

When I left Uni Overcoming deficit conversations

This is a fictitious story. However, the words are all those of educators in Australian schools. In the Introduction to Stronger Smarter online module, we ask participants to write in an online journal about whether they have heard deficit conversations in the staffroom. This story has been put together from a scan of responses from over 500 online participants.

When I left Uni, I thought everyone believed in high expectations for all students – that we should treat everyone the same. That's what we were taught. I thought it was pretty straight forward. My first appointment was in a school where there was quite a high percentage of Aboriginal students, and I came in with high expectations for everyone.

But even on my first day, I was shocked by some of the attitudes and the conversations in the staff room. They were talking about students as though they were second grade and unteachable. Some of the statements were so generalised. *"These parents just don't look after their kids.... this kid can't do that, I'm not even going to bother Indigenous students will never learn past Year 6 - just look at the stats."*

At first, I couldn't believe all this deficit talk was still happening in schools. As teachers we are certainly not trained to talk about students in this way. But then I began to understand why. Teachers would come into the staff room exhausted and just needed to debrief. Sometimes that meant having a vent. It was a way to release emotions or blowing off steam after teaching difficult kids or a particularly difficult lesson. Or just the frustration of children being allowed to progress though the grades at school without making academic progress. Sometimes if a student is coming back from a disrupted year, it can be so hard to put the pieces back together. And I have to admit that on particularly bad days, when I'm at my wits end, I have made similar comments about these kids' home lives.

There was no malice in the conversations. Nobody was being deliberately negative. It wasn't always about the Indigenous students, so I didn't feel it was racist. The teachers did genuinely care, and these conversations were based on concern for the students and expressing their frustrations at not being able to do anything. Sometimes they would start the conversation with something like, *'I know I shouldn't say this ...'* or *'I know this isn't politically correct'* as though that somehow made what they were about to say OK. And it was true. They were just stating facts. The Aboriginal students did have high rates of absenteeism and this did contribute less



to the success in the school. We were just trying to understand a student's situation. It is hard to keep expectations high when there is death, poverty, unemployment, despair and substance abuse all around

Sometimes staff were looking for help or ideas, and the conversations just came out the wrong way. It came from a failure to achieve the outcomes we hoped for... and it just felt like there was nothing we could do. And, well, it's just easier to see the negative than the positive sometimes. But the problem was that the conversations never went beyond just the negative talk. We never talked about solutions. Everything seemed to start with, '*What little Johnny can't do ...*' rather than starting with what he can do.

When I started to think about it, some of the comments sounded like justification for why things were not going well in the classroom ... '*my students can't do that because ...*' '*my students don't come to school because ...*' '*just look at his home life, he'll not get anywhere.*' It sounded like an excuse for the teachers not stepping up in the classroom. I thought that if the staff are really still having these conversations then the students in their classrooms have no chance of achieving. We were using their situations to justify their behaviour, rather than looking to see if we could do something different in the classroom to change this. I understood that for some of the more experienced staff, it came from having tried many strategies to improve outcomes, from years of repeated attempts but with little affect. And it had created a defeatist and hopeless attitude. The staff had become assimilated into the same sense of destiny as the students and there was just this culture of blame and excuse.

A couple of times when I first started, I just mentioned high expectations and got comments back like '*wait till you've been teaching for a few years*' and '*you can tell she's just out of uni*'. And I realised that some of these beliefs have been engrained in Australian society for a while. In many ways this wasn't surprising. We live in a judgmental society, and it's difficult to break away from that judgment. We all compare our upbringing to others. Some of the conversations seemed to be based on broad community beliefs that have been around for decades. It's true the conversations were based on misunderstanding or misinformation, but it allowed some sort of 'safety' or 'knowledge' of what is really 'unknown'. And it's much easier to blame others than it is to self-evaluate. Many people are unlikely to discover truth or explore situations beyond the safety of their own bias.

It was affecting my beliefs

The conversations became contagious. We seemed to be justifying the low expectations - it seemed to be glass half empty rather than glass half full. There was a danger we would all begin to believe in this. Students were being pigeon-holed into those that can and those that can't. Were we really trying to understand the situation, or just ending up locking a student

into that situation? It was impacting on the way we were teaching. I realised that the conversations were giving me a view about the students and their families when I hadn't had anything to do with them. It was easy to begin to believe that certain students were just not as capable as others. Sometimes I noticed a common theme where the Indigenous students seemed to be treated as a collective. The pronoun 'they' was used a lot rather than talking about an individual student. Stereotypes were well and truly coming into play. It was particularly easy to get into the deficit spiral when reports were due, and everyone was getting really tired and we were just looking forward to some warmer weather.

Sometimes when I listened to these conversations, I could feel the positive energy being drained out of me. It's so wearing after a while, listening to the same thing and usually never accompanied by possible solutions. Some of the conversations made me feel really deflated - I almost began to question why I'd gone into teaching. It got to the point that I'd walk into the staffroom, look at who was there, and then walk out if there was just too much negativity going on - it just made me feel down. Negativity breeds negativity. Expecting nothing will result in nothing.

It was affecting the kids too

When I talked to the kids, I realised they were aware of these conversations. Maybe they were hearing them second hand, or perhaps just getting the vibe from the teachers - but the message some of these kids were getting was that they were feeling worthless instead of wanting to do their best. So even though the school was trying to promote high expectations, the students were getting some really mixed messages. Kids are great at picking if we really want to be there or are just going through the motions. I noticed that sometimes the Indigenous parents and caregivers got caught up in the same discourses because they've been socialised into positions of inferiority and of course their own experiences of schooling play a part. A child doesn't want to hear negatives. Sometimes they are hearing the negatives from home. If they hear it at school as well, attendance rates just plummet. It needs to be a partnership between both home and school to build positive reinforcement. Easier said than done but we all need to work together to help these issues.

Hard to know what to do

I felt we needed to start thinking of our students as individuals and stop passing judgment as a whole. Having high but realistic expectations is essential to progress and achievement. But I didn't feel comfortable challenging anyone's' views, and I wanted to be respectful to my older colleagues.



I thought that just saying nothing was better than joining in. But then I thought if I say nothing and not act, then I might as well be the one who started the conversation. I felt I wasn't being fair to the child if I allowed myself to hear biased opinions or assumptions about students which clouds my judgment. It was easier to leave the room than to confront the issues. Perhaps I should have been braver.

I had to think about it for a while before I did anything. But I did try to change the energy, and to mention positive programs and experiences or the strengths of a student. I tried turning the conversation back on them, flipping the perspective, and asking what we should do to help that student instead. In the end, the only conversations you can really change are your own.

A new principal - new way of doing things

It was only when a new Principal arrived, and we had a bit of a change of staff leadership that things really started to change. One of the first things the new Principal did was to change some of the furniture in the staff room, move some things around. Somehow that made it feel more welcoming.

Then she sat us all down in a circle. No-one could hide. She didn't try to point fingers at anyone, but just talked about how she wanted the staff room to be a positive place. We looked at what was considered appropriate behaviours and conversations we expect from our students compared to what was being said in the staffroom. She was really good at modeling behaviour from the top down, and she included everyone - front office staff, general assistants and cleaners. The change started to spread quickly.

A couple of the more negative staff left, and things felt like they were starting to change. When the principal talked to us about deficit conversations, it was mind blowing. The conversations were open and honest. She asked us to put on our parent hat and think about what we would feel if it was our children or our family being talked about in this way. I started to feel quite guilty when I thought back about how I'd just left the staff room and had done nothing.

We talked about ways to challenge a deficit conversation in a respectful way. We talked about how some of these conversations come from not really knowing the student or their family. We started to realise that things weren't quite as hopeless as we thought – that we didn't need to just sit back and blame the situation, but we would get further if we found ways to be more effective in the classroom. We talked about how we could adapt and change and improve our strategies to support these students. We started focusing on the solutions, not the problems.

Once we all understood the term 'deficit conversation' it was really helpful to have that shared language. We were able to say '*hey this is a deficit conversation*' and we were then able to stop and explore further – where is this conversation leading us and what is it saying about our

beliefs and assumptions. We were able to counteract the deficit conversation by focusing on a positive aspect – discussing what the student good at, *is the family supportive of the school or the child, does the child enjoy coming to school, are they a good friend to other kids, are they a leader*. Then we could look at what we could do to build the child's confidence that they do have many strengths.

We took the time to focus on small wins. We took more time to reflect on success and acknowledgement of the positive differences. We started to really focus on the positives, such as how much progress students had made during the year. We started to think about how to help plan for the kid to succeed. The school leaders really supported us. If I'd had a hard day with the class, I could always find someone to sit down with me and work through some strategies. The staff room was starting to change into a place for constructive and positive discussion.

Knowing students

Our Principal talked about the AITSL standard 1 'Know your student and how they learn'. Education is about bringing out the best in an individual, but we can only do that if we build relationships with students. I realised that you can't just read in a book about how to teach Aboriginal children. That 'one size fits all' is an easy solution, and one that we sometimes desperately want. But the real message is that the only solution is to connect with your individual students at a human level. You need to connect with them as individuals and understand who they are, where they come from, what they do, who their family are. You need to find out about their community, their housing, their weekends, what is important to them and what excites them. You need to be in a positive relationship with the child.

I knew that the place to start was with myself and looking at how I relate to students and parents. I had to step outside of my role and become more humanised. I started to find more opportunities to talk to the children, such as when I was on yard duty. When students came into class, I'd ask questions like *'tell me one thing you did at the weekend.'* I encouraged the children to come to lunchtime library club and be involved in activities there, giving me the opportunity to chat with them. I started being a bit more involved in events in town such as football matches.

I began to work in partnership with students to achieve high expectations. It was about having an open dialogue. I found out more about them as individuals, what their strengths were, their likes and dislikes, their hobbies. I found that when you really spend some time with a student you get a true understanding of their story, background, values and ethics that form who they are. More often than not this completely changes your view of that student and your ability to empathise with their plight comes to the forefront. I found that building relationships is key in getting students engaged. If you can build a genuine relationship with a student, then you



have created a valued connection. This grows exponentially as students can sense from their peers whether the relationship is genuine or not.

High-expectations Relationships

But then I realised this could influence how I did things as well. As we got to know the students better, there was the danger of making special consideration for poor behaviour. We were finding it easy to have something to put it down to. As staff became more understanding of the students' situations, we were more likely to not challenge kids who were late or absent, because they knew it wasn't their fault. So we just worked around it. But that wasn't supporting the student's learning.

Fortunately, we were able to have these conversations in staff meetings. We talked more about students' backgrounds and experiences to help make positive plans for their future learn. We talked about how, if we understand their home life better, we can adjust learning opportunities but without lowering the challenge or the expectations. I realised it wasn't easy trying to get the balance of the relationships right. There is a fine balance between setting the bar high enough to challenge students and setting it so far ahead that they give up.

The community

I knew I needed to reach out to the community too – but the thought was so daunting. But I'm beginning to understand ways this can be done in a positive and respectful manner. I've made a real effort to develop friendships with the Aboriginal staff in the school, just through informal chats or at social events. That's a starting point.

I'm starting to work more co-operatively with parents and build relationships and find out what their strengths are too. I've realized that some families find it hard to ask for help, some are intimidated, and some have their own bad memories of their upbringing. Some just don't understand the school jargon, so a simple 'interpret' can help do the trick.

Yesterday I had a phone conversation with a family for one of my students. He hadn't handed in an assessment task. I took the tack of support and conversation where this conversation used to be about what the student hasn't done – the blame. It used to be very one sided. This time we discussed and planned a solution together. It is a small, but positive step in the right direction.

But I think the most important thing is building the links with the community and having parents, carers and others feel that the school is their place too. This is more than feeling welcome. It is about ownership as well. Many, many teachers question the institutionalising of all aspects of school and prefer to experience school as community rather than as a hierarchy



with a strong systems-based way of working. In a process mode we can all feel heard, and be a part of the solution, not constantly marginalised and having decisions made at the top and imposed on us.

Changing the conversation

Looking back, I think that changing patterns of conversations has several phases. Firstly, I needed to be in a position where I could reflect on my own position and behavior. I needed to carefully monitor what I say to ensure that I am not inadvertently allowing deficit conversations to flourish. Then I needed to challenge expressions of deficit when I hear them. It is critical to do the second in a way that takes people with me rather than put them offside. Then it was about developing a rapport with people on a one to one basis. Building relationships with my students, the other staff, with the community. Individualisation, differentiation, and interactions based on relevance... what's actually happening in your lives right now, not what some book or some 'expert' has told you is the 'right' way to go about speaking with someone.

What had seemed pretty straightforward to me when I left Uni, I now realise is actually much more complicated than I thought. We had been taught to see everyone as the same, and I realise now that this doesn't work – we are all unique individuals with personal and cultural experiences that are valuable and an integral part of who we are. But if you can build a genuine relationship with a student then you have created a valued connection. This grows exponentially as students can sense from their peers whether the relationship is genuine or not.