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# **Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education – Paper #15 – The State of Reconciliation in Education, from safe to brave**

**June 2021**

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CRICOS Provider No. 00120C

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# 1 Introduction and overview of Narragunnawali

At the time of writing this paper, Australia was commemorating National Reconciliation Week (NRW) 2021. Held from the 27<sup>th</sup> of May through to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June, the theme for NRW this year was ‘More than a word. Reconciliation takes action.’ To reinforce the focus, Reconciliation Australia has identified 20 specific actions that all Australians can take to help achieve reconciliation. These actions—guided by the five dimensions of reconciliation—are based on recommendations from the State of Reconciliation in Australia 2021 report<sup>1</sup> and are as follows:

1. Move from ally to accomplice;
2. Call out racism;
3. It’s all our history;
4. Know your local history;
5. Create culturally safe places;
6. Make reconciliation everyone’s business;
7. Drive reconciliation in education;
8. Aim higher in higher education;
9. Support self-determination;
10. Get your facts first-hand;
11. Act to protect First Nations cultures;
12. Support economic development;
13. Understand political representation;
14. Challenge our leaders to take action on justice;
15. Buy from First Nations businesses;
16. Defend Land Rights and Native Title;
17. Acknowledging Country;
18. Care for Country;
19. Speak up for languages; and
20. Get involved beyond NRW2021

For each of these broad actions, Reconciliation Australia has suggested specific actions grouped under ‘safer’ and ‘braver’. This is based on the suggestion in the State of Reconciliation in Australia 2021 report that the reconciliation movement in Australia is at a tipping point, and that we as a nation need to move from a space of ‘safe’ to ‘brave’ on issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Within Action 7 (drive reconciliation in education), the safer actions were to ‘See all the ways you can help your school or early learning service learn about teaching and learning about reconciliation on the Narragunnawali website and at Learn our Truth’ whereas the braver actions were to ‘Challenge colonial perspectives on history, support school curriculum changes, commit to a RAP in your school or early learning service.’

To support these actions, as well as many other reconciliation actions over a number of years, Reconciliation Australia has been engaging with schools and early learning services, as well as the wider Education sector, to drive ‘reconciliation in education’ through its Narragunnawali program. *Narragunnawali* (pronounced narra-gunna-wally) is a word from the language of the Ngunnawal people meaning alive, wellbeing coming together and peace (the Ngunnawal people are the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands in and around Canberra, where Reconciliation Australia’s head office is located).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/state-of-reconciliation-2021/>

The program is designed in part to support all Australian schools and early learning services in developing a high level of knowledge and pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and contributions.

The Narragunnawali program consists of four key areas (Reconciliation Action Plans, Professional Learning, Curriculum and Awards), each of which are simultaneously underpinned by dedicated foci on Research and Evaluation, Communications and Events, and both Education Sector and Regional Engagement. The program comprises an online platform which is free to access and provides practical ways to introduce meaningful reconciliation initiatives in the classroom, around the school/service and with the community. While the platform can be accessed by any individual interested in reconciliation in education, it also provides a framework and aligned resources for driving reconciliation at the whole school or early learning service level. Through the Narragunnawali platform, schools and early learning services can develop a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), and teachers and educators can access professional learning and curriculum resources to support the implementation of reconciliation initiatives.

While Narragunnawali, and initiatives relevant to reconciliation in education, features heavily in specific actions related to NRW 2021, the program and these actions are also designed to fit into the five interrelated and interdependent dimensions of reconciliation that Reconciliation Australia has identified. These are: Race Relations, Equality and Equity, Institutional Integrity, Unity, and Historical Acceptance. Specifically:

- Within the Race Relations dimension all Australians understand and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous cultures, rights, and experiences. This, in turn, fosters stronger relationships based on trust and respect and that are free of racism.
- Equality and Equity recognises the need for equal participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a range of life opportunities. Further, that the unique rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised and upheld.
- The Institutional Integrity dimension acknowledges that active support for reconciliation from our nation's political, business and community structures is needed.
- Unity is reflected through an Australian society which values and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage as a proud part of our shared national identity.
- Lastly, the Historical Acceptance dimension documents the importance of all Australians understanding and accepting the wrongs of the past and their impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Additionally, that Australia makes amends for these past policies and practices, and ensures that they are never repeated.

Since early 2015, the Australian National University (ANU) has been involved in the evaluation and monitoring of Narragunnawali. One of the principles of the evaluation was a genuine collaboration between the ANU project team and Reconciliation Australia (RA). In addition to a collaborative approach, four further principles were followed as part of the methodology. Specifically, the project aimed to:

- Use a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analytical techniques;
- Provide information to Reconciliation Australia at regular intervals in order to ensure lessons learned can be incorporated as the program is developed;
- Collect information where possible from those who are directly involved in Narragunnawali; and
- Make use of available data where possible and data collected as part of the program.

For Phase 1 of the evaluation (2015-2018), the methodological approach was structured around a set of questions. Given the voluntary nature of the program, there are a set of main questions guiding the analysis:

- **Process:**
  - Why are certain schools and early learning services participating and others not?
  - For those who are participating, what are the strengths, weaknesses and suggested improvements for the program?
- **Outcomes:**
  - For those who are participating, what is the effect of the program on four main outcomes, namely does Narragunnawali lead to:
    - A higher level of understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage?
    - A higher level of pride in our shared national identity?
    - Increased trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the rest of the Australian population?
    - Reduced prejudice experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and teachers?

For Phase 2 of the evaluation, a more expansive set of research questions were used to guide the analysis. These questions were structured around 7 themes or areas as outlined below. While Phase 2 originally included for research from January 2018 to June 2020, the questions were designed to support a longer-term research agenda that aligned with Reconciliation Australia's 2017-2022 Research Agenda. These were

1. Growth, uptake and usage
2. Information sharing and within-institution knowledge
3. Effectiveness of resources
4. Teacher knowledge and confidence
5. Community interaction and engagement
6. Student experience
7. Expansion of Narragunnawali

During phase 2 of the evaluation, there was unprecedented disruption to Australian schools and early learning services. These disruptions have been primarily caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic and the 2019-2020 Australian bushfire season (known now as the Black Summer bushfires).

As well as being aligned with the methodological principles outlined below, the aims and objectives of Phase 3 of the Narragunnawali Evaluation (2020 to 2022) will align closely with the Goals and Vision of the Narragunnawali Strategic Plan:

With this in mind the overarching line of inquiry for Phase 3 of the Evaluation of Narragunnawali is:

**To what extent, and to what effect, do the Narragunnawali program's strategic priorities and enabling initiatives – and the resources and activities that these encompass – meet the program's goals and intended outcomes, in alignment with the five dimensions of reconciliation and Reconciliation Australia's wider organisational vision and strategic goals?**

Key evaluation questions for Phase 3 are:

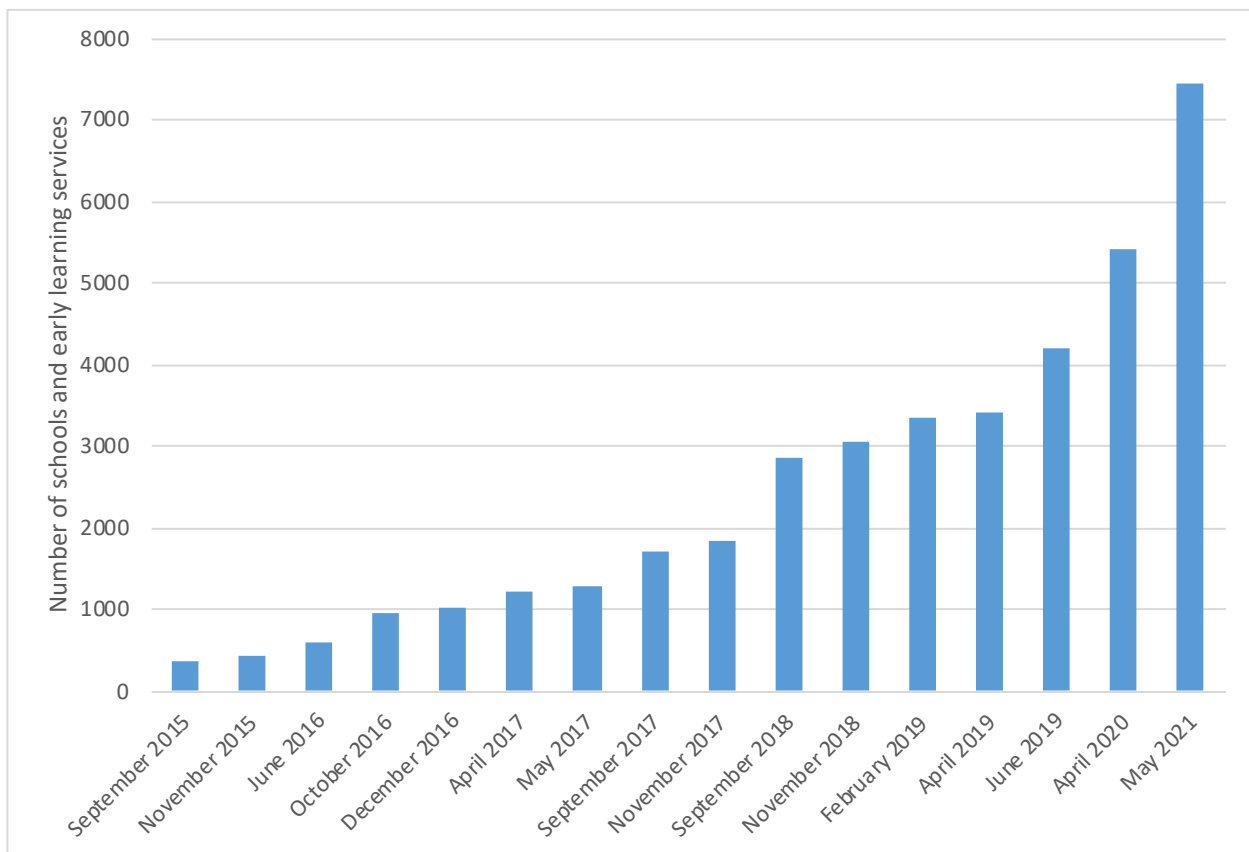
- To what extent, and to what effect, does Narragunnawali support schools and early learning services to develop and/or strengthen links with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?
- To what extent, and to what effect, does Narragunnawali support schools and early learning services to engage in meaningful, practical and symbolic actions of reconciliation?
- To what extent, and to what effect, does Narragunnawali empower and support teachers and educators to develop their own awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures?
- To what extent, and to what effect, does Narragunnawali empower and support teachers and educators to be confident to support reconciliation in their schools and classrooms, their students, and their students' families?
- To what extent, and to what effect, does the communications and marketing of Narragunnawali see an increase in engagement and participation in the program and wider reconciliation-in-education initiatives, as well as increased contribution made to relevant made to relevant policy frameworks?
- To what extent, and to what effect, does or could monitoring and evaluation enable evidence-based modifications, enhancements or changes to the Narragunnawali program to occur, and enable the reporting of programmatic successes and challenges?

The aim of this paper, the first for Phase 3 of the evaluation, is to summarise the state of reconciliation in education, using three sources of data. The first source of data (covered in Section 2 and 3) is from the program itself, with a summary of which schools and early learning services were participating in Narragunnawali as at May 31, 2021, as well as reflections of the state of reconciliation and specific actions taking place in individual schools and early learning service institutions, as reported by those Working Groups who have completed the RAP Reflection Survey. The next source of data (summarised in Section 4) is from the November 2020 wave of ANUpoll, where a representative sample of Australians were asked about their views on reconciliation in education, and the role of schools more broadly. In Section 5 we summarise some of the key findings that relate to education from the most recent (2020) Australian Reconciliation Barometer, with Section 6 providing a summary and some concluding comments.

## 2 Engagement with reconciliation in education

As of the 31<sup>st</sup> of May 2021, there were approximately 7,966 schools and early learning services that were identified as having registered to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) on the Narragunnawali platform. This represents a large, and continued engagement by schools and early learning services with reconciliation in education since the program commenced in 2015 when there were less than 500 schools and early learning services that had commenced the RAP process (Figure 1), as well as since April 2020 at the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic when there were a little under five-and-a-half thousand schools and early learning services in the program.

**Figure 1 Growth in number of Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) in schools and early learning services**

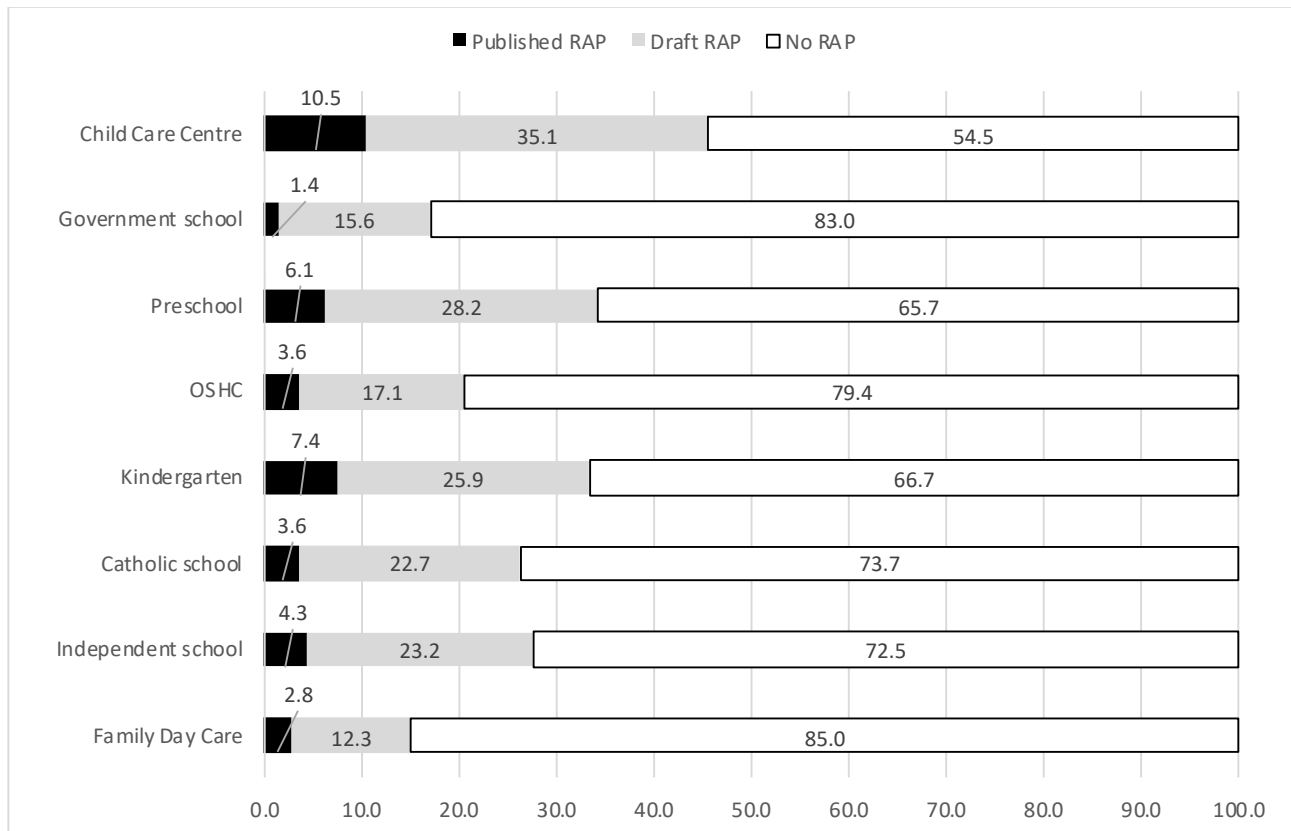


The vast majority of schools and early learning services that have a RAP are at the ‘Draft’ stage (81.1 per cent), most likely because they are either schools that have had a previous public RAP and haven’t since refreshed their RAP; because they are currently actively going through the RAP refresh process<sup>2</sup>; or because they have only started the process of developing a RAP and haven’t yet reached publication stage.

While the absolute number of schools or early learning services that are or have engaged with a RAP is important, it is also important to know whether there are particular institutions that are more or less likely to engage. There is much that can be learned from those that are more likely to engage (in terms of motivations and support structures) as well as the need to target those that are less likely to engage (perhaps through additional support or targeted communication).

There are eight main categories of schools and early learning services on the dataset (Figure 2, ordered by total number of institutions). Child Care centres are the most likely type of institution to have a RAP with 45.5 per cent of centres that are in our baseline population having either a draft or published RAP (i.e. 54.5 per cent of Child Care Centres are estimated to not have a RAP). The institutions that are least likely to have a RAP are Family Day Care Centres (15.0 per cent) and Government schools (17.0 per cent).

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/storage/media/media-uploads/refreshing-your-rap-faqs\\_982OA.pdf](https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/storage/media/media-uploads/refreshing-your-rap-faqs_982OA.pdf)

**Figure 2 Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) by sector – May 2021**

There are also differences in RAP engagement by State/Territory (Figure 3, ordered by total number of institutions). Queensland has a greater proportion of schools and early learning services with a RAP (40.5 per cent combining those with a published and draft RAP) whereas the Northern Territory has the lowest proportion (16.1 per cent).

To explore the geographic factors associated with participation in more detail, we use a regression approach with the probability of participation as a dependent variable and a range of characteristics of the institution and the area in which the institution is based as the independent variables. Some findings that emerge that are of particular relevance are that combined schools and secondary schools have a higher probability of engagement than primary schools. Although there aren't many in the sample, single sex schools and boarding schools have a higher probability of engagement than co-educational schools without boarding. The region in which the school is located has a very strong association with participation in Narragunnawali with participation decreasing substantially as schools become more remote.

Although it had an association early on in the implementation of Narragunnawali, the share of the area in which the school is located that identified as being Indigenous no longer has an association. Schools that are in areas where there is a high proportion of the population born overseas are less likely to have engaged with Narragunnawali. Schools that are in relatively advantaged areas have a higher probability of engagement.

The analysis suggests there are certain types of educational institutions that need to be focused on, if participation is going to be consistent across Australia – primary schools, in disadvantaged and/or remote areas, with a high proportion of students who are born overseas.



## 2.1 Individual users

In addition to institutions, individuals are able to access the Narragunnawali platform and engage with resources and material. Users can be part of one or more RAP Working Groups, but need not be in order to otherwise access the wider resources available on the Narragunnawali platform. Individual Users can be teachers and educators, but the types of registered users on the platform also includes students, parents and community members. As at 31/05/21, there were approximately 89,051 registered Narragunnawali platform Users (6,465 new Users since the end of the month prior). This figure represents a monthly growth rate of approximately 7.8 per cent.

Of those registered Narragunnawali platform Users as at 31/05/21, 40,526 (about 45.5 per cent) were represented on one or more Narragunnawali RAP Working Groups. There was an increase of 2,238 Users being connected to a RAP Working Group between the end of April and the end of May 2021. Further, as at 31/05/21, 25,842 (approximately 29 per cent) represented 'active' Users as per the definition of both having an active (verified) account and having logged into the Narragunnawali platform at least once within the past 12 months (since 01/06/20).

Approximately 4.8% of registered Narragunnawali platform Users (4,284 in total) had at least one professional learning resource saved to their profile as at 31/05/21 with more than twice as many (9,193 or about 10.3%) of Users having at least one curriculum resource saved to their profile as at the same date.

## 3 Experiences with Narragunnawali – Reflections from RAP Working groups

There are a number of potential reasons for why a school or an early learning service may have participated in the Narragunnawali RAP development process. While we do not have information on those institutions that have not decided to engage, one of the key steps as part of the RAP development process is for the RAP Working Group to complete a 'Reflection Survey' (RS).<sup>3</sup> Re-completing the Reflection Survey is also one of the minimally required steps for those schools and early learning services working through the RAP refresh process, 12 months after their RAP's prior publication. The Survey questions have changed a little through time, but as of May 2021 we have data from 4,157 schools and early learning services with consistent questionnaires.

Surveys were completed in a number of ways with the most common being 'Some of the Working Group' having completed the Survey (28.5 per cent of institutions) or the 'RAP Working Group Chair' having completed the Survey in 27.5 per cent of cases. Less common modes of responses were 'All of the RAP Working Group' (22.2 per cent) and 'A RAP Working Group member' (18.7 per cent) with very few Surveys (3.3 per cent) completed by 'Other'.

Surveys completed by schools were somewhat more likely to have been completed by 'Some of the Working Group' than early learning services (41.7 per cent compared to 25.2 per cent) but less likely to have been completed by the 'RAP Working Group Chair' (21.1 per cent compared to 29.2 per cent) or 'A RAP Working Group member' (12.4 per cent compared to 20.4 per cent). This could potentially reflect the potential for a larger RAP

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/storage/media/media-uploads/completing-the-rap-reflection-survey-faqs\\_Zp5WV.pdf](https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/storage/media/media-uploads/completing-the-rap-reflection-survey-faqs_Zp5WV.pdf)

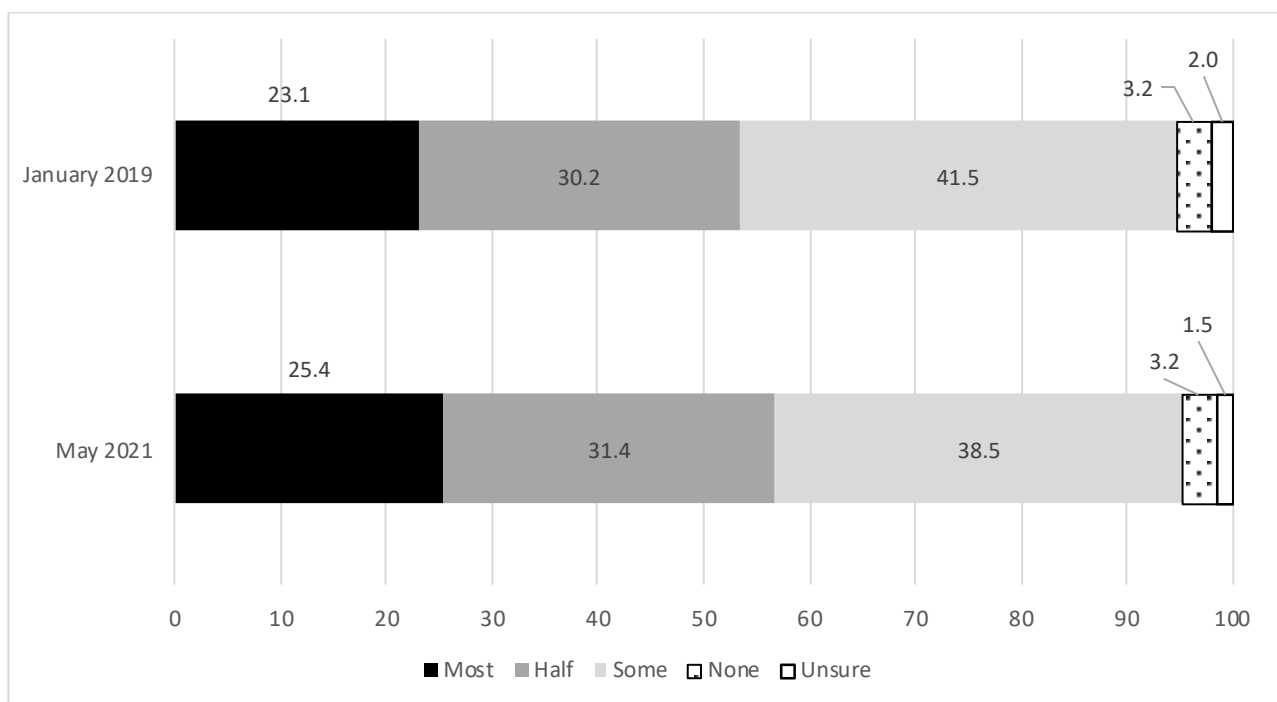
Working Group in a school compared to an early learning service, given the much larger faculty size in the former.

The first Survey question asked was ‘How many teachers and educators are aware of the Country on which your school or early learning service stands?’ The most common response was ‘Most (more than 75%)’ given by 73.4 per cent of the sample of institutions, with an additional 12.8 per cent saying that ‘Half (around 50%)’ know the Country.

There was a much smaller per cent of RAP Working Groups that said that their ‘teachers and educators regularly and confidently incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, perspectives and contemporary issues into curriculum planning and teaching’ Only 25.4 per cent said that ‘Most (more than 75%)’ do with a further 31.4 per cent saying that ‘Half (around 50%)’ do. The most common response though, given by 38.5 per cent of institutions was that ‘Some (less than 25%)’ do. On a more positive note, there were very few institutions (3.2 per cent) where the RAP Working Group felt that none of their teachers or education were able to do so, and an even smaller per cent (1.5 per cent) that were unsure.

Although the proportion of schools and early learning services that incorporate histories, cultures, perspectives and contemporary issues is still relatively low, there has been an increase since early 2019 (Figure 3). At that time, only 23.1 per cent of institutions said that they did so most of the time, with a further 30.2 per cent that said they did half of the time. Combined, there was an increase from 53.3 per cent of institutions that incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, perspectives and contemporary issues into curriculum planning and teaching at least half the time in January 2019 to 56.8 per cent in May 2021. This may not necessarily be attributable to Narragunnawali itself, but it does give some indication that there has been an improvement in that aspect of reconciliation over a reasonably short time period.

**Figure 3 Per cent of schools and early learning services that regularly and confidently incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, perspectives and contemporary issues into curriculum planning and teaching – January 2019 and May 2021**



While there is a reasonably even split between those schools that incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, perspectives and contemporary issues and

those that do not, the vast majority of teachers and educators have not in the last year ‘collaborated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to prepare and deliver lessons’ (30.2 per cent of institutions) or only done so some of the time (42.2 per cent). Only 12.2 per cent of institutions said that their teachers and educators had done it half the time, with a further 11.8 per cent of teachers and educators that did it most of the time. This aligns with some of the findings from Phase 2 of the evaluation, with schools and early learning services reporting challenges building relationships with community, despite their understanding of the significance of doing so, and of the benefits that can arise when doing so.

RAP Working Groups were very unlikely to say that their teachers and educators are not ‘aware that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are a priority within the Australian Curriculum and the Early Years Learning Framework.’ Only 2.5 per cent of institutions answered no, with a further 33.4 per cent saying somewhat. The vast majority of institutions (62.0 per cent) answered yes to the question of whether their school or early learning service is aware that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are a priority within the Australian Curriculum and the Early Years Learning Framework.

Compared to the above finding, there were fewer institutions that said that teachers and educators actively engaged with meeting or maintaining proficiency in the AITSL Australian Professional Standards for Teachers focus areas 1.4 and 2.4 (for primary and secondary schools) and the ACECQA National Quality Standard (for early learning). A little under half of institutions said yes (48.5 per cent) with a further 37.0 per cent saying somewhat. Only 7.3 per cent of institutions said no, with a relatively high proportion of RAP Working Groups saying that they were unsure.

There were not many schools or early learning services that did not fly at least one of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander flags (22.8 per cent), with most schools (63.3 per cent) flying both. In addition, 29.7 per cent of respondents said that aside from flags, their school or early learning service demonstrated ‘respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures through other permanent, visible symbols’ with a further 58.2 per cent saying that they did, but would like to do more.

There was a mix of responses when RAP Working Groups were asked ‘How many of your staff members have undertaken some level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness/competence training?’ The most common response was ‘some,’ given by 38.2 per cent, with a not insignificant minority (7.7 per cent) saying none of their staff members had. A further 5.4 per cent of RAP Working Group respondents were unsure. Combined, there were a little under half of schools or early learning services where half (18.0 per cent) or most (30.6 per cent) of staff members were reported to have undertaken cultural awareness/competence training.

The vast majority of schools and early learning services (77.3 per cent) support staff ‘to participate in cultural awareness/competence training and other professional learning around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and perspectives.’ It is not surprising that institutions that provide such support are more likely to have most of their staff having undertaken such training (35.3 per cent) compared to institutions that do not support staff (13.3 per cent). However, what is somewhat surprising is that even with such support, the proportion of staff that have undertaken such training is reasonably low.

Compared to cultural awareness training, there is a much smaller proportion of institutions (43.6 per cent) engaged with the Narragunnawali RAP development process that have a dedicated budget that includes ‘specific provision for reconciliation initiatives’. Compared to this, almost two-thirds of schools (63.0 per cent) has an anti-racism strategy. For both these questions, however, there was a very high level of uncertainty amongst those who completed the Survey. Around one-quarter (25.3 per cent) of respondents were unsure

about the budget for reconciliation activities, with around one-fifth (21.2 per cent) unsure about whether there is an anti-racism strategy in their schools/services. There were lower levels of uncertainty when the Survey was undertaken by all of the RAP Working Group (18.2 and 15.4 per cent respectively). However, it is highly likely that those teachers and educators outside of the RAP Working Group have much higher levels of uncertainty. One role of Narragunnawali that has been under-invested in may therefore be to increase intra-institutional awareness of what is going on within schools and early learning services with regard to specific RAP Actions/reconciliation initiatives.

One way to increase awareness is through discussion at staff meetings. Indeed Staff Engagement with RAP is one of the 14 minimally required RAP Actions within the Narragunnawali framework. RAP Working Groups were asked 'How often in the last term (approximately 10 weeks) were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and perspectives discussed at staff meetings?' Only 19.0 per cent of institutions said 'Never' with a further 4.4 per cent unsure. The most common response (given by 46.0 per cent of respondents) was 'At some meetings' with a further 18.0 per cent saying that the topic was discussed at most meetings and 12.6 per cent saying that it was discussed at each meeting.

Another way to increase awareness is through discussion at Parents and Citizens (or equivalent) meetings. Almost exactly half (49.9 per cent) said that 'in the last term were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and perspectives' were never discussed at such meetings. Furthermore, only 27.6 per cent of institutions 'have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory group or equivalent.'

A slightly higher per cent (32.6 per cent) said that they had 'an employment strategy to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to apply for teaching and non-teaching positions', though there is a very large amount of uncertainty around this question (34.5 per cent of respondents were unsure).

Most schools and early learning services (56.4 per cent) acknowledged Country regularly in the last 10 weeks (10 or more occasions) with a further 15.1 per cent doing so often (6-10 occasions). Only 7.4 per cent of institutions were reported as never doing so. There is also a high level of involvement in once-yearly, national level events. Most schools and early learning services (58.0 per cent) said that they always celebrated and promoted NAIDOC Week, with 45.2 per cent of schools saying that they celebrated and promoted National Reconciliation Week.

Compared to the above, there was a far smaller proportion of schools or early learning services that in the last year said they invited 'Elders or Traditional Owners to deliver a Welcome to Country at significant events.' More than half of institutions said that they never did (54.1 per cent) with a further 29.7 per cent saying they did so sometimes (1-2 occasions). There was also only a small proportion of schools who said that in the last year Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, businesses or organisations were 'invited to be involved in activities at your school or early learning service' with 31.9 per cent of institutions saying they never did and 40.8 per cent saying that they did so only sometimes. In addition, very few schools or early learning services said that they regularly or often had 'staff, students or children visit local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sites and/or attend events in the community as part of school or early learning service activities' (5.9 per cent combined).

While these are activities that are much harder for an online and nationally focused intervention like Narragunnawali to support, it would appear that it is a large gap in the reconciliation in education process. Returning to the introduction to this paper though, involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, businesses or organisations can be seen as a 'brave' activity for schools to engage in. This could potentially

be supported through the Narragunnawali Regional Engagement Program or similar, though inevitably this would involve allocation of financial and staffing resources.

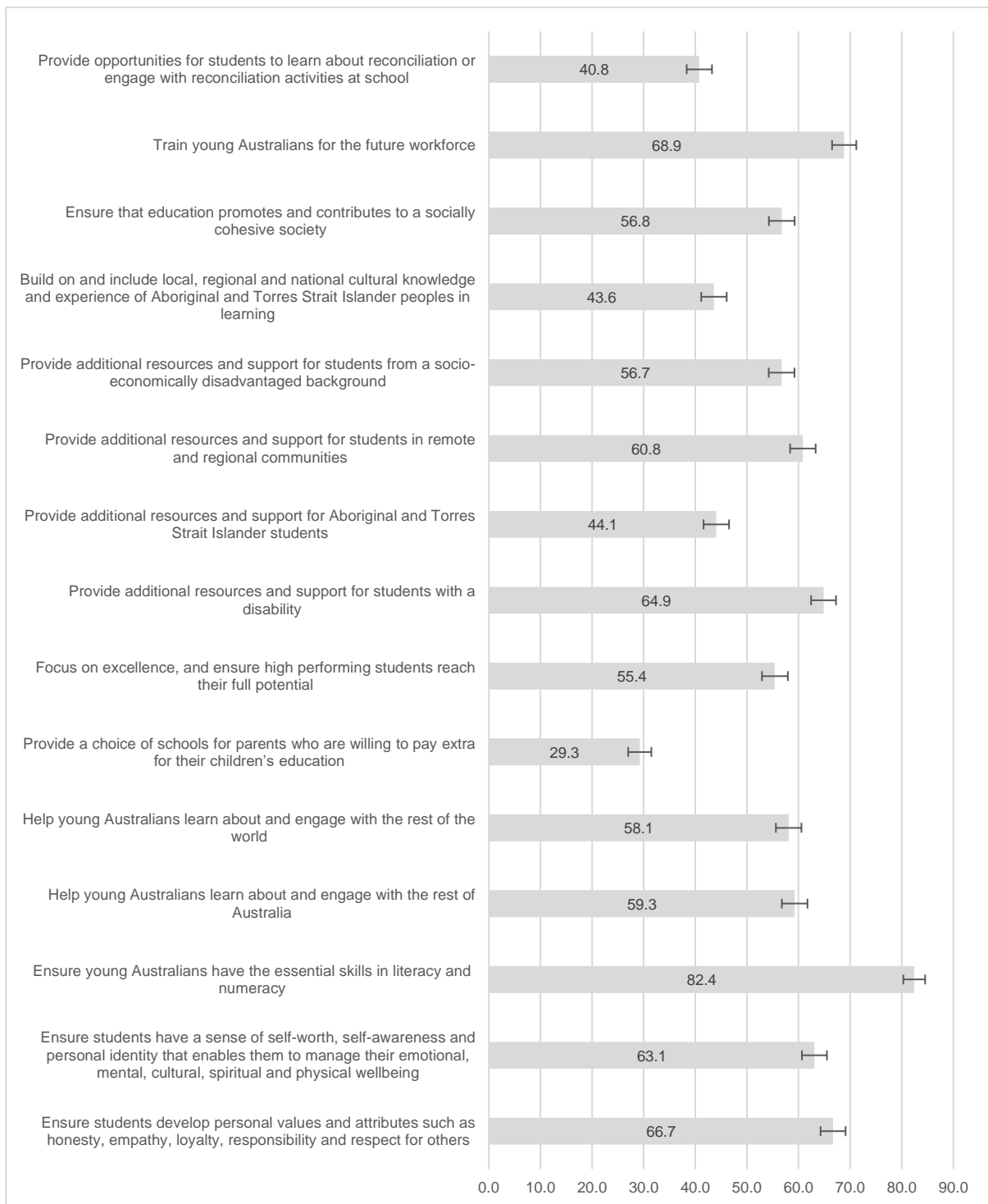
## **4 Views of the general public and parents towards reconciliation in education**

In November 2020, the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods undertook a large survey as part of both the ANUpoll and the CSRM COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Survey programs. In addition to a range of questions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing, mental health, economic and social outcomes, there was a large module on the experience of education during the COVID-19 period, as well as views on the role of education more broadly. In general, parents of Australian children were satisfied with the steps that schools and early learning services had taken to continue the provision of education during the COVID-period, however there were still a high proportion of parents and carers that had concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on the education of their children.

In addition to these COVID-19 specific questions, all respondents to the survey were asked 'Now thinking about school education, on the whole, do you think it should or should not be the responsibility of schools in Australia to...?' with 15 potential roles asked about, presented in a random order to respondents. Response options were 'definitely should be', 'probably should be', 'probably should not be', and 'definitely should not be'.

There are relatively low levels of support for aspects of the school system related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, at least when compared to other aspects of schooling (Figure 4). Only 40.8 per cent of respondents felt it was definitely the role of schools to 'Provide opportunities for students to learn about reconciliation or engage with reconciliation activities at school' and only 43.6 per cent of respondents saying it was definitely a role of schools to 'Build on and include local, regional and national cultural knowledge and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in learning'. Furthermore, despite there being majority support that a role of schools is to 'Provide additional resources and support for students with a disability' (64.9 per cent), 'Provide additional resources and support for students in remote and regional communities' (60.8 per cent), and 'Provide additional resources and support for students from a socio-economically disadvantaged background' (56.7 per cent), there was less than majority support that a role of schools is to 'Provide additional resources and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' (44.1 per cent).

**Figure 4 Per cent of Australians who think particular options definitely should be the role of school education, November 2020**



Notes: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, November 2020.

There was also a very low level of awareness of Narragunnawali amongst parents or carers of children in an education institution. Specifically, respondents were first told ‘This question relates to a program you may or may not be aware of. Please do not search for it online before you answer. We are interested in your honest response.’ They were then asked ‘Have you heard of a program called Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education?’, with only 5.6 per cent of parents or carers saying they had heard of the program.

There was a much greater awareness of one component of Narragunnawali though. Specifically, when asked 'Do any of the schools or early learning services your children currently attend have a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)?' 21.8 per cent of respondents said that they did.

There were some differences in the characteristics of parents/carers, households and the students that predicted whether they were aware that their school or early learning service had a RAP. With regards to parents/carers, higher levels of education were strongly associated with being aware of a RAP. Controlling for education, those households that were in a relatively disadvantaged area were less likely to be aware of a RAP. Parents/carers were also more likely to be aware of a RAP if they had a child attending a long day care centre compared to other educational institutions.

The findings from the ANUpoll summarised in Figure 4 and in the discussion above suggest that aspects of reconciliation in education have a limited amount of support across the general population, especially when compared to the much more positive findings from the Reflection Survey discussed in the previous section. This suggests a potential role for Reconciliation Australia in raising awareness of their own interventions and increasing support for aspects of reconciliation in education.

Such policy interventions are reinforcing though. When we control for the average level of support for education related measures, those parents/carers who are aware of Narragunnawali and those who are aware that their school or early learning service have a RAP are much more supportive of the role of schools as being to 'Provide opportunities for students to learn about reconciliation or engage with reconciliation activities at school' and, to a lesser extent to 'Provide additional resources and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.' More broadly, females, young Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and those with relatively high levels of education are more supportive of the role of schools as being to 'Provide opportunities for students to learn about reconciliation or engage with reconciliation activities at school.' As well as leveraging the momentum of supportive groups, any campaign/initiative to increase support for reconciliation in education should therefore target males, older Australians, those who are non-Indigenous and those with relatively low levels of education, as these are the groups that appear to currently be least supportive.

## 5 Key findings from the 2020 Australian Reconciliation Barometer

One of the key research activities undertaken by Reconciliation Australia is the Australian Reconciliation Barometer. This repeated, biennial survey aims to capture the views of both the general Australian population, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in particular, with regards to 'attitudes Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians hold about each other, and about reconciliation in this country.'<sup>4</sup>

The most recent survey was completed online between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2020 with a sample of 1,988 Australian residents for the general community sample and 495 respondents who had previously self-identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. It would appear that these respondents were recruited from an 'opt-in' panel, which means that it is not possible to make accurate and robust generalizable conclusions about the Australian population, or sub-sections of the population, and it is not possible to create

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/australian\\_reconciliation\\_barometer\\_2020\\_-full-report\\_web.pdf](https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/australian_reconciliation_barometer_2020_-full-report_web.pdf)

standard errors around estimates from the sample. It is possible, however, to draw tentative insights from a large number of Australians that at the very least has been weighted to be representative of the Australian population in terms of age group, gender, and location, even if it is not possible to control for known biases in opt-in samples in terms of education, internet proficiency, labour-force status, volunteering, altruism, and many other characteristics that may impact on views regarding education. Furthermore, because the methodology is reasonably consistent through time, we can make the not-unreasonable assumption that many of these biases haven't changed and that through-time estimates are also indicative.

One of the headline findings from the 2020 Australian Reconciliation Barometer is a continued increase in the proportion of the general community sample who feel that the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is very important. In 2014 when the current sampling approach was first used, 43 per cent of the general community sample said the relationship was 'very important'. This increased to 48 per cent for the 2016 sample, 50 per cent for the 2018 sample, and 56 per cent for the 2020 sample.

There are also a number of findings in the most recent report that are specifically related to education. A key finding from the most recent Barometer is that the importance of teaching and learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures appears to be increasing. In 2020, 83% of the general community sample and 91% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sample believe it's important for Indigenous histories and cultures to be taught in schools. Both figures had increased from the 2018 sample, when 79 per cent and 89 per cent of the respective samples said it was 'very' or 'fairly' important.

This finding at first glance would appear to be somewhat different to that found in the ANUpoll data presented above. However, the sample of the Barometer were recruited to complete a survey on reconciliation, and may therefore be more positively predisposed to aspects of reconciliation than a sample recruited for general social surveys. Furthermore, the results from the ANUpoll were relative to other aspects of schooling, rather than in isolation. Combined, it would appear that a significant proportion of the Australian population see the importance of teaching and learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. However, they do not necessarily see it as being as important as literacy and numeracy, or even things like learning about the rest of Australia, student wellbeing, or the development of personal values. This highlights the challenge of a crowded school curriculum with many competing demands.

While there was change across the two most recent Reconciliation Barometer samples (2018 and 2020) in the belief in the importance of histories and cultures, it would appear that there has been less change in self-reported knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. In the 2020 survey, 66% of the general community sample and 78% of the Indigenous sample believe they have a high level of knowledge about the history of Australia.

This gap between knowledge and the belief in its importance would appear to be resulting in a stronger perceived role for the education system. Specifically, there was an increase in both (general Australian and Indigenous) community samples since 2018 of people who strongly agree the education sector should do something to help improve reconciliation. In 2020, 31% of the general community and 46% of Indigenous respondents "strongly agree" that educational institutions should put measures in place to help improve reconciliation, and 41% and 38% respectively "agree."

More Australians in the sample think organisations (including educational institutions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, community sector organisations, private sector businesses, and government departments) need to do a lot more in areas of



education, than in 2014 to help close the gap. 24% of the general community sample believe educational institutions “need to do a lot more,” and 31% believe they need to “do more.”

The general community sample and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sample largely feel there is a shared trust with teachers and principals. 24% of the general community sample and 27% of Indigenous respondents reported “very high trust” in 2020, and 48% of the general community and 45% of Indigenous respondents reported “fairly high trust” when it comes to teachers and principals. The general community sample and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sample largely felt they have good relationships with school staff. 27% of the general community and 31% of Indigenous respondents reported having a “very good relationship” with teachers and principals, and 36% of the general community and 41% of Indigenous respondents reported having a “fairly good relationship” with teachers and principals.

In a less positive finding, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s self-reported experiences of racial discrimination from professionals have increased across the 2014, 2018, and 2020 samples. In 2020, 9% of the Indigenous sample felt racially discriminated by school teachers and/or principals in the past 6 months, and 12% in the past 6-12 months (up from 7% and 5% respectively in the 2018 sample). This difference would probably not be statistically significant if it was taken from a random sample of equivalent size, so this change should be treated with caution. However, there has certainly not been a decrease in the percentages.

## 6 Concluding comments

This paper has used four sources of data to help understand the state of reconciliation in education as at May 2021, and as Australia moves towards the recovery phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were some very positive findings. Despite the very uncertain situation faced by schools and early learning services with regards to school closures (as this paper was being written, Victoria was in the middle of its fourth COVID-related lockdown), there has been a continued increase in the number of schools and early learning services engaging with Narragunnawali, Reconciliation Australia’s education-focused program.

Outside of the education-specific environment, there has been a continued increase in the proportion of the general community who feel that the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is very important, when asked across repeated opt-in, internet based panels. Within the community of institutions engaged in the Narragunnawali RAP development process, there has also been an increase in the proportion of schools and early learning services that report to regularly and confidently incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, perspectives and contemporary issues into curriculum planning and teaching.

There were other findings in this paper that were less positive with regards to reconciliation in education. In a probability-based, nationally representative survey, we found relatively low levels of support for aspects of the school system related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Only 40.8 per cent of respondents felt it was definitely the role of schools to ‘Provide opportunities for students to learn about reconciliation or engage with reconciliation activities at school’ and only 43.6 per cent of respondents saying it was definitely a role of schools to ‘Build on and include local, regional and national cultural knowledge and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in learning’. Schools and early learning services involved in Narragunnawali were also still unlikely to say that they have regularly engaged with the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community in which they are based.

At the start of this paper, we highlighted the fact that it was written during National Reconciliation Week, which has had as a focus a transition from safe actions, to brave actions. The results presented in this paper suggest that those schools and early learning services engaged in reconciliation in education in Australia have achieved many of the safe actions (engaging with Narragunnawali, flying Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander flags, incorporating histories, cultures, perspectives and contemporary issues). These actions are still important, and should not be dismissed. However, it is perhaps time for Reconciliation Australia and the broader education community that it supports to shift the focus to braver actions, like engaging the broader Australian community in educational initiatives and, in particular, deepening the engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in which schools, early learning services and wider educational institutions are located.