

They throw spears: Reconciliation through music

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'They throw Spears' was written as part of the research for my PhD at the University of Sydney. The study was conducted in two primary schools: one in a remote area in the Northern Territory (NT) and one in an urban setting in Tasmania. It was conducted in 2009 and investigated Indigenous and non-Indigenous student, non-Indigenous teacher, non-Indigenous principal and Indigenous Teaching Assistant attitudes towards Reconciliation. The theories of Lev Vygotsky and Kieren Egan and the writing of Karen Martin informed the study. The article focuses on the importance of the contribution of the two Indigenous Teaching Assistants involved in the research and explores their role in its success. It concentrates on Marlene Primary School in Katherine in the Northern Territory. At the time that the research was conducted, the school population was over 90% students Indigenous. I used an arts-informed research methodology and the writing includes narratives written in the first person. I gathered the research data through semi-structured individual and group interviews, student definitions, song lyrics, t-shirt designs, digital recordings, video footage, sketches, collographs, photographs and researcher observations. This approach enabled my personal story to be told. The article also features an image I created to symbolise the spirit of the research. The image is a block printed collograph and depicts the spears that the Indigenous Teaching Assistant (Arthur) used in his classes with the students.

Keywords: Reconciliation, arts informed inquiry, Indigenous education, Indigenous teaching assistants, Indigenous learning styles.

I was first motivated to do this research in 1995 when I worked as a music teacher in the Northern Territory. During this time I observed that Indigenous students in particular, responded positively to learning experiences through music. I observed that these students experienced academic success in the classroom through the study of song writing. I thought that perhaps involvement in the arts could have a positive impact on the learning of these Indigenous students and resolved to design a research project to test my theory.

The inspiration for the research also lay in the pilot case study that I conducted at an inner-city school with a high Indigenous enrolment in Sydney. I approached the principal of the school to be involved in a pilot project in 2008. The students at this small school came from "... a variety of different backgrounds including working and middle-class and students who lived in the various housing commission estates dotted around the inner city Sydney suburb" (Excerpt from interview with the principal of NSW pilot case study school, July 2008). I spent eight afternoon sessions with one-year five/six class and ran workshops in song writing on themes of Reconciliation. During the pilot I analysed the definitions and lyrics of the songs written by the students for themes and motifs. The pilot study informed the research methodology I used in the Reconciliation through Music investigation. It enabled me to develop my strategies and understandings before my official study commenced. The students at the pilot school, and the songs that they wrote, provided inspiration for me and helped galvanise my resolve to continue with the inquiry.

A DEFINITION OF RECONCILIATION

Broadly speaking, Reconciliation is about recognition, rights and reform. It is recognition of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original people of this land, and it is recognising the Indigenous history of this land, both the long Indigenous history before the invasion, and the shared history since. Reconciliation is recognising the rights that flow from being the first peoples, as well as our rights as Australian citizens in common with all other citizens. It is about reforming systems to address the disadvantages suffered by Indigenous peoples and, as I have said, it is about changing the frame of reference of all Australians to include Indigenous Australia (Burney, 2000, p.66).

This definition has been used throughout the investigation because it communicates concepts of recognition, rights, and reform for Indigenous people. Moreover, it acknowledges the significance of the land to Indigenous peoples. The description also conveys a sense of the history of Indigenous peoples and offers the possibility of a collective history for all Australian people. Whilst symbolic Reconciliation definitions have been theorised since the 1980s, in the past decade theorists have suggested that there are hard, soft and assimilationist Reconciliation concepts (Burridge, 2007). In this framework, hard Reconciliation refers to Indigenous leaders demanding their land and sea rights and exacting compensation and a treaty (makarrata). This has widely been seen as a radical movement.

Soft Reconciliation is described in more conservative terms, and refers to programs that focus on correcting Indigenous disadvantage (Burridge, 2007). Soft Reconciliation has generally been seen as a movement led by non-Indigenous community leaders and has been referred to as the people's movement. Marches, ceremonies, gatherings and celebrations are viewed as soft Reconciliation activities. Assimilationist Reconciliation is known as practical Reconciliation and aims at standardising health, housing and education for all Australians as one nation.

METHODOLOGY

This inquiry embraces a qualitative approach and I gathered data from students, teachers, principals, and Indigenous Teaching Assistants. I made field notes, took photographs, made digital recordings and sketches, recorded video footage and conducted interviews with the participants from both schools. I worked as teacher, researcher, and observer in the school for four weeks. I was an active participant in the research and after observing the classes for one week, I taught the two classes of year five and six students each day for a period of two weeks. After the project culminated in a community concert, I spent one week completing the project and in this time, I interviewed the students to collect their thoughts on their involvement in the project.

The study introduced Reconciliation as a teaching topic. In the first session as project facilitator, I met the students and asked them to write down what they thought Reconciliation was. After I had collected the student definitions, I discussed the meaning of the term with the students. I used a chalkboard and chalk to write down important terms for the students. This information was accessed from the education portal Skwirk that features syllabus-specific content for Australian school students in every State and Territory. The Skwirk web site offers a comprehensive history of the Reconciliation movement and presents current issues and future approaches possible for the Reconciliation movement in simple language designed for students and teachers. It explores issues of Indigenous cultural identity and how reconciliation impacts Indigenous peoples in a contemporary context ([https://www.skwirk.com; www.skwirk.com.au/...reconciliation...reconciliation.../challen...accessed 21/02/08](https://www.skwirk.com; www.skwirk.com.au/...reconciliation...reconciliation.../challen...)). After I had discussed the history of reconciliation and the students had asked questions, I delivered a series of singing, clapping and chanting exercises to the class. I introduced the students to the notion that we were going to write songs about reconciliation and the students broke off into self-selected groups. Arthur and Maggie worked with the classes who participated in the song-writing session and later reflected that they enjoyed being involved in the song writing process and observing the students writing lyrics, experimenting with tunes and trying out rhythms and beat box patterns. The non-Indigenous classroom teachers, the school principals, and the two Indigenous teaching assistants were also consulted through interview as to their own understandings of Reconciliation. They were also asked to give their opinions on the effectiveness of using the creative arts in exploring Reconciliation in schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term 'Indigenous' has been used throughout the article. For the purposes of this article, an Indigenous person regards them self as of Indigenous descent, self-identifies as an Indigenous person and is recognised by their own specific Indigenous community as an Indigenous person. But more than that, an Indigenous person maintains an Indigenous worldview. For the purposes of this research, an Indigenous worldview encompasses a belief that regards all beings as interrelated and interconnected. Karen

Martin (2003) named this relatedness theory. This theory emphasises the importance of an individual's relationship with others. An Indigenous worldview regards individuals as existing within a network of related entities where people, animals, plants and spirits are deeply connected (Edwards, 2008).

The intense involvement of Indigenous people and community in listening, making and dancing to music taps into Egan's notion of Mythic understanding and allows development of the cognitive competences needed to make meaning from stories to merge with children's imagination and sense of fantasy (Egan, 1997). Learning cultural stories through music, furthermore, allows children to learn through rhythm, rhyme and meter, increasing their capacity to remember and later access learning. Indigenous cultures are oral cultures, and the understandings developed through engagement with music helps preserve folklore and culture (Edwards, 2008). Vygotsky argued for the importance of the family in influencing social learning; and this research found this to be particularly relevant when exploring Indigenous student perceptions of Reconciliation. He asserted that all new knowledge is influenced by a child's culture and family background (1930, 1931, 1932, and 1933). Martin's relatedness theories also emphasise the importance of an individual's relationship with others.

The research presented here provided both Indigenous and non-Indigenous primary school students with the opportunity to participate in learning that required them to be actively involved. Song writing in groups is a dynamic process that involves student's trialling sounds, writing, discussing, and sharing ideas with others. Vygotsky argued that through humanising (Cole, Scriber & Souberman, 1978) knowledge, children could learn more deeply. Embedding learning experiences in the lives and culture of the students involved enables those students to make their learning more comprehensible and meaningful. Vygotsky asserted that learning that engages the emotions leads to rich understandings.

The deficit model emerged as an academic theory in the 1960s and was based on the idea that lower achievement in schools arose from issues with the students, rather than the teachers, teaching or the school itself (DiMaggio, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The deficit model was characterised by lower expectations of Indigenous students. A desire for equity and social justice for Indigenous people drive the move against deficit models of teaching in contemporary situations. Researchers in Indigenous education have recently presented the notion that when teachers do not share the socio-cultural backgrounds of their students, they are less able to apply principles of cultural inclusivity (Harrison 2008; Moore, 2007; Martin 2003). The deficit model has been rejected by a number of academics. In particular, those writing about Indigenous students in school settings have stressed that programs need to be culturally inclusive where interaction with parents, Elders and the Indigenous community is involved (Edwards, 2008). It has been suggested that improved teacher training for all pre-service teachers could help improve Indigenous student performance in the classroom (Edwards, 2008). Early career teachers need to be encouraged to create tools for knowledge sharing that reinforce a sense of relatedness and community for Indigenous

students (Martin, 2003). Having Aboriginal teaching assistants working in classrooms allows opportunity for cultural inclusivity and Indigenous wisdoms to be valued and shared.

A cultural deficit theory blames students, their families, cultures and communities for their failure to thrive in educational institutions (DiMaggio, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Trueba, 1988). The theory adopts negative stereotypes and shifts blame to the students and their families, establishing low expectations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. According to this perspective, Indigenous students begin school with a lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997). Furthermore, the cultural deficit theory affirms that disadvantaged students do not value formal education in the same ways that their middle- and upper-class white counterparts do and regards this as a barrier to success in an academic setting. This theory does not value community cultural wealth (DiMaggio, 2004; Yosso, 2005) and fails to acknowledge the special value that students from different cultural backgrounds can bring to a classroom. Indigenous cultures are rich and offer special understandings and knowledges to its people. Teachers who understand these riches offer Indigenous students the opportunity to succeed within their classrooms.

The study rejects the deficit-teaching model that presents Indigenous students as disadvantaged. The research presents examples of positive learning outcomes of involving Indigenous Teaching Assistants in research and of their presence in schools and primary classrooms. The inquiry also affirms the need to recognise Indigenous students' specific learning needs, preferences, and styles. The importance of acknowledging Indigenous learning styles has been emphasised by a number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars (Harrison, 2008; Martin, 2003; Moore, 2007). "There are numerous suggestions based on how Aboriginal children learn and how to teach Aboriginal children, yet very little evidence to support these assertions." (Rasmussen, Sherman, Baydala, 2004, p.334.) Despite criticism of the validity of testing Indigenous-learning preferences (Rasmussen, Sherman, Baydala, 2004) a body of knowledge supports that Indigenous learners prefer collaborative, holistic, observational and experiential tasks (Yunkaporta, 2010, 2009). The Reconciliation through Music research acknowledges that Indigenous students learn in different ways from non-Indigenous students. Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and academics have proposed that Indigenous children prefer discovery, practical and social learning models (Harrison, 2008; Moore, 2007, Martin, 2003).

DISCUSSION

During the course of the research at Marlene Primary School I had one formal interview with both Maggie and Arthur that were recorded digitally. I worked with each of them in the classroom each day for a period of two weeks and over the four-week period that I was in Katherine I had several informal one on one conversations with them. It is during this time that I discovered the importance and value of working with Indigenous teaching assistants in the classroom. Arthur offered me valuable

tools to understand the students and advice on developing insight into an Indigenous student perspective. These findings, if shared, could have significant impact on the pedagogical approaches used by teachers when working with Indigenous students and may help Indigenous students feel valued and heard. I also visited them at their home and took digital photographs and ‘yarning notes’ after this visit to their property on the outskirts of Katherine. Arthur had spent over twenty years in the local area and his children had attended the school. He had been involved with the school for ten years. Maggie was born in the local region, which represented her traditional land. She had considerable experience working at the school and had been working there for over five years. Arthur and Maggie were married. The community and cultural capital that they brought to the classroom was substantial.

In this research, music provided students with a medium through which to construct, negotiate and modify aspects of their personal and group identities, and offered them a range of strategies for knowing themselves and connecting with others (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson, 2000). In this example, the community concert offered the student described the chance to connect with the Indigenous teaching assistant, to take a risk and work with others on a shared project. The song-writing project presented the student with an occasion to be assisted by the Indigenous teaching assistant and to overcome his fears. By working with Arthur and having him there throughout the song writing process and the performance outcome, I observed the importance of trust being played out before her. If Arthur had not been with the student supporting him throughout the concert, I believe that the student would have refused to perform. For this student, writing and performing music on themes of reconciliation enabled him to be a potent agent for change.

Songs are an important way that Indigenous people frame their world. Arthur spoke about the importance of song in Indigenous cultures and the notion of songs bringing an individual’s personal vision to the world with his words: “the song writing lets face it. The Indigenous people like song. So you know and I think the words, if they put words into songs, it’s how they feel. Inside” (Excerpt from Interview with Arthur, March 2009.) Writing and performing music can give Indigenous students the opportunity to develop positive self-identity and can build cross-cultural understandings (Dunbar-Hall, 1997a,b) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, their teachers, parents and school communities. It has been argued that a major obstacle to Reconciliation is apprehension and reluctance about face-to-face communication and personal associations overcome an exaggerated sense of difference, which flows from ignorance (Deane, 2004, 208). Through song writing and performing the student described in the earlier excerpt was able to overcome the reluctance that his classroom teacher had observed in him. “Through music – ah! The kids love music. It’s something they really love and you can teach ‘em anything through music I reckon!” (Excerpt from Interview with Arthur, March 2009).

In this study, participating in music sessions built team skills and provided democratic options for self-expression where advanced written communication skills were not

required. The students shared their ideas orally through discussion, participation and mimicking each other's singing. In this way, Indigenous students, with their familiarity with music and story, were advantaged. These understandings provided opportunities for the transmission of their cultural heritage and values in a meaningful way. Student creativity and identity were explored through genuine partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The students acted with tolerance towards each other. They worked cooperatively throughout the project and their song writing and art making had the power to bring them together in a dynamic and compelling way. Through the study, students, particularly Indigenous students, gained deep learning perspectives on Reconciliation from their own family backgrounds. The social, community, and family backgrounds of these students strongly impacted their views on Reconciliation (Vygotsky, 1993). "We must not forget for a moment that both knowing the nature and knowing personality is done with the help of understanding other people, understanding those around us, understanding social experiences (Vygotsky, 1993, Vol. 4, p.50).

Arthur offered insights into how Indigenous children learn best with his words;

It's just giving them the guide and support and giving them the confidence so that they can get up and do stuff and saying we're here for you and we are the group. We are together. You are not an individual. We're here as a group. So at the end of the day, once you get up on the stage and you get stage struck and you look like that and you see all the people. Don't worry about that because look at us; we'll be there. It takes time but I think keep trying to build that self-esteem and confidence and that and empower the kids and that and you know the thing is what we looked at in the class was you know, have that back up for them all of the time – you know – say 'I'm here for you if you want me to be.' It's a lot of encouragement. It takes time. Like it doesn't happen overnight. It doesn't happen within a week. You gotta spend a lot of time with them kids to get used to you and I say 'I'm there for you as back up.' And over the years – I'm talking over fifty, seventy years just on the Indigenous side the Indigenous people have been put down for so long and what we are trying to do now is completely the opposite. We've gotta try to empower them kids to get up and say 'hey I'm Indigenous and I'm proud of it. And I want to do this!' (Excerpt from Interview with Arthur, March 2009)

Robinson and Nicol (1998) defined Indigenous pedagogy as being holistic, imaginal, kinaesthetic, cooperative, contextual, and person-oriented. Characteristics of Indigenous learning as observation, imitation, trial and error, real-life performance, learning wholes rather than parts, problem solving and repetition (Yunkaporta, 2010, 2009; Christie, 1986). The Reconciliation through Music and Art project offered Indigenous and non-Indigenous students the opportunity to learn through doing in collaborative ways. The song writing and t-shirt making projects were set up where students shared ideas, talked with each other and worked in groups. They practiced group decision-making. The arts activities were organised in informal environments, without desks and walls – outside, in outside stage areas, in music rooms and art spaces. These informal spaces provided the students with the opportunity to learn in

close proximity to each other where they could move around freely and explore the themes of Reconciliation kinaesthetically.

The students involved in the song writing sessions at Marlene Primary School asked not to be taken out of class during the sessions, so Maggie and Arthur work with me directly on the music writing project. Both Arthur and Maggie were supportive of the project. In an interview Arthur told me that he knew I was doing a good job "...the kids who usually come to me didn't want to come. They come to you. They wanted to be with you. You need to tell them you are there for them. For them, it is a leap of trust. Their trust is frayed and broken by past experience" (Excerpt from Interview with Arthur, March 2009). I reflected on Arthur's comments about trust. Vygotsky linked deep learning with the need to develop family like relationships and argued that family influenced social learning (1930, 1931, 1932, and 1933). In later discussions about Indigenous learning, Arthur told me that he believed that strong relationships with a trusted mentor was one of the ways to encourage Indigenous students to succeed in the classroom. He argued that with the presence of a known Indigenous adult mentor the students could move past their reluctance to take risks.

The following excerpt describes Arthur helping an Indigenous student overcome his nerves when confronted with performing at the Harmony Day community concert. It explores my own personal observations about the importance of providing students with hands on support, of the vital aspect of developing relationships with Indigenous students and the significance of Indigenous school staff offering opportunities for the students to experience Indigenous pride. It is written in the first person and concerns a student whose non-Indigenous classroom teacher described as "talented, but with low self-esteem" and a "reluctant participator"(Excerpts from interview with classroom teacher, March 2009).

I observe the Arthur. He talks quietly to a young Indigenous boy who tells him that he is too shame and that the others are doing it wrong and the microphone does not work and he cannot perform. Arthur tells him: you can do it. He tells him: you go up there and be proud. I am here for you. The boy performs in the group. His voice is loud and clear. He breaks into a smile (Extract from The Boy with The Smile' story, March 2009).

I reflect on this incident and how Arthur has taught me about the importance of spending time with the students and the importance of developing trust. He has shown me how to encourage and support the students and revealed the importance of acknowledging that they and their families have had a number of bad experiences, which have been passed down. He reminds me that these bad experiences must stay in the past for this generation of children, and how important it is to stay focused on Indigenous pride. He has taught me the importance of empowering students in schools. Empowering Indigenous students means offering culturally responsive programs and the following excerpt reveals my observations of an afternoon of spear throwing at the school.

Arthur leads the spear-throwing session. He is an older man and an experienced teacher although he later tells me that he is not an Elder. He makes simple requests

They throw spears

of the children and is patient and firm. He shows the students how to hold the spears. The spears are painted in earth colours and have metal tips. They are two metres long and made of thin pieces of local wood. The girls take their turn first. The other students are encouraged to clap respectfully after each throw. Arthur asks me to be involved. He tells me it is an ideal opportunity for me to learn from the students and for them to show leadership. I wait my turn. I am shown how to hold the woomera, which releases the spear. The students crowd around me and offer advice. The boys show and re-show me the grip. The boy with the smile shows me again. It sails through the air. He dances and laughs. He throws his own spear. It sails through the air. He turns and bows (Excerpt from He throws Spears story, March 2009).

This passage describes the informal learning environment established by Arthur and supported by the principal at Marlene Primary School. The spear throwing gives kinaesthetic learners the opportunity to succeed. They mimic and model and learn through trial and error. I reflect on an interview with the Principal and how she regarded the contribution of the Indigenous Teaching Assistants at her school to be valuable and important.

She tells me that the senior classes are involved in spear throwing as a reward for good behaviour in the afternoons. She says that it is difficult to hold the attention of the students in the afternoons and that these spear throwing sessions have proved to be a successful way to encourage students to stay on track during their morning classes. She describes how the Indigenous culture program revolves around respecting the student's own culture and how Arthur and Maggie lead discussions about the bush tucker found in the local area. The children are encouraged to collect and try the local bush foods. Information is shared about the seasons, bush medicine, bush tracks and the land around. She describes the class of Indigenous boys that is learning men's business with Arthur. She explains that he is teaching them traditional men's stories didgeridoo and clap-stick techniques (Excerpts from The Principal's story, March 2009).

From this conversation it is clear that the principal supports the study of Indigenous cultures at the school delivered by Indigenous educators. She states that she is proud of her school and its commitment to Indigenous cultures and learning. She praises the work of both Arthur and Maggie and states that she feels lucky (Excerpt from The Principal's Story, March 2009) to be working with them. Indeed, Marlene Primary School demonstrated the spirit of reconciliation in its focus on culturally responsive programs and Indigenous teaching and learning. The non-Indigenous principal modelled respect for the Indigenous staff at the school and encouraged them to take leadership roles in her school. Arthur later affirmed this positive attitude towards Reconciliation in schools through partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers and mentors with his words:

People at the top like the principal and deputy principal being positive about Indigenous culture; it encourages it a lot here. I think 90% of the kids are Indigenous kids. But it's the 10% we need to concentrate on coz we look at education as being a non-Indigenous thing (Excerpt from interview with Arthur, March 2009).

This extract explores the notion that Reconciliation and Indigenous cultural education and knowledge is just as important for non-Indigenous students. It further supports the notion that leadership from Indigenous support staff in conjunction with leadership shown from principals in schools can have positive repercussions in student behaviour and levels of trust. The research affirms the importance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous partnerships in the promotion and support of Reconciliation activities in schools and how when these activities are supported, they can have a positive impact on the students.

The collaborative learning processes fostered in the inquiry assisted the Indigenous students to develop the cooperative learning abilities so highly valued within their own communities. The investigation alluded to the importance of involving Maggie and Arthur in the process of teaching. As an Indigenous person, a parent and a teaching assistant from the local area, Maggie in particular brought a wealth of knowledge to her interview and to the classroom. She was keen to share her views with me and was generous with her time. She linked moving forward and not getting stuck in the past with the overriding theme of respect – both self-respect and respect modelled through parental and familial relationships.

So if we can get our kids here to all respect themselves then they can start respecting each other. It's not an easy thing. You know it's gonna take a bit of work because of what happens at home and because of what happens in the community. The kids see every day. It's a cycle that just goes on and on. So it's getting the parents support. They have to be supported at home (Excerpt from interview with Maggie, March 2009).

Maggie's interview emphasised the need for respect from students towards each other but also towards Indigenous Teaching Assistants, principals, classroom teachers and parents. She told me that she consciously modelled respectful relationships in her work at the school and tried to be a positive mentor to all of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students at the school. It was significant that almost all of the songs written by the students at Marlene Primary School used the term respect. Indeed, one song stated; "Respect is all you need/Name-calling will recede/Our people will combine/And its gonna be fine." (Excerpt from song written by students at Marlene Primary School, March 2009).

From my observations, the year five and six students involved in the study, did not display any belief that Indigenous students were at a handicap at their school. Their definitions and lyrics did not feature the concept of Indigenous student barriers to learning. Similarly, the students did not use learning obstacles, or Indigenous student disadvantage, as a theme in their interviews or informal conversations with me. Correspondingly, Maggie and Arthur did not speak about Indigenous student disadvantage at all, and regarded the Indigenous students as successful and thriving learners. The principal too maintained that all students were equal and able to succeed at their school and did not subscribe to the belief that there was a deficit-teaching model adopted at their school.

While Maggie's interview affirmed the importance of involving parents in the Reconciliation process, she did not, however, use the terms 'disadvantaged' or 'barriers' or 'difficulties' when speaking about the students. Like Maggie and the classroom teachers, he affirmed the importance of parental attitudes, values and expectations in teaching children about Reconciliation. He reminded me about the importance of the family for an Indigenous child and of the significance of family when working against racism and prejudice. He stated:

I believe Reconciliation starts at a younger age level – like at primary school and we need to work with these kids – say from grade one upwards and start teaching them – because I know the parents if they are racist, (both Non Indigenous and Indigenous parents) then the children will be racist. And what the parent teaches the kid at home is what the kids grow up to be and you know it's very hard for teachers and teachers' assistants to change a child altogether. We are not here to do that. But we are here to show them a different angle. Then you know they can make up their own minds. At the end of the day I think that if we can teach our young kids and when they grow up they can make up their own minds at a certain age. They don't have to listen to mum and dad anymore. They can make up their own mind (Excerpt from Interview with Arthur, March 2009).

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrated that involvement in the arts could provide opportunities for Indigenous staff in schools to work with and lead the Reconciliation process. It introduced the idea that classroom teachers and Indigenous Teaching Assistants that work on reconciliation projects through arts strategies may be able to assist non-Indigenous students in their understandings of Reconciliation and Indigenous culture. By formally studying Reconciliation and its history, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can discover ways to work together. Through song writing on themes of Reconciliation, students can learn to celebrate Indigenous culture, history, and success through song. By working with Indigenous teaching assistants in the classroom, Indigenous students can be mentored and positive relationships and learning patterns can grow. By promoting the study of Reconciliation through the arts in schools, principals can work in partnership with Indigenous educators to provide Indigenous students with leadership roles in their schools. Indigenous Teaching Assistants can model learning styles, which suit the Indigenous students, through culturally specific programs where collaborative, learning and oral or story-telling delivery is selected as appropriate pedagogy.

The spears thrown by Arthur at Marlene Primary School were powerful demonstrations of the Reconciliation process possible in schools. Both Maggie and Arthur offered me significant insight into some very particular issues that impacted the learning of Indigenous students at their school. They affirmed the importance of developing trust and respect and modelling positive, appreciative relationships where diversity was valued. They provided alternative learning models where trial and error was a valued learning model and where kinaesthetic, active learners were given the opportunity to become actively involved in practical, discovery based learning in an outside

environment. Their spears are powerful reminders of the possibilities of partnerships between Indigenous teaching assistants, researchers, and schools and of the importance of Indigenous teaching assistants leading culturally appropriate programs in primary schools.

The research valued the insights and contributions made by Indigenous teaching assistants working in schools. It provided opportunities for reflecting on culturally sensitive ways of working with Indigenous students. It demonstrated schooling that moved away from deficit models and progressed towards inclusive pedagogy that embraced an Indigenous worldview, acknowledged the importance of music and story in Indigenous cultures and celebrated the significance of learning through observation and working with others. Through sharing the story of the spear throwing sessions and some of the insights offered by the two Indigenous teaching assistants working in a remote school in the Northern Territory, and their pedagogy gave hope and provided opportunities for others to feel the power of the spear and acknowledge its importance in the continuing story of Reconciliation.

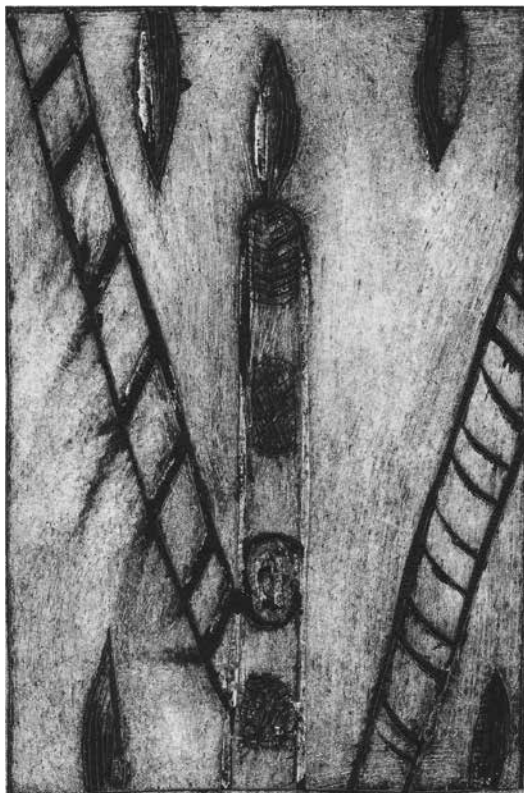


Figure 1. They Throw Spears. Collograph by Jane Moore, March 2009.

NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

Harmony Day

Harmony Day is celebrated on or around the 21 March each year in primary and high schools around the nation. It is an activity endorsed by education departments across the nation. Harmony Day celebrates Australia's community harmony, participation and cultural diversity.

Indigenous

The word Indigenous is commonly used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In this study, out of respect for the wishes of Aboriginal people, and in particular the Palawa community, the term Aboriginal is used.

Murri

Murri is used to identify Indigenous people from Queensland.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is about recognition, rights and reform. It is recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original people of this land, and it is recognising the Aboriginal history of this land, both the long Aboriginal history before the invasion, and the shared history since. Reconciliation is recognising the rights that flow from being the first peoples, as well as our rights as Australian citizens in common with all other citizens. It is about reforming systems to address the disadvantages suffered by Aboriginal peoples and, as I have said, it is about changing the frame of reference of all Australians to include Aboriginal Australia (Burney, 2000, p. 66).

TOs

Traditional owners or first peoples.

Woomera

A small piece of painted or carved wood, which is used to launch a spear into the air.

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