# The Implementation of the Policy of Reconciliation in NSW Schools

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my extended family: Those who are closest to me and have endured the longest and the most Brett, Emma and Hugh, I hope the price was not too high. To all my dear and loyal friends, activists, chardonnay sipping bleeding hearts one and all, who understood the pressures this work brought to my life.

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## Abstract

The research detailed in this thesis investigated how schools in NSW responded to the social and political project of Reconciliation at the end of the 1990s.

The research used a multi-method research approach which included a survey instrument, focus group interviews and key informants interviews with Aboriginal and non Aboriginal teachers, elders and educators, to gather qualitative as well as quantitative data. Differing research methodologies, including Indigenous research paradigms, are presented and discussed within the context of this research. From the initial research questions a number of sub-questions emerged which included:

- *The exploration of meanings and perspectives of Reconciliation evident in both the school and wider communities contexts and the extent to which these meanings and perspectives were transposed from the community to the school sector.*
- *The perceived level of support for Reconciliation in school communities and what factors impacted on this level of support.*
- *Responses of school communities to Reconciliation in terms of school programs and teaching strategies including factors which enhanced the teaching of Reconciliation issues in the classroom and factors which acted as barriers.*

Firstly, in order to provide the context for the research study, the thesis provides a brief historical overview of the creation of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. It then builds a framework through which the discourses of Reconciliation are presented and deconstructed. These various meanings and perspectives of Reconciliation are placed within a linear spectrum of typologies, from 'hard', 'genuine' or 'substantive' Reconciliation advocated by the Left, comprising a strong social justice agenda, first nation rights and compensation for past injustices, to the assimilationist typologies desired by members of the Right which suggest that Reconciliation is best

achieved through the total integration of Aboriginal people into the mainstream community, with Aboriginal people accepting the reality of their dispossession.

In between these two extremes lie degrees of interpretations of what constitutes Reconciliation, including John Howard's current Federal Government interpretation of 'practical' Reconciliation. In this context "Left" and "Right" are defined less by political ideological lines of the Labor and Liberal parties than by attitudes to human rights and social justice. Secondly, and within the socio-political context presented above, the thesis reports on research conducted with Indigenous and non Indigenous educators, students and elders in the context of the NSW school system to decipher meanings and perspectives on Reconciliation as reflected in that sector. It then makes comparisons with research conducted on behalf of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation during the 1990s on attitudes to Reconciliation in the community. Perceived differences are analysed and discussed.

The research further explores how schools approached the teaching of Reconciliation through a series of survey questions designed to document the types of activities undertaken by the schools with Reconciliation as the main aim.

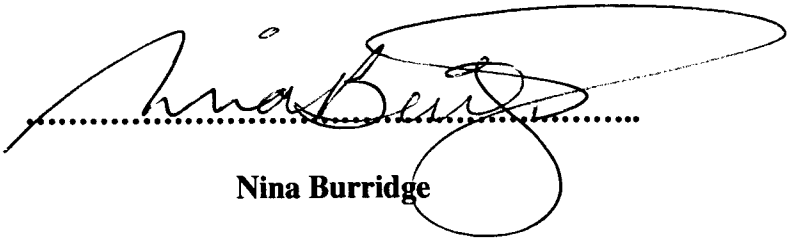
Research findings indicated that while both the community at large and the education community are overwhelmingly supportive of Reconciliation, both as a concept and as a government policy, when questioned further as to the depth and details of this commitment to Reconciliation and the extent to which they may be supportive of the 'hard' issues of Reconciliation, their views and level of support were more wide ranging and deflective.

Findings indicated that, in general, educators have a more multi-layered understanding of the issues related to Reconciliation than the general community, and a proportion of them do articulate more clearly those harder, more controversial aspects of the Reconciliation process (eg just compensation, land and sea rights, customary laws). However, they are in the main, unsure of

its meaning beyond the 'soft' symbolic acts and gatherings which occur in schools. In the late 1990s, when Reconciliation was at the forefront of the national agenda, research findings indicate that while schools were organising cultural and curriculum activities in their teaching of Indigenous history or Aboriginal studies - they did not specifically focus on Reconciliation in their teaching programs as an issue in the community. Teachers did not have a clearly defined view of what Reconciliation entailed and schools were not teaching about Reconciliation directly within their curriculum programs.

The research also sought to identify factors which acted as enhancers of a Reconciliation program in schools and factors which were seen as barriers. Research findings clearly pointed to community and parental attitudes as important barriers with time and an overcrowded curriculum as further barriers to the implementation of teaching programs. Factors which promoted Reconciliation in schools often related to human agency and human relationships such as supportive executive leadership, the work of committed teachers and a responsive staff and community.

**I certify that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.**



**Nina Burridge**

**7 November 2003**