"Building Dreams, Keeping Goals, Developing Aspirations, Having Conversations": An Interview with Nicole Wade

Nicole Wade is a Nyoongah (south-western Western Australia) woman who is Principal of Campbellfield Public School. As a student, she found school a lonely and disconnected place, and left when she was in Year 11. Determined to succeed, Nicole later gained the HSC through distance education, and then graduated from Western Sydney University with a Bachelor of Education and First Class Honours. She was awarded the University Medal for her outstanding academic achievements. Nicole has been involved in two projects under the Fair Go Program. She was a co-researching, exemplary teacher in Teachers for a Fair Go, and then a mentor in Schooling for a Fair Go. This contribution to the Special Edition is an interview with Nicole on her own history, her approaches to teaching and her role as Principal. The questions in this interview include quotations from previous responses Nicole has provided in the Teachers for a Fair Go and Schooling for a Fair Go projects.

The conversation

You often speak about your Indigenous 'Nan' as one of your greatest influences and you have described:

> *… the stories, songs and warmth between her and the kids.*

You have also shared that you left school early because you found it a 'lonely and disconnected place'. Can you explain about the differences between your own experiences and your current work as a teacher and Principal? What, from your Nan, do you bring to your professional work?

My Nan, Joan Eggington, was a strong Nyoongah woman. As a young child, she gave me powerful messages about being a proud Nyoongah person. I vividly recall telling her about how I hated school and how the other kids would tease me for having brown skin. My Nan would say, "The price you put upon your head is the price that others will place upon you. We are a strong people." As a child, I never really understood the nuances of this message, but the fire in her eyes and voice told me that I was meant to stand tall and not listen to others. As an adult looking back, I now know that my Nan taught me to have self-determination, resilience and to view my Aboriginality as a strength.

My Nan worked as an Aboriginal pre-school aide at one point in her life. I remember how much she loved all the little *coolangars* (children). Some days I would go with my Nan to the pre-school and watch how she would sing, tell stories and connect with the kids. Her warmth surrounded us all like a blanket. She told kids they were, '*moorditj*' (the best) and they believed her. They would walk away feeling strong, excellent and like 'the boss'. I wanted to be like that too. I wanted to make kids feel like 'the boss'.

My early experiences in primary school did not make me feel *moorditj*. I can't pinpoint exactly what didn't work, but I know I felt disconnected. I felt that school was not for me. I remember trying to become invisible. Sitting hidden off to the side, never saying a word or contributing my ideas or thoughts. If the teacher did notice me, I just froze. Even in the playground, I felt lonely and disconnected. It was like I was an outsider viewing the happy kids playing. My thoughts were always about escaping, and school refusal became a real problem.

The disconnect from school felt like a heavy haze that lasted throughout my primary and high school years. As I got older, I learned how to hide my feelings and play the school game. I became compliant, however, my internal dialogue remained the same: "school was not a place for me". It was not until I was 16 and pregnant that I found a fire burning inside me to do better. I completed my HSC across two years through Distance Education with not one, but two children. That fire to provide a better life for my children ignited my self-belief that I could achieve. I ended up gaining a Universities Admittance Index (UAI) of 94.5 and became the Dux of my school.

It was at this point that my pathway to become a teacher emerged. I thought to myself, "What if my teachers had connected with that invisible girl in the classroom, and made her feel that school was a place for her?" I can't help but wonder what potential I could have achieved and how different my experiences would have been. I was going to become that teacher: one that made sure every child felt connected, successful and *moorditj*.

Fast forward 20 years down the track and now I am a proud Principal of the best school. With a talented team of educators, I have worked tirelessly to build a learning community focused on belonging, connectedness and quality relationships. Every child in our school is known and our motto has become: 'At Campbellfield, Every Face Has a Place.' High expectations are interwoven into our fabric. We ensure students receive evidence-based pedagogies that are research-driven. This means that every child's learning is challenged and that closing the gap becomes a reality of our daily work. We utilise evidence-based frameworks that build both a positive and mentally healthy learning community. This means that all students feel connected, build resilience and know that they are valued. Student voice is also strongly supported within our school culture. The pedagogical practices are responsive to student voice. Students take ownership of and agency for their learning. They contribute to the shaping of our learning community by evaluating ways of learning. This school culture sends powerful messages to children about school not only being a place for them, but actually *their place*.

When we first interviewed you during your case study for the *Teachers for a Fair Go* project, you talked about students having dreams, goals and aspirations, and the importance of conversations in the classroom:

> ***Building a dream, keep a goal: something you want. 'Where do you want to be? What do you want to be? What do you want to do?' At the start of the year, not one student could answer these questions. Now so many kids have aspirations. Part of it is having these conversations about life.***

Can you tell us something about what these conversations can look and sound like in the classroom?

I firmly believe that building aspirations from the time children start Kindergarten is powerful work. It is not solely the work of high schools. Schools are in such privileged positions to have conversations with kids about dreaming big. My experience as a Principal is that children don't get asked enough, 'What do you dream of being?' When kids shrug their shoulders, the conversation can't stop. What do you enjoy doing? What are you passionate about? Who are some people in the community that you want to be like?' These questions generate the basis of a conversation. I have one young Aboriginal boy who tells me weekly that when I retire, he will become the Principal of Campbellfield. This is a boy with disabilities and a complex home life. Our strengths-based aspirational conversations are powerful because he doesn't

see adversity or challenge, just opportunity and success for his future. This has translated into academic success.

I also feel it is important to reflect on the aspirational conversations we have with children to check if we really do have high expectations. If kids tell you, 'I want to be a mechanic', talk to them about engineering too. Kids who want to be nurses, let's talk to them about being doctors. I know that our children are capable of these successes. The conversation is powerful and having a teacher or Principal in your corner believing in you makes a huge difference.

When you are authentically invested in these conversations, they are never 'one-off'. You will always find time to revisit these conversations across time. This is the real game changer. Children know when someone is genuine about believing in them. Following through with conversations builds trust, connectedness and a self-belief in students that they can succeed.

In my experience as a Principal, providing students with strong community role models also lifts aspirations. I have made our school our learning hub for members of the community interested in education. Our school has become the site for professional learning for parents and carers aspiring to become School Learning Support Officers (SLSOs) and teachers. I am proud of the six women who were parents from our community that we have supported to become employed as SLSOs or Aboriginal Education Officers, three of whom are employed at our school. This level of work provides our children with positive role models who continually support the aspirations of every child.

In your case study for *Teachers for a Fair Go*, we observed that you were able to 'weave a balance between keeping a lesson on focus whilst allowing reflective moments and discussion'. There was a term you used - '*spontaneous discussion*' - where students 'simply comment without raising their hands.' This seems an interesting 'insider classroom' strategy, and certainly challenges many of the ways classrooms have looked, and what they have sounded like. It would be interesting to hear more of what you think about the importance of reflection and discussion in your teaching.

Student voice and reflection are key to successful learning. Deep learning requires teachers to thoughtfully plan questions or thinking routines that act as a catalyst for spontaneous substantive discussion. Students must be provided the space to clarify, analyse, justify, reason, problem-solve and think critically when learning new skills and knowledge. The teacher has a pivotal role in developing a classroom environment that encourages risk-taking free of judgment. The teacher shapes the culture of the classroom through the expectations they set around classroom talk. Good teachers are aware of classroom 'status'; they actively put strategies in place to ensure that 'status' does not exist and that every child's voice is expected and valued, to move the knowledge in the learning community forward. This is a difficult skill for teachers to acquire and it can go unchallenged in many classrooms. We specifically plan questions or enabling or extending prompts for students by anticipating where they could get stuck. Having this bank of prompts or questions means that teachers don't allow status to be reinforced, as all students are supported to contribute their knowledge and voice. Teachers can also carefully sequence student responses to build upon the discussion and deepen thinking as a group.

The best teachers vacate the floor. They teach students dialogic talk that moves and send messages around the importance of every voice contributing to the growing knowledge in the learning community. Students are taught how to clarify, revoice, add on or revise and extend thinking. They are taught the

pragmatics of conversations. This is powerful because students can see themselves as active learners and resources for each other as learners. We want students to develop independence and learning agency. That can't be achieved if teachers hold all the talk and knowledge. As a teacher, I gauge student learning through surges of energy in conversation. When students are bursting to add their ideas and thoughts, and challenge or extend each other's thinking, there is a productive flow that leads to a building river of knowledge. Even the pauses in conversation are highly valued. These pause moments are when students are clarifying and revising their thinking. The challenge is 'internal' and they are 'thinking big'.

The best teachers also embed opportunities for student reflection. Student reflection really needs to occur throughout the learning experience and across the learning sequence. This means that reflection is not viewed as something we do at the end of the lesson. Instead, student reflection becomes a tool that builds students' metacognition through all stages of learning. Teachers encourage reflection on personalised learning goals and success criteria. The learning goals and success criteria are most effective when co-constructed between teacher and students. This gives students ownership of their learning pathway and they feel connected to learning. The focus becomes on the learning trajectory and growth for each student. In my experience, students are driven to achieve co-constructed learning goals that provide them the right amount of challenge. Students are motivated to progress as active participants in their learning.

You talk about the need for students to be 'immediately aware of the purpose' of learning because:

> *… it breaks the secret language of school and assists our students to be successful learners.*

What are the most critical 'secret languages of school' that need to be broken, and what are some steps that teachers can take to do this?

The secret language of schools is a difficult concept to explain. Maybe if I tell you a story about when my Uncle found out I was going to become a teacher it might help. My Uncle is a strong, proud activist who has devoted his entire life to resilience and self-determination for Nyoongah people. When I told him I was going to become a teacher, he felt disappointed. His belief, like many from Aboriginal communities, is that schools are places that take culture away and value '*Wadjella'* or 'White person's' knowledge. This can be a confronting thought for many. I understand what he is saying and I think of this as one of the secret languages of schools. I argue that our kids need to go to school - that is not in our control. Having an Aboriginal Principal means that school will become a place where Aboriginal culture thrives. Where all students, staff and families will learn truth telling about our peoples and use their voices to ensure social equity. Where our kids will be given aspirations to dream big and build their leadership as proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to influence the future.

Schools send powerful overt and covert messages about belonging and the value of cultures. School leaders must be aware of the messaging they send to their community. A school vision and school plan need to include strategies that actively address culture and messaging. Staff, students and families need to be valued partners when creating the direction for a school. Authentically listening to voice will mean that there is a shared goal that is contextualised to the community. This will allow cultural diversity to thrive and flourish. Schools are only enriched through opening their eyes to different ways of thinking, learning and knowing.

Sometimes schools need to move away from traditional ways of 'doing' or 'knowing'. This could mean inviting Elders from cultural groups into the school to share their thoughts on what young people should be learning. Sometimes it could be conducting business differently. For example, instead of holding Aboriginal family meetings at school, we hold them in a local community organisation.

In classrooms, the discourse of school is another secret language. Through explicit teaching and high expectations, teachers can make the language and processes of learning visible. Setting learning goals and success criteria with students is a strong strategy to show students what success in this discourse looks like. Providing students feedback that gives students actionable steps to improve their learning supports this process.

When you were mentoring Martin in the *Schooling for a Fair Go* project, you both talked about how it was vital for teachers not only to hold onto strong beliefs that their students were able to succeed, but they also had to work hard to build a classroom climate that supported students to 'buy in' to high expectations. Indeed, in the following conversation, you both argued that it was the 'buy in' that was where the real differences were to be made.

> *Martin: We often talk about teachers having high expectations … but it's way beyond that; it has to be that you need to be skilled enough to be able to make sure your kids have high expectations of themselves … that is it, that's where it lies, and once you can tap into them having those high expectations …that's that big picture that 'school is for them'.*
>
> *Nicole: You need to be able to make sure that every student in your class has high expectations of themselves, has aspirations, can see themselves as a learner and then knows how to do that. That's the important task. That's the hard work … and all of Martin's practice really helps to do those things … they actually believe … it's true that they are meant to learn and achieve'.*
>
> *Martin: Any teacher could tell them that but until they believe in it themselves, there's no difference, there's no change for them …*

This seems a critical realignment of perspectives around teacher expectations of students as a decisive equity issue, and an inversion of the mantra of high teacher expectations of students to a more concentrated and nuanced focus on student 'buy in'. It would be valuable to hear about how to work on this 'buy in' in classrooms and schools. What does it mean for you as Principal of a school in Sydney's South West?

I hold true to my belief that it is easy for teachers to have high expectations of students, but the true measurement of success is when students have high expectations for themselves and for their peers.

'Buy in' in classrooms and schools looks like:

- A whole-school vision and school plan that supports belonging and connectedness, and values every student. Schools need to actively build a culture of high expectations where students are challenged, have aspirational conversations and feel success. Our school is committed to

frameworks that develop a positive learning community such as the 'Be You' framework, in which the wellbeing of students is explicitly supported through strategies that build a positive sense of cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing.

- Student voice is central to classroom learning. Classroom environments promote student talk through dialogic talk moves and teacher questioning. The students co-construct learning goals and success criteria. Students are given opportunities to self-reflect on their learning throughout the learning sequence and also to reflect on peers' learning. Teacher feedback is specific, to build student self-regulation of learning. These practices ensure that students feel that the classroom is a space where every person contributes to the learning community and that deep thinking and learning is the work of every person. Students are also given authentic purposes for using their voice in the community. An example is that our school has recently written to our local member of Parliament about the cultural significance of Bull Cave (at Kentley, near Campbelltown) as a local site that holds importance for Aboriginal histories and for all Australians. Students are learning that their voice is powerful to make changes in their community when there is a perceived need for justice, sustainability and education.

- Student voice is authentically used to shape school decision-making. Students evaluate whole-school pedagogical practices. Student forums and surveys are regularly conducted to gain student voice about what is working and what needs improvement in our teaching and learning. Students are also on our school Classroom Walkthrough teams each term. They review research and evidence-based practices and observe each classroom with a team of staff. They then contribute to conversations that shape our school professional learning and directions.

- Individual students are promoted in the school through sustained leadership opportunities such as a School Representative Council and our Junior Aboriginal Education Consultative Group.

Finally, what three pieces of advice would you offer teachers who were keen to enhance student engagement in their classrooms?

1. Be a fierce advocate for your students. Have high expectations of every student and aspire to students having high expectations of themselves. Actively encourage students from a young age to dream big and continue having authentic conversations with children about their future pathways. Make time to get to know every student and build a positive relationship with them. Set challenging learning tasks that encourage students to think deeply and to see themselves as successful learners.

2. Develop student voice and agency. Encourage every student voice to share and contribute to the learning community. Actively break down 'status' in classrooms by ensuring that all students are supported to take risks and contribute ideas. Don't let students become invisible in your classroom. Know every student and be responsive to their individual needs. Build positive relationships with students, as this will encourage them to feel secure to share their voice within the classroom. Use dialogic talk and effective questioning strategies that promote substantive conversations.

3. Involve students in their learning pathway. Set learning goals and success criteria with students. Design tasks that allow students to elicit their thinking or demonstrate their skills for this learning goal. Provide students with effective feedback that gives them actionable steps to improve their learning. Encourage student and peer reflection throughout learning sequences. When students feel like they have ownership of their learning, they will be motivated to progress. Give students authentic opportunities to share their learning with others.