

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr Rod Towney for his Welcome to Country. It's such a significant and symbolic thing to be welcomed to Country and for it to be done in language just adds to how special it is, so thank you. I would also like to acknowledge the Wiradjuri people as the traditional custodians of this area. I offer my respects to elders both past and present and recognise their unique and unbreakable connection to Country. I also extend that respect to all the Aboriginal people here tonight.

I would like to acknowledge Ms Cindy Berwick, President of the NSW AECG, AECG Executive members, and AECG Life Members, Mr Greg Prior, Deputy Secretary School Operations and Performance, Conference delegates, community members and other dignitaries.

I am honoured and humbled to be here tonight to accept this award, even though I feel as though the excellence I am being recognised for stems primarily from the beauty, power and relevance of the subject I teach more than anything else.

No teacher can teach this subject alone and it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the team who surround me. Firstly, I would like to thank my Principal, Christine Del Gallo, who has supported the growth of the subject at Mackellar and who, when I asked how many classes I could run, responded that I should teach as many as I could. In my experience this kind of support is rare and very valuable.

I also would like to acknowledge the Guringai people who are the traditional custodians of the land where I live and work and also thank the vibrant and diverse community who live in the Northern Beaches area today, including the Guringai AECG who, despite being incredibly busy people, consistently offer support to both myself and my students. As a non-Aboriginal woman it would not be possible to do this subject any justice without the support of community. I would also like to recognise the tireless efforts of the Aboriginal Studies Association and the team of Aboriginal Studies teachers who go above and beyond to support each other, and myself, at all times.

I would also like to particularly thank Mr Dave Lardner who was instrumental in establishing this subject at Mackellar and who has been incredibly encouraging and supportive since then.

I also need to recognise the efforts Hayley Saunders who I have had the pleasure of working alongside for the past few years. As an Aboriginal woman and a teacher she is an inspiration to both myself and our students. As well as breaking down barriers and fighting stereotypes personally, she's also a powerful role model to all the students at Mackellar, both Aboriginal and not. We had four Aboriginal students graduate from Mackellar last year and three of those four are now studying education as a direct result of having been taught by Hayley. She offers insightful advice, shares my work, gives me access to all the numbers in her phonebook, which is so important in this subject, and makes me keep going even when I feel like stopping so thank you Hayley.

I began tonight by acknowledging the Wiradjuri and it was incredibly important for me personally to do this. Recently I attended Connecting with my Community, a Professional Development run by the Met North Regional AECG and during one of the sessions we were

asked to think about a favourite holiday we had taken within Australia. As someone who has travelled quite extensively in Australia I had a few options and more than a few memorable experiences in my head, but quite coincidentally I settled on a trip to Dubbo which my grandmother had taken me on when I was a child. Now I have been known to forget my own name, especially since I have been married, but my memories of this trip stand out vividly even now; I remember driving to the Old Dubbo Gaol and my brother telling me was going to lock me up when we got there and I remember being right here at the Western Plains Zoo. I even remember the exact floral pattern on the matching bed spreads and curtains of the motel we stayed in. While undertaking this reflection, it became clear to me, that at no point during this trip had I thought about the Wiradjuri people. I knew about Aboriginal people and I had learnt that they were here long before Captain Cook but neither my grandma nor I knew anything about Aboriginal nations, or the diversity of language or even the concept of Country. And it was only when I started studying at university that I even began to understand the complexity of these ideas. So it was important to me to pay my respects properly tonight because I didn't do it last time I was here and I'm incredibly grateful to have the opportunity to make it right. This brings me to reflect on the nature of Aboriginal Studies and the incredibly rewarding journey that studying and teaching this subject has brought me on so far. I stand before you a much more empathetic and informed person than I was a decade ago.

The best way to really consider the far reaching and hugely significant impact of Aboriginal Studies is to think of the students who encounter it and how it changes them. I think of the students currently undertaking the subject at Mackellar and I know that each of them regularly takes time to acknowledge the traditional custodians of our area and values this practise as an integral to our school and community. I know that each of these students not only acknowledges the Country they visit but also understands the necessity of that respect and the ancient cultural roots of this practise. Their acknowledgement of traditional custodians is not done in a tokenistic way or because it's something they have to do to tick a box, instead they do it because they see it as the right way and because they know that paying respect to the people who walked this earth before them is important. They understand that a few meaningful words can break down misconceptions and can bring people to recognise the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and peoples. And this is only one class. When I consider the roughly 800 students who are studying this subject each year throughout NSW, and all of the students who came before and will come after, I begin to appreciate the power this subject has to bring about change both to individuals and society as a whole.

Students not only learn about the centrality and importance of land but they also examine the social inequality that exists as a direct result of dispossession and colonialism. It is incredible to see the empathetic understanding that students develop, as well as the outrage which they invariably voice. Students who take on this subject each year are horrified by the differences in predicted life expectancy figures and devastated by infant mortality rates and they tell me that while improvements in these areas are good, they are not good enough and they never will be good enough until there is no disparity between the figures for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Each year these young people are appalled by the

disproportionate incarceration rates and tell me that we need to be doing more to rectify this now and more often than not they demand to know why we're sitting in a classroom when we should be out protesting or doing *something*. These students go home and they talk to their parents about inadequate housing. At recess they ask their friends if they have considered that the 26th of January doesn't have the same meaning to everyone. These students develop genuine and meaningful relationships with members of the community. They spend their weekends and holidays volunteering their time at community run events and they feel invested and connected.

When these students finish this course they become voters and their knowledge of the contemporary issues which stand between this country and equality is invaluable. And even more than this, through the study of social justice these students have begun to point out the pitfalls of top-down policy making and argue eloquently and passionately for the importance of programs that are initiated and run by local communities with adequate and consistent funding provided by the government. It's comforting to think that when they make it to the polling booth they will be able to examine the policies that the parties in front of them stand for and determine not only if it benefits them as individuals but also understand it's impact on the social justice experiences of the rest of Australia.

As well as becoming tomorrow's voters, and at risk of sounding clichéd, these students are tomorrow's doctors, lawyers, teachers and policy makers and society can only benefit positively from the understanding and appreciation for Aboriginality that these people have because, in the end, it is them who will determine the future direction of this country. Imagine a doctor, who at the age of seventeen was working with community to examine the high rates of Otitis Media in Aboriginal children. Or a politician who spent a year of their life examining the marginalisation of Aboriginal people in historical sources, particularly in regards to international conflicts. Or Annika, who doesn't quite know what she wants to do but whose understanding of the social justice issues facing Aboriginal people and her experience consulting community will no doubt make her a force to be reckoned with.

These are individuals who are no doubt going to change our world. But even if we consider the more subtle changes to everyday lives that these young people can bring about, such as the sixteen year old, non-Aboriginal girl, who had the courage and conviction to stand up to her boss over the use of racial slurs. The grandchild who explained to their less than sympathetic grandfather that not only was an Apology necessary but that it was only a start. Or the girl who during their HSC year travelled an hour and half away from their home each week to volunteer their time at a child care centre in Redfern because she cared so deeply for the community she was working in. And perhaps most importantly, the Aboriginal girl living off Country whose favourite subject is Aboriginal Studies because each week she has the opportunity to spend time learning about her home and through doing this the chance to experience cultural affirmation and for a few hours each week feel the comforting strength of her ties to her family and her history. We have had a number of Aboriginal students complete this course and for each student their Aboriginal Studies mark was the highest mark they received in any subject in their HSC. I think this alone speaks profoundly

about the value of the value of the subject. Each time a student takes on this subject it is like a pebble dropping in water and the most rewarding thing about teaching it is that you can watch their ripples spread further and further.

I have an image of myself at the end of my career, and it's probably a bit soon to be thinking about retirement but nonetheless, I see myself still teaching Aboriginal Studies, but instead of teaching issues of contemporary inequality I will be teaching the history of inequality. I will be able to explain that Aboriginality is no longer a significant factor in poverty, or health or crime or suicide, and that while there are a thousand differences between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people, there are also none. When I have my own grandchildren and I take them on a trip to Dubbo, before we visit the zoo or the old Dubbo Gaol, I'll talk to them about the Wiradjuri and the importance of recognising the ongoing and deeply spiritual relationship that these people have to this country because in the end the most significant reason why I teach this subject is my hope that future generations will grow up in an Australia that universally respects and celebrates the complexity, resilience and beauty of the oldest living culture in the world.