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# MEANINGS of RECONCILIATION in the SCHOOL CONTEXT

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## ◼ Abstract

This paper draws on findings from a major research project conducted between 1998 and 2000 on meanings of reconciliation in the school education sector. Using data collected from surveys and drawing from the community context in which schools exist, it explores and analyses meanings of reconciliation within school communities when the discourse of what constitutes reconciliation was at its peak. Survey responses were used to map the level of support for reconciliation and to identify what barriers existed to the teaching of reconciliation in schools. Responses were categorised into various themes which defined the type of meaning respondents had accrued to reconciliation. The overwhelming impression from this research is that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people aspire to a level of harmonious co-existence; what is less clear is the direction on how this can be achieved. There is a great level of support for reconciliation within the education community with almost no responses being overtly negative. Many of the comments can be seen as reflecting "soft" reconciliation perspectives. A prevailing theme of this research is that the harder issues of reconciliation are being ignored in favour of symbolic representations. What perhaps best distinguished the survey comments from the responses from the general community was the greater desire amongst the education sector for equity-based solutions and the need to redress past injustices through social justice action. There was a greater understanding of the link between past dispossession and current disadvantage and this required action through specific programmes, and education was seen as a major part of this. 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 or Reconciliation weeks.

## ◼ Introduction: Reconciliation as official policy

The policy of reconciliation emerged from a consultative process with Aboriginal people begun by the Hawke Federal Government in the early 1980s to ascertain whether the Australian legal system might be able to incorporate some form of treaty or *makarrata* or a "compact" between Australia's Indigenous people and the Commonwealth government (Commonwealth of Australia, 1989; Gardiner-Garden, 1999; Hawke, 1988). The political realities of 1980s state politics squashed any real possibility of a treaty for the bicentenary. Subsequently, the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) recommended the creation of a body to advance a process of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (hereafter CAR) was created in mid-1991 through an act of Federal Parliament which 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 10 year mandate to consult widely with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people throughout the nation to discuss the process of reconciling a difficult history of intercultural 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 are one logical starting point of this process.

It is one of the underlying premises of the policy of reconciliation, as articulated by both governments and organisations such as CAR, that education is pivotal to any effective attempt at reconciliation programmes, 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 programmes. As Buckskin (2001, p. 6) notes, "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".

Using data collected from surveys and drawing from the community contexts in which schools exist, this paper investigates meanings of reconciliation within school communities in the late 1990s when the discourse of what constitutes reconciliation was at its peak. Survey responses were used to map the level of support for reconciliation and to identify

what barriers existed to the teaching of reconciliation in schools. The paper will also provide some comparisons with community views and perceptions of reconciliation.

## Schools in the context of society

In providing an analysis of what school communities are saying about reconciliation it is imperative to remember that schools do not operate in a social vacuum:

> [Schooling] is a social practice, centred in the main, on the reproduction of the existing social order. It takes place in a society in which conflict and division, inequalities in the distribution of power and opportunity exist not on a trivial scale but in a way which affects the outcomes of schooling (Symes & Preston, 1997, p. 15).

In order to evaluate the role of schools in the process of reconciliation, it is therefore important to consider the impact that societal norms and attitudes have on the performance of schooling. Indeed Mortimore (1997, p. 476) reminds us:

> In 1970 Bernstein noted that 'schools cannot compensate for society'. In this succinct sentence, he summarised the view that the potential effects of schools should always be compared with the totality of influences in society and that, in his judgment, many of these other influences were likely to be more powerful than those of the school.

It is for this reason that within each analysis of responses for all data collection instruments, reference will be made to research conducted by various commercial marketing firms for CAR.

One important question for schools as microcosms of the community is to do with their role in the process of reconciliation. Do they have a transformative function? That is to say, is their role to do more than merely mirror societal values and norms and should they question or at least explore and define societal values thereby adding a critical perspective to the debate? In the words of Symes and Preston (1997, p. 15), "it might mean developing a model of schooling which is transformative and emancipatory rather than reproductive and disciplinary, which brings about real cultural and social change". Some of the responses from the survey allude to this transformative function of schools while others allude to the dangers of politicising the classroom by advocating a pro-reconciliation approach – even though it is an established policy of governments.

## Analysis of responses on meanings and perspectives of reconciliation

As noted earlier, the prime focus of this paper is to decipher meanings and perspectives of reconciliation within the school education sector with particular reference to research conducted in New South Wales (NSW) schools. The survey question was "What is your understanding of the term reconciliation?" The question was deliberately couched in the personal and aimed at ascertaining the respondent's personal views on reconciliation. The survey responses are analysed below. Responses from surveys were compiled from the first 100 surveys and thereafter every fifth survey response was included. In total, 230 responses were analysed for meanings of reconciliation. These constituted a representative sample of all the responses. Thirteen surveys (5.6%) contained no response for this question. The majority of respondents were school principals and deputy principals (59%) and by the fact that the question deliberately required a personal response, it is the voice of leadership that is being heard in this context.

The analysis which now follows includes commentary and a selection of quotes from the surveys. Quotes are included to illustrate points. Often several quotes are included to illustrate a slightly different perspective. The inclusion of a number of quotes has been done with the deliberate intention of allowing the voices of the respondents and interviewees to be heard without censure. All quotes used have been identified by the survey number and are reproduced verbatim.

### The process of categorising responses from the survey

A close reading of respondents' comments identified a number of common phrases and terms which indicate meanings of reconciliation, at least at the superficial level. The responses were not extended answers. Many cited keywords, most had one or two sentences. So by necessity these answers have a tendency to be all-encompassing "motherhood" statements while others can be seen as almost trite. Although no computer-assisted keyword analysis was conducted, a systematic, yet simple, process of analysis was undertaken which categorised the responses and applied discourse analysis theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Cameron, 2001; Lemke, 1995) to make meaning of what was being said (see Appendix 1 for details of categories and how they were created).

The themes on meanings of reconciliation which emerged in order of most often repeated were:

1. Partnerships/Harmony/Walking Together/Learning Together
2. Social Justice/Equity/Equal Status/Saying Sorry
3. Valuing Differences/Mutual Respect
4. Acknowledgment

5. Recognition/Understanding
6. Acceptance of the Past/Tolerance
7. Unity/One People

Each of the themes is discussed below. Although themes 4, 5 and 6 have been categorised separately they are so inter-related that they are discussed together here, with emphasis given on how the interpretations of the terms differed.

Negative responses

In all the responses there was a sense of underlying hope or desire for better relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and it could be said that there were no overtly negative responses to this question. Responses which did show an element of reservation are noted below. Nevertheless, it may be possible that those 5.6% who chose not to answer the question may have had reservations about the policy and its application in schools but were less open to express these given that it is a policy supported by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). The one mildly negative comment referred to the associated guilt factor that might accompany the policy: "Although it is meant to be a policy without guilt, that is very difficult to do in Australia" (no. 106). Another noted: "Aboriginal people should accept that your Australian generation did not do the injustices of the past" (no. 450). Another merely expressed a lack of understanding of the term – this was the only response to do so: "We really have little understanding or knowledge of what reconciliation means or its implications. We need more information and input" (no. 76). The lack of negative responses may indicate that the survey sample itself reflects the fact that those who responded were already predisposed to positive views on reconciliation.

Theme 1: Partnerships, harmony, walking together, learning together

By far the majority of responses dealt with these "soft" reconciliation issues, citing phrases such as "walking together", "learning together" and "developing relationships". Examples of the phrases which were listed in this category include: "Resolving past differences, sharing cultures ... reconciling the people and dealing with past issues such as land rights, taking of children – acknowledging the pain & loss, allowing the grief, repair and moving on" (no. 20); "Acknowledging the inequities and injustices of the past while joining together to make the future bright for all" (no. 102). This aspirational desire to make the "future bright for all" was noted quite often. There appeared to be an almost naive desire for "peace and harmony" without the considerations of the realities in achieving this state of happiness. Reconciliation was to "bring harmony"; "to live in harmony" and

to "harmoniously co-exist". Some of the comments had quasi-religious overtones: "Our aim is to achieve togetherness with peace, harmony, closeness and forgiveness" (no. 97); "Reconciliation is based on the need to recognise the dignity of every person and to foster co-operation and harmony" (no. 86). Making gentle "feel good" statements about extending friendships and living together are easy platitudes to make. Often these encompass the symbolic aspects of reconciliation and the fact that this was the most often quoted meaning of reconciliation affirms the view that this form of reconciliation is the most acceptable within the school context ... perhaps because it causes the least angst amongst the greater number of people within the school, whether they be teachers, students or parents.

These views of reconciliation appear to be shared by the wider community. Nevertheless, what is evident in the community-based research, as noted in a CAR poll conducted by Brian Sweeney and Associates in 1996 (Sweeney & Associates, 1996, p. 6), is a greater level of scepticism related to what reconciliation can achieve: "Fears centre on the perpetuation of divisiveness in the community. While it is believed that the document should recognise and address '*past wrongs*', the contrast between that and embarking on a '*guilt trip*' needs to be drawn". One consideration requiring further research may relate to the notion that schools programmes are able to allay those fears of guilt more readily than those being implemented in the community at large.

Theme 2: Social justice, equity, equal status and saying sorry

In the next category of meanings, respondents cited social justice, equity and equal status for Aboriginal people as signifiers of reconciliation. Terms used here included "empowerment of Aboriginal people"; "equal opportunities"; "creating an equitable society". Statements included "we all share equally as a nation and show respect for all other cultures" (no. 60); "being friends; respecting each other's values, rights and beliefs. All people having equal opportunities. Reconciliation will only work when we understand why there is a need for it. We all need to join together" (no. 285); "being able to reconcile differences between cultures, develop an understanding of different cultures" (no. 365).

Those responses whose focus was on social justice and equity also wrote of the need to acknowledge the past or to recognise past injustices. This is a typical answer which fits into most of the categories of meaning:

> Acknowledging the inequities and injustices of the past while joining together to make the future bright for all. A process whereby the Indigenous peoples of Australia achieve equity; process

whereby non Indigenous peoples of Australia redress the wrongs of the past (no. 102).

The wish to say sorry was mentioned quite often in this category of seeking justice. One of the most direct answers on this question noted: "seeking forgiveness of Koori people by saying sorry; recognising rightful ownership of Australian land and accepting historical facts of the takeover of their land and destruction of their culture, especially the stealing of their children" (no. 740). While some wrote of the need "to create a more equitable society" and "social justice", fewer respondents in the survey wrote of land rights, a treaty or compensation. "Forgiving past wrongs; joining together in harmony; recognising past injustices and atoning for them through compensation" (no. 620) was a typical response.

Approximately 22% of the responses in this category did require the government to say sorry or at least express regret: "An awareness by non-Aboriginal people that they should be sorry for the treatment of the Aboriginal community over the past 210 years. The PM should say sorry on behalf of the non-Aboriginal community" (no. 595); and further,

> Reconciliation means doing the difficult things – acknowledgement of past wrongs, expression of regret for things done in the name of governments and institutions; commitment to moving forward as one Australian people with equity and respect for diverse cultural heritages (no. 385).

The act of saying sorry according to discourse analyst Austin (1980) is a performative act – in this case "speaking is doing"; the utterance of the word sorry is an important act in itself. Consequently, the very notion of the Prime Minister uttering "sorry" to Aboriginal people on behalf of the nation is an act of enormous significance. In the context of the reconciliation debate, and controversy over a national apology to Aboriginal people, the steadfast refusal by the current Prime Minister John Howard to say sorry has been so politicised that it has involved national debate on the notion of Sorry Day. Some believe that the Prime Minister would suffer a significant loss of face (particularly from his conservative constituents) should he seek to change his mind. Indeed, any formal apology from the Prime Minister at this stage would be deemed to be insincere by members of the Aboriginal community. Still, there is a feeling amongst respondents who note the need to say sorry, that such an utterance is part of the healing process so that the nation can move on. This can be linked to other discourses on the psychology of forgiveness and the restorative powers of apologies. Some thought it important for Aboriginal leaders to accept the apology. In this way the healing process can be meaningful to both sides:

> Acceptance that previous governments made the wrong decisions and having apologised for these wrongdoings (if and when) there should be an acknowledgement of the apology by Aboriginal leaders so that reconciliation can become something tangible (no. 125).

Interestingly, very few people used the term "invasion" when referring to past injustices. Given that "invasion" is the accepted term in syllabus documents, its lack of visibility as a term in the responses may illustrate that teachers are uncomfortable with it.

This focus on justice, equity and the need to say sorry (i.e., the "hard" issues of reconciliation) as the second most popular theme of responses may indicate a greater awareness of past injustices and the historical disadvantage suffered by Aboriginal people amongst the education community in comparison to the awareness of the wider community. The community attitude is that while they are generally supportive of the softer concepts of reconciliation, they are much less inclined towards issues of an apology or treaty. This is affirmed by a Newspoll conducted for CAR in March 2000. According to the Newspoll research, the community is supportive of reconciliation as "a little over 80% of people feel the reconciliation process is important, and 37% believe it is very important – but only on their terms" (Newspoll 2000, p. 6). It goes on to cite the following interesting conclusions to its findings:

> On some matters the community appears to be in general agreement – these include the desire for equality and unity; the recognition that Aboriginal people were treated badly in the past; that efforts to help Aboriginal people have been less than successful; a desire to look to the future and move forward, and that reconciliation between Aboriginal people and the wider community is important (Newspoll, 2000, p. 6).

On the matter of an apology, Newspoll (2000, p. 9) has this to say:

> Around 60% feel that: 'Australians weren't responsible for what happened in the past, so today's governments should not have to apologise for it', and almost 8-in-10 agree that: 'Everyone should stop talking about the way Aboriginal people were treated in the past and get on with the future'. So, although a majority are in agreement with the notion of formally recognising the past, the majority are not prepared to apologise for it.

On the matter of a treaty, the education responses were more disposed to it as a binding document while Sweeney and Associates' findings noted: "In both the

qualitative and quantitative research, respondents rejected the word 'treaty'" (1996, p. 6).

Members of the education community who responded to this survey appear to be more committed to the process of reconciliation in that they expressed less frustration about "dwelling on the past", than the Newspoll respondents. When "moving on" was mentioned in the education responses it was noted as a consequence of recognition and acknowledgement of past actions rather than an impatient desire to forget the past and get on with the future.

Theme 3: Valuing differences, mutual respect

Responses in this category were closely related to theme 2. Respondents saw reconciliation as a process to bring about understandings of cultures through valuing and respecting differences in the distinct cultural heritages of each group. Some extended the theme to all cultures, not just Indigenous peoples: "Acceptance that what makes Australia the country it is, is the diversity of cultures of its population, each contributing positively" (no. 218). Acceptance and tolerance of cultures was emphasised with the need to value the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to "Australian society and to Australia's identity". For example, "understand each others culture; working together to heal the hurt; working together (no. 755); "a process by which different groups of people learn to live together in harmony by developing an understanding; empathy and acceptance of their differences culturally, historically and able to live together in harmony" (no. 560); and, "A coming together and understanding of the values, beliefs and traditions of culture. A recognition of the injustices done in history (recent and older) and acceptance that the whole society must move towards equality and acceptance of difference" (no. 415).

In the research conducted for CAR there is less emphasis on this particular theme of valuing difference and mutual respect. This theme did not emerge as a central one though Irving Saulwick and Associates (2000, p. 17) noted that:

> Australians in general have accepted the new multicultural society which has emerged within the last one or two generations. People who look differently to the Anglo-Celtic majority, and who have different cultural or religious backgrounds, are accepted, if they meet certain threshold conditions, these include learning or trying to learn English, mingling in the wider community and acting like us. Acting like us implies accepting our values and our world views.

According to the Irving Saulwick and Associates findings, Australians, while believing in a "fair go society", are intolerant of those who have a "chronic

dependency without obvious cause" and "Aborigines are seen by many as transgressing these threshold conditions of acceptance and assistance. They are often seen as not behaving like us or accepting our worldview" (Irving Saulwick and Associates, 2000, p. 17).

In the education community's responses there was consistent comment about the need to value cultural differences, not just in terms of Indigenous cultures, but for all cultures which now make up the classroom. This positive view of cultural differences is reflected in syllabus documents and in all departmental policy documents. In addition, there are specific strategies for multiculturalism and combating racism in schools. This may explain the greater emphasis given to this theme by the respondents from the education community.

Themes 4, 5 and 6: Acknowledgement, recognition and understanding, acceptance of the past and tolerance

For ease of discussion, themes 4, 5 and 6 have been grouped together as they are inter-related and respondents often noted them in one sentence or comment. The decision to categorise them as separate themes was taken to allow for greater analysis of the terminology used so as to decipher different interpretations of meaning of reconciliation. Often, moderated judgements had to be made on the variations of meanings accrued to each term depending on the context in which it was framed. The discussion on meanings and perspectives must therefore centre on the variations of emphasis through the "speech acts" (Austin, 1980; Cameron, 2001; Coulthard, 1985) used in these inter-related themes (see Pearsall, 1999; see Appendix 1 for further explanation of this process).

The assumption was made that the term "acknowledge" has a greater weight in terms of commitment to reconciliation in that it may be used within a formal legal framework and its meaning pertains to"recognition of authority or claims of" as well as a sense of admission of the truth in "own to knowing". "Recognition" and "understanding" are terms which imply a considered but less authoritative stand on an issue. In adding these three themes together, it is clear that a sense of acknowledgement, recognition and understanding of the past is a very important part of the reconciliation process according to the responses. The other theme, "acceptance" of the past, does have some clear differences in interpretations as noted below. In the use of the term "recognition" often what had to be recognised were the wrongs and injustices done to Aboriginal people since European settlement or colonisation. The process was not complete, however, just with recognition and understanding of the past. What must follow is the healing process. One respondent

noted the need for "mutual understanding" in order to reach "compatible outcomes" (no. 56). Therefore, reconciliation meant a "coming to terms with the past".

The phrase "acknowledgement of the past" often implied the need to know of the pain and loss and to say sorry so that a real healing process can take place. The need for healing did underscore the comments which linked acknowledgement and recognition with past injustices. Again, the spiritual renewal connection associated with the religious discourse may be evident in these comments. In some cases "acknowledgement" implied an acknowledgement of Aboriginal people as First Nations peoples. Recognition was also coupled with acceptance: "Recognition of and acceptance of problems from the past and working towards closer relations" (no. 41).

The use of the word "acceptance" was ambiguous if no further explanation exists in the response. "Acceptance" was used to indicate an acceptance of the past in some cases and the acceptance of Aboriginal people in others (whether as part of us and/or as part of the Australian identity is unclear). The ambiguity arises when one ponders if "acceptance" of the past means Aboriginal people accepting what happened in the past, or does it mean non-Aboriginal people owning up to and accepting the negative aspects of our history? For example, if we deconstruct the following comment: "Accepting everyone's historical situation and relaxing about it", we can attribute some intentions, but there are variations on interpretations of meaning of this "speech act" (Austin, 1980; Cameron, 2001; Coulthard, 1985). It can never be clear what these intentions are without further explanations from the respondent, which in this case is not possible. Does the comment imply that we should let all bygones be bygones and carry on as if nothing has happened? In the first instance this statement reads as a positive response – let's be relaxed with each other – but on further analysis it is perhaps an expression of an assimilationist ideology seeking to bury the past. For Aboriginal people it may present as an utterly unacceptable response as an interpretation of the policy of reconciliation. This ambiguity may also spring from the respondent's own confusion as to what is meant by reconciliation, which further illustrates the vagueness of the term itself.

The terms "acknowledgment", "recognition" and "understanding" are regularly used in the discourses of reconciliation to imply the need for Australians to come to terms with the nature of our history and relationship with Aboriginal people – there are variations of meanings as to what that might imply, and this is highlighted by the use of the word "acceptance" in the same context. However, the desire for the need to deal with the unfinished business of our history

does underscore the commentary on reconciliation in these responses.

Regarding attitudes and responses of the wider community to the recognition of past ill treatment, Newspoll found some interesting results: "On other matters, for example, the notion that Aboriginal people are 'disadvantaged', the community is divided" (Newspoll, 2000, p. 6). It continued:

> In summary, more people are inclined to say Aboriginal people have themselves to blame for any disadvantage they may experience, as opposed to putting the blame on past mistreatment ... There is little understanding of the possible psychological or social effects on a people of the undermining of their culture by a dominant culture ... either because of the complexity of the premise [past injustice = cause of disadvantage], or other attitudes, a majority of Australians do not believe there is a link between current disadvantage and the past (Newspoll, 2000, p. 9).

Schools appear to have a great appreciation of Indigenous disadvantage and a better understanding of cause and effect relationships contributing to the disadvantage faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### Theme 7: Unity, one people

The final theme on meanings of reconciliation, and the one with the least number of responses, was the desire to "work and live together as one for the common good of the nation" (no. 95); "Uniting both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in a celebration of Australian culture" (no. 103). In one instance the word "AUSTRALIAN" was capitalised so as to emphasise the unity implied in the term. This was not an uncommon desire, "to be brought together and seen as one people" (no. 165); "working together for the common good" (no. 220); "we are one people" (no. 310); "we are one – we are Australian, living in harmony; equity; seeking continuous improvement" (no. 355); and, "we need to unite as one and come together so we can move into the new millennium as a united nation" (no. 720).

## Summary comments and discussion

In providing an overview of responses, the findings illustrate a clear desire for a shared vision of Australia. This ideal of a united Australia is of course reflected in the vision statement of CAR. This vision itself may have skewed the responses towards the symbolic end of the reconciliation spectrum. In summary, it can be said that in answer to the survey question "What is your understanding of the term reconciliation?"

nearly every respondent answered positively with aspirations for harmonious relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, based on mutual respect, and sharing an understanding of past injustices. The vast majority expressed the desire to live together in harmony, valuing Indigenous cultures and their contribution to Australian culture. There is the desire of working and learning together and the need for social justice and building mutual respect between two different ways of seeing the world. It appears, based on the responses, that support for reconciliation within the education community is more accepting of variations of meanings – which include the acknowledgement and acceptance of the causes of disadvantage in Aboriginal communities; the importance of addressing the imbalance and the need to for an apology – than the wider community as a whole.

What is apparent in both the education and wider communities is that meanings of reconciliation are couched in emotive and aspirational statements with degrees of acceptance of the need for an apology. The harder actions of reconciliation – of treaty, compensation (which very few responses mentioned), in other words, what really needs to be done to achieve what has been termed as "hard" reconciliation – are far more difficult to achieve. The education community may be more responsive to some of the historical issues of reconciliation and the need to say sorry – but it still is vague regarding the extent of its commitment to the process.

This paper has canvassed meanings of reconciliation within the educational context. The overwhelming impression is that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people aspire to a level of harmonious co-existence. There is a great level of support for reconciliation within the education community with almost no responses being overtly negative. Many of the comments through all the data collected can be seen as reflecting "soft" reconciliation perspectives. A prevailing theme of this research is that the harder issues of reconciliation are being ignored in favour of symbolic representations. Although respondents see reconciliation as "walking together" and "living together", no clear direction is provided on what needs to be done to achieve that harmonious co-existence, that capacity to live and work together in one community.

What perhaps best distinguished the survey comments from the responses from the general community was the greater desire amongst the education sector for equity-based solutions and the need to redress past injustices through social justice action. There was a greater understanding of the link between past dispossession and current disadvantage and this required action through specific programmes, and education was seen as a major part of this. Research findings for this project

noted that within the education community in 1998, the support for reconciliation was higher than that of the general community and registered at 90%. The one qualification to make of course relates to the discussion on types of reconciliation favoured – and this is where opinions differ. On the whole, however, the support level for reconciliation at the end of the 1990s was very high.

Over four years have elapsed since the original research data were collected in schools. It is therefore appropriate to reflect on what changes have occurred within the general community and what the implications of these changes might be for the teaching of reconciliation in schools. There has been no fundamental change in those policy documents since the late 1990s. The Council's *Document for reconciliation*, included a section titled "National strategies to advance reconciliation" (CAR, 1999) which 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 noted earlier, the relationship between education and reconciliation is not clearly defined except in broad educational principles as embodied in the *The Adelaide declaration on national goals for schooling in the twenty-first century* (Department of Education and Youth Affairs, 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 or Reconciliation weeks. 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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## Appendix A: Themes that Emerged from Survey on Meanings of Reconciliation

### Survey Analysis Procedure

A simple process of analysis of survey responses was undertaken. The steps that were taken were as follows:

1. The survey responses were read and reread for familiarity and meanings.
2. Keywords and phrases were noted and listed.
3. Several themes or "common types of meanings" were identified from keywords and phrases; these were discussed and refined with colleagues.
4. Each survey response was then categorised under one or more of the types of meanings of reconciliation.

Often the responses contained more than one identifiable category meaning or theme in the one sentence; for example, a respondent would include several issues such as "to say sorry for past wrongs and to learn to live in harmony". Its different parts were then listed under more than one category. This was seen as appropriate as the intention was not to produce exact percentile distributions but to establish indicators of types of meanings that respondents were alluding to. The types of meanings were categorised into seven themes which had common "keyword" elements or common phrases. Within each theme there were degrees of variations of meanings in terms of the strength of the messages or the inherent conviction with which the message was couched.

### Definition of Terms

A judgement was made by the researcher reading the full comments of the respondents on the degrees to which one term or another espoused a different interpretation of reconciliation. The researcher's interpretations of what each of the terms implied in the given context was checked with an independent reader who was unfamiliar with the debates on reconciliation. Meanings of the terms are noted as follows:

*Acknowledgement:* to admit the truth; own to knowing; recognise the authority or claims of; to recognise in legal form.

*Recognition:* acknowledge validity; accord notice or consideration to; discover or realise nature of; to realise or admit; to identify as previously known.

*Understanding:* having insight; power of apprehension. It was also used as a verb in describing reconciliation as in "coming to an understanding" (i.e., a union of sentiment; agreement; harmony).

*Acceptance:* allow the truth of; take responsibility for; taking of what is offered.

### Survey Results

Table 1. Themes that emerged from an analysis of meanings of reconciliation.

| Theme/Type of meaning | Ranking in order of frequency of terms used |
|---|---|
| **Partnerships/Harmony/Walking Together/Learning Together** Extending friendships/working for the common good/coming together/co-existence/living in harmony/working together/partnerships/end to barriers/ improving relationships/repairing relations/building bridges/listening/ forgiveness/sharing/healing/friends | 1 |
| **Social Justice/Equity/Equal Status/Saying Sorry** Social justice/treated as equals/saying sorry/fairness/equity/non-racist behaviours/redress wrongs of the past/commitment to bringing about positive changes/empowerment of Indigenous Australians/equal opportunities/land rights | 2 |
| **Valuing Differences/Mutual Respect** Respect for diversity of cultures/mutual respect/appreciating people's differences/valuing cultures/raising awareness of Aboriginal cultures/ appreciation | 3 |
| **Acknowledgement** Acknowledgement of the past/pain and loss/that Australia has a black history/address ignorance of the past/acknowledge wrongs/ acknowledge contribution of Aboriginal Australians/Aboriginal Australians as first peoples | 4 |
| **Recognition/Understanding** Recognition of the past/heal the scars/renewal/understanding of the past/coming to terms with the past/empathy/mutual understanding for compatible outcomes | 5 |
| **Acceptance of the Past/Tolerance** Acceptance of others/forgiveness/togetherness in peace/acceptance of the need to address the problems/acceptance of Aboriginal cultures/past is put behind/acceptance of first peoples | 6 |
| **Unity/One People** Unity/to be seen as one people/we are one people/joining together as one community/unite as one/common goals/one society/Australian | 7 |

■ About the author

Nina Burridge is a teacher, academic and community activist. She holds the position of Lecturer in Education at the University of Technology Sydney. She has been involved in tertiary education since 1991 in various education faculties in Australian universities. Her main research interests centre on Indigenous education and approaches to the policy of reconciliation in schools. More recently she has broadened her research interest to investigating representations within community settings of popular education issues, including cultural diversity and refugee studies. She has published papers and educational materials on the teaching of history, on Indigenous education in schools and on approaches to reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the current socio-political context. She was the founding director of the Institute of Aboriginal Studies and Research at Macquarie University from 1997–1999. She holds a number of community-based positions, including chairperson of the Don Chipp Foundation, board member of the Burdekin Association, a non-profit organisation working with homeless youth, and is she is involved with a number of local community groups dealing with social, political and cultural issues.