2000 was a seminal one for Reconciliation. The Council presented the Prime Minister John Howard with the Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation and the Road Map for Reconciliation as part of its final report. It made six recommendations to advance the Reconciliation process and gave advice on how these could be implemented. (CAR, 2000b, pp.105–106). On a cold Sunday morning, at the end of May, 250 000 joined the people's walk for Reconciliation across the Sydney Harbour Bridge and saw the word "Sorry" written across the sky. Many more thousands walked in other cities. To many it was a symbol, as Sir Ronald Wilson noted in the Council's final report to the Federal Government, that the nation was ready "to move beyond emotional good feelings to a lasting resolution of unfinished business. A legislative framework for serious negotiations must be created without delay" (Wilson, cited in CAR, 2000b, p. 194). Yet since then there has been little committed action on advancing reconciliation both in the legislative framework and within the community at large.

In 2002 the Federal government affirmed its opposition to a treaty. "The Government is deeply concerned that rather than offering closure, the pursuit of a treaty would be a recipe for ongoing disputation and litigation" (Ruddock, Commonwealth Government, 2002, p. 19). In 2004 it disbanded ATSIC as it clearly sees self determination as a threat to national sovereignty.

Consequently, what Aboriginal people call the 'unfinished business' of reconciliation, those 'hard' issues of treaty, self determination and first nations rights, still remain at the crux of dispute of what reconciliation means.

The following quote from an Indigenous person to the Senate Committee on the progress towards Reconciliation clearly demonstrates that the frustrations and ambiguities of the Reconciliation process still linger:

What is Reconciliation? Nothing much has changed in Gove where I live. Reconciliation is a big white fella word. What does it mean?

People ask me that and I don't know what to say. I was on Sydney Harbour Bridge when everybody walk across the bridge and they did that for 'reconciliation'. I been grown up in the bush and I know our law. Our law never changes...I don't understand your law. It always changes. The only thing that stays the same for the white man is that he never listens to our law and our kids keep getting locked up with that mandatory sentencing. I don't understand your reconciliation.

(Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, p. 14)

Clearly the debates on meanings and perspectives of Reconciliation must continue. The difficulty facing the Reconciliation movement is that the resources for such an ongoing discourse are not forthcoming from the Federal leadership.

Reconciliation Australia was provided with initial seed funding from the Federal government to assist its operations, however this has not been renewed in the 2003 budget and in its submission to the Inquiry, Reconciliation Australia pleaded strongly for further resources to undertake its strategic plan stating:

As part of its leadership role, government must adequately resource the ongoing reconciliation process. The people's movement must be sustained. Young Australians must be educated. The funding responsibility is the government's — the resources required are beyond the ambit of private organisations or individuals (Reconciliation Australia, 2003, p. 8).

According to Reconciliation Australia what is needed is a great commitment by the Federal government to the Reconciliation process not only in terms of financial resources but also in terms of emotional and symbolic support for the movement.

Reconciliation, Education and the Future

This paper has outlined the policy documents and the guidelines which underscore the Reconciliation process in schools. There has been no fundamental change in those policy documents since the late 1990s. The Council's final report in its *National Strategies to Advance Reconciliation* document outlined objectives and strategies for educational institutions at all levels, and schools in particular, to sustain the reconciliation process.

In general terms both State and Federal governments support strategic initiatives to improve learning outcomes for Indigenous students and in this sense there is a 'practical' reconciliation agenda in operation in schools.

As has been argued in this paper relationship between education and reconciliation is not clearly defined except in broad educational principles as embodied in the *National Goals of Schooling in the 21st Century* (DETYA, 1999) or in the speeches of politicians and leading educators who consistently make the links between education and Reconciliation.

Given the current socio-political context, anecdotal indications suggest that reconciliation may reflect wider community attitudes and may be 'off the agenda' in schools, except within the narrow parameters of Department of Education requirements for activities or celebrations during NAIDOC and Reconciliation Weeks.

We need to re-ignite the debates and discussions on social justice for Indigenous Australians. What is required is substantive and genuine reconciliation as Mick Dodson noted. Practical reconciliation is merely *about the entitlements every Australian should enjoy* (Dodson, M., 2000). True reconciliation is has much deeper spiritual connotations.

What is required is more funding to continue the debates about reconciliation and further research in schools, and indeed in the wider community, on the changing attitudes to reconciliation as well as further mapping of activities

occurring within educational settings to establish whether any advances have been made in the teaching of reconciliation in schools.

The particular focus on teaching has to include the various permutations of meaning of reconciliation so that young people are conscious of the complexities of reconciliation as a policy of government with its practical dimension, but also as a social movement of Indigenous and non Indigenous peoples who see its symbolic and spiritual dimensions, enshrining Indigenous rights and social justice for Australia's Indigenous people.

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