

"Why we need to get our act together and take this seriously"

Firstly I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners, the Kaurna people, on whose land we meet today. I pay respect to their elders and to the ancestors who have gone before us.

I would also like to acknowledge my Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders, brothers and sisters who are here today. I pay my respects to you and I want to acknowledge your commitment to making a lasting difference in the lives of our children.

I would also like to take this time to thank the Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council and *Dare to Lead* for the opportunity to speak with you today.

In April 2003 I spoke at the launch of the *Dare to Lead* Coalition in Sydney. That day I urged Principals to sign up as coalition members and to take the challenge on.

Today I no longer ask you to sign up, you have done that. Today I implore — get your act together and take this business seriously.

Recently Reconciliation Australia and the APAPDC formed a partnership to work collaboratively, to keep each organisation honest and to strive together in improving education outcomes for Indigenous students and develop a greater awareness of Indigenous perspectives and reconciliation in schools.

As a partner with APAPDC it is my obligation to keep challenging *Dare to Lead* schools to start acting now and improve outcomes for our Indigenous students.

"Why do we need to get our act together and take this seriously?"

When I spoke at the launch in April 2003 I spoke of the disadvantage that Indigenous people were confronted with. Do I need to speak to you today and tell you the statistics? You should already know the alarming difference in retention rates, completion of Year 12, numeracy and literacy levels.

You must have read and seen images on television of life expectancy, health, employment, over representation in the prisons. You see the racism daily on television, on radio, in your schools. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people cannot spend their time reminding non-Indigenous people of challenges we face.

I do not need to stand up here today and remind you again and again. What does that do for me? What does that do for my Indigenous brothers and sisters here today? To devote my time to telling people what they should already know!

You know, otherwise why did you sign up?

Today I want to adopt a different approach. Today I want young people, your Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, to tell you to get your act together. If the young people in your schools are telling you, you have to take them seriously.

In April and May this year, with the support of the National Australia Bank, Reconciliation Australia and *The Age* photographer Sandy Scheltema visited six secondary schools around Australia to conduct *Reconciliation: all about us* photography workshops.

Reconciliation Australia initially planned for Sandy to photograph images that captured reconciliation for our publications and promotional material, but in discussion with her, we decided on an alternative approach which was both more challenging and ultimately more rewarding for all involved.

Why not ask young people to tell us what they think reconciliation looks like in their communities? Why not get the young people to use digital cameras and to capture reconciliation in and around their schools?

The six schools chosen were from the same communities as the finalists of the Reconciliation Australia/BHP Billiton Indigenous Governance Awards, but each school also displayed a commitment to improving the outcomes of their Indigenous students — and most of course were *Dare to Lead* coalition members! The schools were:

- Maroochydore State High School
- Anzac Hill High School in Alice Springs
- Xavier Community Education Centre on Bathurst Island
- Eastern Goldfields Senior High School in Kalgoorlie
- Northland Secondary College here in Melbourne, and
- Broken Hill High School.

Twelve students, six Indigenous and six non-Indigenous, from each school participated in a day long workshop where they were taught the finer details of photography (but as you know it doesn't take long for students to work out how to use technology and soon they were telling us how to use the cameras!!).

They participated in a small exercise generating some discussion on issues around reconciliation, and then spent the day taking photos.

The result was 4000 photos and many stories and examples of students challenging themselves, their schools and communities and coming up with new and diverse ideas of reconciliation. Today I want to show you six photos.

Each of these photos comes with a message from the young people who took them. They are not necessarily nice; they may take some time to soak in; but they are a challenge from our young people to take them seriously.

Let me begin... As each picture comes on the screen I will give you 30 seconds to look at it, absorb it, and perhaps even take some notes or chat to the person next to you and discuss what you think this image might be saying or asking you.

The first picture was taken by two Murri boys from Maroochydore State High School, in the heart of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. Maroochydore was the final school that we visited and I'm told it was beautiful weather until... our team arrived in the Sunshine Coast and it poured with rain!

What are the two young men who took this photo telling us?



The image is in many ways haunting and it was their intention for us to feel uncomfortable, to be disturbed by the boy's eyes and to be drawn into staring at the jar and the snake.

For the young man in the picture, the serpent is a part of his dreaming. He has been told the stories of his dreaming and this land was created by the serpent. In his words he is saddened that the creation spirit has been turned into a specimen to study, to poke and to prod, instead of being allowed to be free and remain somewhat of a mystery.

These are powerful sentiments from a young man. But more powerfully he also issued a warning with this picture. Maroochydore State High School has a small number of Indigenous students and at times he says he feels like a specimen. He is a problem, he is a statistic, he is measured and collected, he is a success and he is a failure.

Maroochydore is innovative when it comes to its Indigenous students, yet even at the best of schools our young people still feel like this. We have to start taking this seriously when it is our young Indigenous people telling us that we must be vigilant and not just study them, talk of them as problems and make them feel like specimens.

The best examples of schools that are showing great improvements, whatever the numbers of their Indigenous students, are those that enable their young people to feel proud, to feel free to express themselves as young Indigenous people and be valued for what they bring to the life of the school.

While collecting data is an important exercise in measuring where the school is improving, our young people can feel like another statistic, a graph or number — a serpent with the greatest potential to create, but instead a specimen that has been trapped so it can be measured and studied. This is a wake up call from these young men and we have to take them seriously.

The next photo...

This photo was also taken by students from Maroochydore and again I will give you a little time to take in what you think it is saying. I should say that the students who took these photos have given Reconciliation Australia a little insight into what they wanted to convey with the image, but they also took the photos so they could be interpreted and re-interpreted by those who look at them.



Every photo can tell a thousand stories. Today I am giving you some insight into the stories of the young people behind these photos.

One of the most powerful images of the reconciliation movement is the hands. Whether it is the Sea of Hands or posters of black and white hands reaching out and embracing, it is a strong illustration of a willingness to reach out and come together. The approach of the young Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who took this photo was to take that strong image of the black and white hands reaching towards each other and place them in chains.

But what are they telling us in this photo? In the words of the young non-Indigenous woman, she has seen the disturbing black and white photos of the chain gangs, but has had little opportunity to learn about that history and the history of Indigenous people in this country.

This is a message to all schools, particularly those with no Indigenous students, that young people want to learn, they want Indigenous perspectives and they want to know the stories of their fellow Indigenous students.

They are challenging educators, teachers, principals and even politicians that they want to know about their local Indigenous people, they want to know about the struggles for rights and they want to know about survival.

What does the young Indigenous person want us to think and feel with this photo? It is a simple comment and one I will not go into detail about, but let you dwell on yourselves.

He simply said that you can put me in chains and you can pull as hard as you want but I will resist.

Okay, this powerful image is from Northland Secondary College in Melbourne. It features the Torres Strait Islander flag, the Australian flag, the Aboriginal flag and a reconciliation flag from the 1999 National Youth Reconciliation Convention in Geelong.

Northland Secondary College was infamous in the early 1990s when the Kennett Government tried desperately to shut it down, but due to the resistance of the local Koorie community it stayed open.

At one stage, the classes were being taught by local community leaders and elders, as the school was technically closed.



It has a large Koori population and proudly claims it is only still open because of the Indigenous students and their families. It lies in the middle of one of the largest shopping plazas, and evident the day of the photography workshops as the students at times found it difficult finding images that reflected reconciliation.

Then one young man, seen in the image draped in the Aboriginal flag, had the idea to take the flags from the library (without permission!) and take them to the top of a mound of soil. The school is building a new science and technology centre, and the soil was being dug up and left in a mound next to the new science building.

It is also surrounded by a temporary fence — what teachers would describe as "an out of bounds area!" The young man had one simple idea — an act of defiance — to take the symbols of Aboriginal, Torres Strait and Australian pride and photograph them.

Here this young Aboriginal man is telling you that he is proud. At the launch of the photo exhibition at the National Australia Bank headquarters in Melbourne he told the audience "I am a proud Koorie man". More than that, he also wanted to turn something out of his normal bounds, something that others had discarded, into a place that showed his defiance and willingness to work with other people.

Looking at this image, you would not know that it is fenced in and surrounded by a large shopping centre.

Your students may not always articulate that they are proud of their heritage and their culture, even their school, but this photo gives us a very different picture.

One of pride, of defiance and of reconciliation in action.



The next picture was taken by a young Indigenous woman from Anzac Hill High School in Alice Springs. And I ask you, what does this picture tell us?

At a recent workshop, a colleague of mine at Reconciliation Australia asked the audience of school teachers and students what they thought this picture told us. Their overwhelming response was of black and white people coming together as equals.

The young Aboriginal woman who took this photo did it for one reason — they are her cousins. Both women in the photo are Indigenous and they too are cousins. What does this tell us?

Simply, know who your students are. In the audience of teachers was a Murri man working with the Education Department in Queensland, who stood up and told this story. Recently he was invited to a NAIDOC Week function at a Brisbane school to speak with the Indigenous students. He spoke to the 15 or so students and noted that one of the students was missing — his daughter.

After the function he went to the teacher coordinating the event and asked where this student was and the reply was "she isn't Aboriginal".

You can imagine the embarrassment that the teacher felt when he declared his interest as her father.

They checked her enrolment records which showed that the school had been made aware of her Aboriginality. Again, know who your students are — it is as simple as that.

This photo can be connected with the first photo I showed of the snake in the bottle. Young people can feel like they are statistics and a simple way of making certain that they don't is to take an interest in each of them.

Put your students at the core of the school community, not at the fringes. NAIDOC Week, National Reconciliation Week and every week should be a celebration of Indigenous culture and heritage for ALL students.

In the words of an elder in Alice Springs, who is also the Aunty of the two students in the image, "I make sure our kids know their cousins, their brothers and sisters, you'd think the school would want to know!".

And the final two images, firstly the picture of the students under the black and white umbrella and secondly what has been called the "racism in the bin" photo.

I have put these two together as they are from the same school, Maroochydore State High School, but also the racism in the bin image is a direct result of the umbrella photo.



Let me explain.

The image of the young Indigenous and non-Indigenous people under the umbrella was the inspiration of the two students in the image. They want to show black and white, coming together.

You cannot see their faces, but you can see that they are determined to stand, black and white, side by side.

After this image was taken, all the Maroochydore students met in the Aboriginal studies room to download the pictures and discuss what photos had been taken. When this photo appeared on the screen, a young Indigenous man spoke up.

He told his peers he was offended by the image and as a fair skinned Aboriginal man he felt that this photo further cemented him as being invisible. While he was black on the inside, he is pale on the outside and this image reinforced the stereotype that Aboriginal people are black and non-Aboriginal people are white — which he believes is not the case.

He grabbed his camera, a texta and piece of paper and stormed out of the classroom. Two minutes later he returned with this image.

Racism, he told the group of students, is a load of rubbish.



A couple of months later at the launch of the photo exhibition at the school, the student was interviewed for the local paper. His sentiments had not changed. Racism should be put out with the garbage: it doesn't make any sense these days to define people by their colour. We need to take the time to really know the stories and the people.

These are powerful statements from a young 15 year old Indigenous man.

These are only six of 4000 images taken by the 60 students from the schools.

As I mentioned earlier, when Reconciliation Australia embarked on this exercise we never imagined the impact the images would have on us and we have committed to making sure that the messages in these photos are seen by as many people as possible.

Why? Because the young people involved seem to have so little difficulty understanding a concept the rest of us often complicate.

We want to ask all the time: "What does reconciliation mean?"; "What does it have to do with me?"; "How will we know when we get there?"

When the young people involved in the project which produced the images you see around you were asked what reconciliation looks like, they offered so many uplifting answers.

Adults tend to read the statistics, see the images on television and become consumed by politics rather than people. I am often asked what will it take to bring about reconciliation in this country.

Of course there are many answers but probably the most important is education, educating our young people.

But what does that mean?

It has to be more than just improving the statistics. Even the best practice schools, some of which were involved in the photography project, still have students telling them they can and must do better.

Through this project the young people have told us to act now and to take them seriously.

You must be innovative. There are many ways to improve outcomes for your students. Many of you have discovered some of those ways — share what you have learnt with each other, start supporting other schools which may not have the resources you have.

It might mean saying no to a cultural exchange experience for students and encouraging them to learn something about reconciliation closer to home.

One Melbourne school I've heard about cancelled its trips to Beagle Bay to spend the time and resources supporting a local Koorie School.

You must engage students in the entire process, give them ownership of the problem solving and they will take greater pride in the success.

We don't want snakes in bottles. We want serpents, free and creative.

Our young people have told us to act now and to take this stuff seriously.

It's time to listen to them and act on what we hear.

Questions for ALL images

1. What does this picture say to you?
2. What do you think the artist is saying about reconciliation?
3. What words come to mind when you look at this picture?
4. What symbols have been used in constructing this picture and what do they represent?
5. Is the picture presenting:
 - a challenge that must be overcome before reconciliation can be achieved?
 - a solution to any problems standing in the way of reconciliation?
 - a symbolic representation of the reconciliation ideal?
6. Do you agree with the sentiments/ideas represented in this picture? If so, why? If not, why not?
7. Black and White has been used frequently in these photographs. Sometimes they are juxtaposed, sometimes joined together or mixed up. Why are other skin colours rarely represented in images about reconciliation?
8. What sort of image would you construct to present or represent your beliefs, thoughts, feelings and/or ideas about reconciliation?