



Professor Tom Calma AO's presentation to the ACDE Forum on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher education and workforce priorities

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Introduction

Good morning. I begin by acknowledging Kurna Elder Uncle Louis O'Brien and the Kurna people, Traditional Owners of the land we're meeting on this morning, and I pay my respects to Elders past and present. I would also like to acknowledge Kurna youth who will be their future Elders and custodians of their stories, language, histories and culture.

I am a firm believer that we must support, develop, nurture and cherish our young, irrespective of their ethnicity, to develop their confidence and resilience, as the challenges they will face as they enter midlife will be much more challenging than what we face today.

We must also be the learners as our youth think, act and learn differently to us – we must be partners in our changing world.

I also acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today from across Australia. Thank you to the Australian Council of Deans of Education for creating this opportunity for us to start an important conversation around education reforms and reconciliation this morning.

I commend the ACDE for strengthening its Board by mandating Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander representation through a permanent Director role, with Professor Peter Buckskin being the inaugural appointee to this position.

The establishment of a specialist Advisory Group to the ACDE taken from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Academy including those in Teaching roles, is also a step in the right direction.

I have been asked to address the 3Rs: Respect, Relationships and Reconciliation and some reference to education reforms. I will do this by highlighting a number of reconciliation and education determinant issues that are of interest in prosecuting my support for the 3Rs and equality of life outcomes for Indigenous Australians. I must say that it is a challenge to do justice to this in the 30–40 minutes I have been allocated, so please bear with me.

While there has been much focus on initiatives to improve education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we must think beyond just getting kids to school or early learning services. We must ensure that what goes on within these education environments fosters pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and respectful relationships between First Peoples and the wider community. There is much I can say in this space and I will address a number of related issues in my presentation.

However, I will start by acknowledging the work of Chris Sarra who I am proud to say recently joined the University of Canberra as a Professor in the Education, Science, Technology and Mathematics Faculty. Chris has a national profile for the bold work that he did in Cherbourg Qld from the late 1990s where he applied the philosophy of high expectation by teachers, students and families. This led to improved school attendance and attainment by students and parental engagement in the school community.

Testimony to his approach was demonstrated when he left the community and the replacement Principal, who did not subscribe to Chris's approach, saw both attendance and attainment drop. Some years later when Chris's approach was applied we saw improvements in both areas.

Chris freely and generously acknowledges that this work builds on the work of great Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers across the nation. I pause to recognise and acknowledge leaders including Professors Paul Hughes, Heather and Irabinna Rigney, Kay Price and Peter Buckskin from Adelaide and the many teachers, educators and principals across the nation. There are too many to mention but they have worked at the grass roots level in classrooms and in senior policy and administrative positions for generations. People like David Unaipon and Eric Willmot who were educators and inventors, and their works are legendary.

So why do I mention Chris Sarra in particular? As mentioned, he has a national profile and he has had influence in the approach he has taken to education reform through the philosophy of high expectations, not only in Cherbourg but in other States and Territories.

Chris Sarra explains his Stronger Smarter Philosophy as follows:

It is a fundamental human right of our children to have an education that makes them stronger, in a way that enables them to develop a rich and positive sense of their own cultural identity; and smarter, in a way that

enables them to participate in a modern society as any other Australian would. If schools only seek to make Indigenous children smart, without developing any positive sense of cultural identity, then we do little more than assimilate them into the mainstream. In this circumstance we all lose.

In 2008, when I was the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and National Race Discrimination Commissioner, I said in a speech delivered to the Victorian Association of State Secondary School Principals in Melbourne:

The Cherbourg experience shows that a strengths-based approach, rather than a punitive-based approach, can have an enormous beneficial impact. If you ask me about what it means to be inspiring and inspired – the Cherbourg model stands out. And it stands out because it combines Aboriginality with success. The success does not require transplantation to another cultural environment.

You may have picked up Chris's address to the Australian Senate in November last year. It is worth a read, but the bottom line messages he presented to the Prime Minister and Parliamentarians were that there are three things they can do:

1. Acknowledge, embrace and celebrate the humanity of Indigenous Australians
2. Bring us policy approaches that nurture hope and optimism rather than entrench despair
3. Do things with us, not to us!

Let's hope they heed this sanguine advice as it impacts across all aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs.

Reconciliation

Let me now turn to some Reconciliation activities of interest.

Many surveys highlight the strong connections between language and identity and between language and community. The Federal Government-sponsored *Our Lands, Our Languages report* also identifies a strong correlation between language status and educational, employment, training and physical health outcomes in communities.

The first National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS) of 2005 found that only

18 of the known 250 First Australian Languages were considered strong and still spoken by all age groups in the community.

In the most recent Survey of 2014, only 13 First Languages maintained this status. Of the 145 languages recorded as being spoken in 2005, only 120 were still spoken as of 2014. This represents a loss of 25 languages in less than ten years and 130 languages since colonisation. UNESCO's Atlas of Endangered Languages identifies Australia as a place where First Languages are disappearing at a faster rate than anywhere else in the world.

We need to act now to save Australia's First Languages from further deterioration and loss and recover lost languages where possible. I won't elaborate but the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF) has been able to facilitate the recovery of the Worrongo language on Palm Island even though it was considered an extinct language.

As a society who cares and respects our history and our peoples we must invest in First Languages. The rationale for investing in the preservation and use of Australia's First Languages goes well beyond the issue of Language itself. Investing in initiatives that promote mother tongue language use and revitalisation serves to strengthen communities, bridge cultural divides, foster resilience, encourage literacy and put First Language back into community members' hands. Languages are also intertwined with history, culture and wellbeing.

Recently, Reconciliation Australia has been working with the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation on its ground-breaking First Language revitalisation and literacy work.

The development of digital solutions, including a First Language to English Community and Children's Dictionary, offers innovative ways for speaker groups to collate, organise, share and disperse language elements as a vibrant living collection of language knowledge. Our grand plan is to record and share all First Languages in Australia, and this is achievable if the will and interest are there to support it.

Collective and social investment is required to consolidate this vital language recording project, and we are calling on our Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) partners to consider this opportunity to support and save Australia's Indigenous languages as part of their commitment to reconciliation.

We must ensure that teachers and educators have the appropriate understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and identities to lead the next generation towards reconciliation. And wouldn't it be great if each school could teach their local or regional Aboriginal language and incorporate it into the life of their school.

Reconciliation Australia and *Narragunnawali*

As the Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia, I am acutely aware of the fundamental role Australia's education system has to play in our reconciliation journey. Within this system, teachers and educators have a unique responsibility to ensure all Australian students and children understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

Reconciliation Australia's recent report, *The State of Reconciliation in Australia*, reveals that only 39% of Australians report having a high level of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, and only 30% report having a high level of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Fortunately, good intentions and keen interest indicate that this knowledge gap can be narrowed, as over 80% of Australians agree that it is important to know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

Political dialogue this week and the importance of historical acceptance

Reconciliation Australia welcomed the Prime Minister's acknowledgement of the facts of Australia's colonial history this week, as expressed in his comments which referred to the "invasion" rather than the settlement of Australia. The Opposition Leader on Q&A made similar acknowledgement a few days earlier so the challenge will now be on how to ensure that all, or at least the vast majority of, federal Politicians fall behind their leaders.

Reconciliation Australia's *The State of Reconciliation in Australia* report described historical acceptance as one of five key dimensions of reconciliation, crucial to moving our nation forward.

Acceptance of the fact that Australia's colonial history is characterised by the dispossession and marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is fundamental to moving our reconciliation journey forward.

Historical acceptance calls upon all Australians to acknowledge and accept the shared, and often difficult, truths of our past and commit to never repeating them.

Reconciliation Australia and *Narragunnawali* cont'd

The requirement to teach the histories and cultures of First Peoples across national education frameworks, from early learning to Year 12, will also narrow this knowledge gap within the next generation.

Reconciliation Australia's *Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Schools and Early Learning* program was developed in recognition of the fact that the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures is a priority in the Australian Curriculum and Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, but can be very daunting for teachers, especially if they are non-Indigenous.

Narragunnawali is accessible to every school or early learning service in Australia through an easy-to-use online platform, which assists educators to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan or RAP tailored to their school or service.

Narragunnawali also provides curriculum and professional learning resources which support the meaningful implementation of reconciliation actions. Over 500 schools and services are currently using *Narragunnawali*.

RAPs: Reconciliation Action Plans

Reconciliation Australia's broader Reconciliation Action Plan or RAP program has been running successfully for 10 years, with over 700 organisations now committed to reconciliation through practical plans of action built on relationships, respect and opportunities.

These RAPs are proven to create powerful social change and economic opportunities. More than 35,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are employed in organisations that have RAPs; organisations which have generated over \$77 million in education scholarships for Indigenous peoples over the past decade and spent \$32 million on goods and services from Indigenous businesses in the last financial year alone.

For the 3 million Australians now working or studying in an organisation with a RAP the attitudinal outcomes are also great. Just 5% of RAP employees believe that prejudice is high in their organisation, compared with 45% in the general community. And 77% of RAP employees have high trust for their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, compared with just 26% in the general community.

Reconciliation Australia has great ambitions for the RAP program, and wants to see RAPs as commonplace in every Australian organisation, including universities.

Universities are a vital 'bridge' between schools and workplaces, both environments in which RAPs are successfully up and running, and can create positive social transformation by making reconciliation part of their core business.

At present, 10 Australian universities have active Reconciliation Action Plans, so there is great potential in the sector for further commitment to reconciliation.

3Rs project and MATSITI

Supporting teachers at all career stages to foster understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures has been an objective shared by *Narragunnawali* and the 3Rs project team for many years.

With the 3Rs focused on 'pre-service' teachers and *Narragunnawali* supporting 'in-service' educators, both early-career and experienced, these initiatives will continue working together to deliver complementary programs without duplication.

The 3Rs and *Narragunnawali* are no doubt providing sound support around 'cultural competence' to teachers in training and practice. However, the fact remains that while the vast majority of teachers are non-Indigenous, students are missing out on vital Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

The importance of having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and community members in the classroom, is reflected by the fact that it is a required action for schools with a *Narragunnawali* Reconciliation Action Plan.

Working in collaboration with the ACDE and the higher education sector across Australia, the *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative* or MATSITI has been instrumental in developing strategies to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people entering and remaining in professional teaching positions.

Reconciliation Australia and *Narragunnawali* wholeheartedly endorse the important work of MATSITI over the four-year period in which it was funded, and while we will continue to support non-Indigenous teachers to contribute to

reconciliation, hope that its activities can be carried on within the higher education sector.

NATSISS 2014/15

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) is part of an established program of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statistics collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The survey collects detailed information on the socio-economic circumstance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people every six years. NATSISS 2014/15 was conducted from September 2014 to June 2015 with a sample of 11,178 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in private dwellings across Australia.

Key relevant findings included:

- more than half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people rated their life satisfaction as 8 out of 10 or better, where 0 is completely unsatisfied and 10 is completely satisfied
- nearly three quarters (74%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people recognised a connection with Country and 62% identified with a clan, tribal or language group
- 11% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people spoke an Australian Indigenous language as their main language at home
- 20% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can speak some words of an Australian Indigenous language
- almost two-thirds (63%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were regularly involved in cultural events
- 96% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 4–14 usually attended school
- nearly two-thirds (63%) of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children aged 4–14 were taught culture at school
- the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people completing year 12 or equivalent was 26% in 2014, up from 20% in 2008
- the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a non-school qualification increased from 32% in 2008 to 47% in 2014.

Remote Education – one system does not suit all

Let me now share some findings on a remote education initiative.

I am chair of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP), and this is one of the research projects we manage.

The *Remote Education Systems* project is investigating how remote education systems can best respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community expectations, aspirations and needs.

The project, referred to as the *Red Dirt Curriculum*, aims to find out how remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can get the best benefit from the teaching and learning happening in and out of schools.

The top four responses by Aboriginal stakeholders living in remote Australia are that the main purposes of education in remote communities must be about:

1. maintaining connection to language, land and culture
2. communities being part of what happens at school
3. providing pathways to employment and economic participation
4. being strong in both worlds (western and Aboriginal).

Red Dirt Curriculum concepts are being used to inform implementation of alternative school to post-school pathways in Central Australia, Groote Eylandt and Territory-wide with Curriculum Development teams.

A successful *Thinking Outside The Tank* session held in Perth during July 2014 focused on the question “Can remote schools prepare Aboriginal kids for a future in the resources economy?” Following the session, it was decided to interrogate the 2011 Census data to see what it could reveal about schooling, certificates and employment.

Some highlights of employment data from Very Remote Northern Territory to illustrate one of the interesting findings relating to employment:

- total employment in all industry groups in Very Remote NT stood at 17,189 on Census night, 2011
- of these jobs, 7,702 were taken by employees with schooling up to Year 10
- of those, 3,197 were non-Indigenous employees
- there were 1,957 Aboriginal people described as unemployed, the majority of who have up to Year 10 schooling.

It is often assumed that the key to economic participation is completion of schooling to Year 12. These data do not support that assertion, at least in

Very Remote NT, where more than one-third of all jobs are held by people with only basic levels of schooling.

- nearly one-third of the non-Indigenous workforce have not had schooling beyond Year 10.

In theory there are more than enough jobs for Aboriginal people who have achieved similar levels of schooling.

Some other interesting facts from an analysis of Census data across Very Remote Australia (excluding Tasmania):

- of more than 22,000 jobs in Mining, just 191 are taken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who speak their own language at home.
- about 94% of more than 50,000 jobs in 'Manufacturing', 'Transport, Postal and Warehousing', 'Information Media and Telecommunications', 'Professional, Scientific and Technical Services', 'Mining', 'Accommodation and Food Services' and 'Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing' industries are taken by non-Indigenous people.
- 70% of the Very Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce who speak an Indigenous language is clustered in four industry groups: 'Public Administration and Safety', 'Education and Training', 'Health Care and Social Assistance', and 'Other Services'.
- 44% of all Very Remote employees had not completed a Certificate or higher qualification: 46,505 jobs required no certificate qualification.
- similarly, 41% of all Very Remote employees had not gone beyond Year 10 at school. The mining industry has a large pool of workers (36%) with no more than Year 10 attainment.

The researchers' take on these data are that there is more to economic participation than completing Year 12 and getting certificates that are linked to jobs. Certainly, there is no shortage of what some would describe as 'real' jobs – and it would seem there is no educational reason why many Aboriginal people could not engage in the economies that do exist in very remote Australia. So the question is why is there an apparent lack of engagement in many industries that are predominantly populated by non-Indigenous workers?

Closing observations

- there is nothing to fear from introducing 3Rs – evidence from the *LIME* initiative and the *Getting it Right* initiative signed off by the Heads of Schools of Social Work show that the sky will not fall in but in fact graduates are better prepared to enter the workforce.
- RAPs are worth pursuing because the evidence shows that employees of RAP organisations have a better attitude towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and a greater understanding of their histories and cultures. This will have a positive influence on students who in turn will contribute to a more inclusive and caring society.
- We must all lobby for and work together to save and revitalise our First Australian languages, because they are integral to our Nation's DNA.
- Chris Sarra and other education leaders show us that *high expectations* is a good philosophy that will enhance school attendance and attainment.
- The CRC-REP remote education study "Red Dirt Curriculum" is instructional to demonstrate the relevance of education to remote-living people and that an education qualification is but a vehicle to gain equality, and it is incumbent on all levels of government to work with schools to identify measures to facilitate employment engagement.

I close by formally launching the 3Rs and wishing all parties the best of success in embracing, promoting and implementing this very important initiative. We at Reconciliation Australia walk with you on the journey to a fair, just and inclusive society for all.