

# From Indigenous Student to Indigenous Educator: reflections over time

Scott Darlow



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To see Scott at work in schools, singing his song "Sorry", visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddntJ7gshB8>

Being an Indigenous student for me was probably a little different than it is for a lot of other Indigenous kids, and I say that for a number of reasons. Firstly, I moved around a lot. My dad was a social worker with the Salvation Army and so my primary school years were spent attending four different schools. I started at Princess Hill Primary in Carlton. After finishing Prep, I then moved to Hong Kong with my family where Dad ran refugee camps on Chi Ma Wan Island. I think this experience – living internationally and attending two different international schools – gave me an invaluable opportunity to look at and learn from other cultures. We travelled Asia a lot as kids. My dad was a missionary kid and was born and grew up in Sri Lanka and India so he took us there several times. We went to England twice and California once. We went to Thailand, China, Singapore and the Philippines as well. So by the time I was 11, I had gone to school with kids from all over the world and in fact travelled to many different countries. I remember so vividly my dad and I driving from Colombo to Jaffna and Kandy – the length of Sri Lanka – and just being overwhelmed, even at nine years of age, by the beauty, the sounds, the nature and the food.

So for me, growing up with that experience as an Aboriginal kid in Asia, it was different. In a lot of ways, I missed out on the closeness of family and, to be honest, I was a very unhappy kid for a large part of my childhood

as a result of this. It was a strange dichotomy. I loved the wonder and experience of multicultural life but at the same time I was genuinely miserable, having an ache in my spirit that at that age I couldn't even articulate. I needed to be in my home. Missing and wanting to be in Australia so terribly, it felt like my soul was connected to the land. Literally the land – the earth and the gum trees (I've always had a deep love and fascination with gum trees!) and I imagine that that connection looks like a long electrical cord. Growing up overseas stretched that cord and frayed it and as a result it stretched and frayed my soul and my spirit.

Finally, we returned to Melbourne just after I turned 11. We lived in Melbourne for two years and it was amazing! But then when I was 13 we moved to Perth. Another two years later we were back in Melbourne and it was then that I became more interested and passionate about my culture. The thing about school was – and I went to seven different schools – there was never another Aboriginal kid at any of the schools I attended, even in Perth. My family were mostly far away – in Bendigo and Shepparton – and I was in Hong Kong and Perth and Melbourne, (I attended Essendon Grammar on a scholarship). So my Aboriginality was something that I held close and dear but was very personal. Most kids in the 1980s and '90s in my schools had the standard uneducated 'white' upbringing and at that age I was too timid to speak up often.

The other thing that was different for me as an Aboriginal student was that I don't 'look' Aboriginal. I'm white with blonde hair (my mum is Aboriginal but Dad isn't). So often people would say things around me that they never would in front of a 'black' Aboriginal person. In some ways that was really tough – seeing a person's real 'heart' and them then justifying the things they thought and said. If I had a dollar for every time someone said "I'm not a racist – my friend is Aboriginal" I'd be a rich man!

As an Aboriginal educator it was a different story. I loved it, being in schools and being that guy who was a positive role model. I still keep in touch with students who I encountered and encouraged to pursue their Aboriginality. Seeing them really blossom has been super-rewarding! Being a teacher in Melbourne and Geelong was a very different experience to then being an educator

in schools in my current capacity. I remember having a teacher rip me to shreds once because I talked about stuff that was “a long time ago and why don’t we just get over it”. I have realised how lucky we are in Melbourne that our multicultural city has really given us a love and appreciation for other cultures. That, in turn, gives people a huge appreciation and love for Indigenous culture. Even in the 10 years I’ve been travelling Australia, I have seen a real growth in peoples’ openness to Aboriginality. What I’ve realised is that reconciliation is about sharing our experiences and drawing people along. Sharing. I meet so many people who are tired of feeling guilty for stuff their ancestors did. What I have realised through my travels around our country is that we need to educate people in a way that helps them understand and empathise. That understanding, in turn, leads to helping people realise that the current situation in Australia – close the gap stats, jail rates, education stats – is a direct result of that history. It’s about using history to educate about today, rather than condemn and convict.

### **Different types of schools**

Educationally, if I’m honest, I’ve found that private schools are much more ‘into’ making change with regard to reconciliation. I don’t think it’s because their teachers have better hearts, I think it is just resources. I think the state system is so stretched for time and money that even teachers with a passion are so stretched for time and resources too. Catholic schools are amazing in their endeavour to pursue real reconciliation. I am often involved with different Catholic endeavours and I love working with them. Ultimately, I think that while there are always ‘racist’ attitudes – and depending where you go those attitudes can be more prevalent – people deep down are people. If they have negative attitudes, that’s mostly because of a negative experience they’ve had at some point. My job is to help people realise there are always reasons; and while those reasons don’t excuse illegal or antisocial behaviour, those reasons make forgiveness easier, and forgiveness is the key to real reconciliation.

### **School experiences over time**

I think, over the last 10 years, reconciliation has become much more ‘real’. There have always been schools, such as St Columba’s College in Essendon, Immanuel College in Adelaide, Emmaus College in Jimboomba, Queensland, that are deeply passionate about reconciliation. But 10 years ago a lot of schools would engage in what I thought were tokenistic endeavours, such as playing didgeridoo at an assembly or giving a 10-minute talk about culture. Now, though, through education and also the new Australian Curriculum, we are seeing more and more schools really truly teach the real history of our country, good and bad, and seeing more and more educators realise what a valuable resource Aboriginal culture can be. It’s exciting to see the schools I visit utilise the Aboriginal students who attend and draw from their wealth of knowledge. There is still a long way to go. One question I ask a room is “can you name three famous Aboriginal people who

weren’t actors, musicians, footballers or artists?”. I’ve only had about 25 people answer that question in 10 years but I am really confident that Australia, and in particular schools and teachers, are much more genuinely interested in reconciliation than they were 10 years ago. And that is exciting!

### **Personal effects of reconciliation**

For me, reconciliation has had a profound effect. It has made me constantly challenge who I am because the reality of reconciliation for me comes back to an acronym I made up: FLUTE. This stands for Forgiveness, Love, Understanding, Tolerance and Empathy. I genuinely believe that if every person, black and white, showed 10 per cent more of those five things to every person they encounter, I’d be unemployed, as reconciliation would be done. As Aboriginal people, we need to forgive the people who have wronged us; not hold on to the anger and bitterness. We need to show more love for those around us. We need to understand the journey of others and realise they could never really understand our journey 100 per cent as they haven’t lived it. We must show more tolerance for uneducated and ignorant people and endeavour to educate them with love, rather than continuing on in anger, judgment and bitterness. Empathy is the key to all of it, “How would it feel if it were me?” FLUTE has bled into my whole life, and while I don’t always get it right, I find myself trying to deal with everyone in my life with that mantra. It is a much more peaceful way to live. It has helped my marriage and my business relationships as well as my work in schools.