TT Series 3
Marnee Shay
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JANE HUNTER 0:10

Marnee Shay is an associate professor and a principal research fellow in the School of Education at the University of Queensland. She's an Aboriginal woman whose maternal family is from the Ngen'giwumirri language group in the Daly River in the Northern Territory. She was born in Brisbane with strong connections to Indigenous communities in South-East Queensland. Marnee is an experienced and qualified secondary school teacher and a wonderful researcher who has won many awards and certainly promoted and still maintains a hugely active HDR commitment. We thank you for your work more broadly. Marnee, I'm so thankful that you've been able to join us for this podcast. Welcome.

MARNEE SHAY 1:47
Thank you, Jane. Thanks for having me and Marnee.

DON CARTER 1:51
We're very excited to be able to talk with you today and I get to ask the first question. First of all, though, you're a lead editor of a critical text in the field of Indigenous education. That's called *Indigenous Education in Australia, Learning and Teaching for Deadly Futures*. Routledge is the publisher, 2021, and the book won a national award for the Tertiary VET teaching and Learning Resource category at the Education Publishing Awards Australia. Congratulations. By the way, this text takes a strength-based approach to the preparation of pre-service and in-service teachers to drive positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Marnee, could you explain to us what you mean by strength-based approach?

MARNEE SHAY 2:38
Yes. So strengths based approaches are necessary in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education because by nature it is a field that's being built on deficit.
So narratives of students and family failure have resulted in Indigenous people being constructed as a problem to fix in education. So strengths-based approaches is a different way of approaching our work. It can be applied across practice policy and research. And Deadly Futures aim to build on the work of people like Professor Chris Sarra, who brought strengths-based approaches to the forefront with his stronger, smarter philosophy and shifting conceptions of Aboriginal identity rather than an asset rather than being a deficit.
So yes, I love strengths-based approaches. I've actually got another manuscript that was commissioned by Routledge that I'm desperately trying to finish by the end of the year. It will be published in 2025 and I'm writing that with my colleague, Professor Grace Sara, we have been researching together for 10 years now, and we use strengths based approaches across our all of our work. We think it's time that we developed into some sort of rigorous theory and formed frameworks for other researchers to take forward in the field and debate it can test it, and we want people to think about what strengths-based approaches means for Indigenous education.

JANE HUNTER 4:00
So just to build on what you shared. It sounds to me like this is something that we should all be doing across Australia in teacher education. Is that fair enough?

MARNEE SHAY 4:15
Look, we would advocate for that. How people approach things is of course their choice and we need lots of different ways. Critical approaches are also very important.
But what we're saying is that it's absolutely dominated the future of indigenous education, even critique of the system. Now, critique of the ways in which the system has disadvantaged our people and our students.
But we also need different ways of looking at it, because what that resulted in is a whole range of deficit ideas about what indigenous education is. So in 2018 I developed a pilot study. I just came up with this idea.
The term 'excellence' gets used across so many areas of education. If you look at programs and policies and awards, it just gets thrown around because of course it's the pinnacle of what we all want to aim for.
But I just Googled excellence and indigenous education. There was nothing. So what I kind of hypothesised at that point was that educators, school leaders, they come to their work with already preconceived ideas about what they're aiming for or what they're aspiring to in their work around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. So yes, that's just one example of how significant strengths-based approaches can be in terms of how we think about our work and how we approach our work.

JANE HUNTER 5:41
What are you actually noticing then, now, given that this has been in operation for a period of time?

MARNEE SHAY 5:49
Well, I come from a teaching background in Flexi Schools, so even back before strength-based approaches became more well known or even trauma informed approaches or some of the more known frameworks, Now that is how we worked with young people.
We worked with a particularly disadvantaged cohort, but there were always strengths to work from. They were the interests of the young people, the skills, the talents, all of those sorts of things. And then we would build from that base in terms of engaging with those young people.
And we were particularly successful in engaging a cohort of young people that the mainstream system had just given up on, and they were unsuccessful in engaging this particular cohort. So I would say that over a really long period of time, both in practice and research, I have noticed a shift in terms of how people engage with conversations, both our own people, Indigenous people, but also non-Indigenous people.
When we're using strengths-based language and we're using a strengths-based approach in terms of a philosophy and starting a conversation about things, even when it is a problem based conversation, there are always strengths to draw from in having those conversations.

DON CARTER 7:06
So can I ask, how are you reaching policymakers? Because you mentioned that the word excellence doesn't appear. How are you going to get the policy makers?

MARNEE SHAY 7:16
Well, I do take a lot of time to sit on boards and committees, and I hope that that sometimes, you know, I have some sort of influence in that space. And others, of course, we've got lots of championing these sorts of ideas.
So in terms of policy engagement, I also try and do a lot of non-traditional research outputs. So we do our peer-reviewed articles. We always aim for Q1 and Q2. That adds the rigour to it. But then I always think, well, how do how do we get this out to a broader audience? I'm an author with *The Conversation*. I can't remember how many articles I have authored now, and I love *The Conversation* because it's a rigorous research-based media outlet. So it's based on research, yet it helps to communicate to a broader audience. And I've had a lot of engagement from different governments and school bodies and all sorts of people through communicating the research in that way.

JANE HUNTER 8:12
Yes. And I love reading your pieces in *The Conversation*. And there was a piece that you wrote with some colleagues in August, Marnee, Aboriginal children as young as five are getting suspended from school. We can't close the gap if this is happening. And so in that piece you talk about the enrolment of Queensland public schools. While you refer to figures from 2023 and you cite the fact that there were 81, almost 82,000 incidents that led to suspension, expulsion or enrolment, cancellation of Indigenous students. So just clarifying that they were 26% in those statistics that were Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander students, and even though Indigenous students are only made up 11% of the population, that was the huge disparity. Now I'm sure that in New South Wales, for example, other states the figures would be not too different proportionally.
So why as a society do you think we're still getting this so wrong? It can. Schools keep accepting that the responsibility lies with them for these appalling figures, even though more Indigenous children are actually attending pre-school.

MARNEE SHAY 9:36
Yes. So I spend my classroom teaching career in Flexi Schools. As I mentioned, and that gave me a fairly unique vantage point on the issue of school exclusion. And I learned so much from the young people who I worked with during that time.
I met so many talented, bright young people who had enthusiasm for learning, but their needs hadn't been met by the mainstream schooling system. Say so anyone listening who doesn't know what a Flexi School is? Flexi Schools are schools for young people who've been excluded formally or informally from mainstream settings, and there's a spectrum. So some Flexi Schools are shorter term options that aim to get young people back into the school system more a remedial based approach. There is increasing number of longer term options for young people who want to attend flexi schools that are aiming at doing school differently. So I always advocate that what we know works in Flexi Schools should be applied on a large scale in mainstream schooling, policy and practice.
If these schools can engage a cohort of chronically disengaged students, then there's things to be learnt from the approaches that are used in these school settings. But unfortunately, schools haven't changed in many ways, but society has changed rapidly, and the issues that young people face today are vastly different from when I went to school in the 80s and 90s. So an overhaul of the architecture of school is obviously really needed. If we want to get serious about shifting some of the data around school exclusion.

DON CARTER 11:17
That's fascinating that the architecture of schooling needs to change. And I just want to move on to some research which shows increasing numbers of schools having success at reducing suspensions. And you've talked a bit about this and you advocate for the positive behaviour for learning framework. Can you explain a little bit about how this framework actually works and why mentoring programs are so critical for belonging and success?

MARNEE SHAY 11:47
Yes, so I will start by saying that Problem Based Learning (PBL) isn't my area of expertise. I'm learning more about.
I'm working with colleagues led by Associate Professor Shiralee Poed at UQ on some research on school exclusion.
I know some of the principles include explicit teaching of social and emotional wellbeing. Competencies such as emotional regulation. Trauma-informed practices are a big part of PBL restorative practices and bullying prevention, and I know part of the success of PBL is the whole of school nature of its application and the emphasis on staff learning and professional development.
In terms of my field in Indigenous education, we know there is very little evidence about whether PBL is effective in reducing school disciplinary action for Indigenous students. I don't have evidence of this, but you can see from the data that there's still a big problem, even though PBL ostensibly being quite effective and some cohorts, we just know the data is there. And so PBL, that's wonderful that it's working for some schools in some cohorts, but I don't think it's going to be the answer to fixing the problem.

JANE HUNTER 13:03
Would you say then mentoring programs? That's sort of, I guess, central to the way that PBL works. So are there other ways of executing that for effective teaching and learning for Indigenous children and young people?

MARNEE SHAY 13:25
Well, I cannot say this for certain because I haven't researched and I don't have data to support it, but anecdotally I work a lot not working in schools.
I'm not hearing that mentoring is a big part of the work that particularly community education counsellors and other Indigenous based workers in schools are doing. And so I don't think their knowledge and expertise is drawn upon enough. I think some schools do it in excellent ways. I think they recognise the knowledge and expertise of their Indigenous staff and they utilise that in a way that brings that expertise into the practices of the school. But the data shows us that that's not happening on a large scale.

JANE HUNTER 14:13
That's so revealing isn't it? Just for a little bit of a change of pace, I'm sure our listeners would love to know a little bit more about your, your own education. And you know, you've done had amazing achievements and just and your voice in so many different places and spaces. But what was it like growing up in South-East Queensland for you?

MARNEE SHAY 14:40
I'm afraid it's a bit of a boring story, Jane. I've always loved learning. My mum didn't have a great schooling experience herself and she will tell you that it was purely based on racism. But she always wanted us to have an education.
She always wanted us to have access to books and reading and she always encouraged us to read. So school itself was a pretty mundane experience for me.
There wasn't really a lot of indigenous programs or anything. When I went through school, so I didn't really feel a sense of belonging through my schooling experiences, but I was also quite capable.
And so it's interesting where I am because I didn't have any guidance offices or any teachers at school, talked to me about post schooling options, but Mum used to take blood and so she had a number of people that would come in regularly to get their blood taken and one of them was an elderly gentleman that was he wasn't very well and he really he loved Mum.
So he and it turns out that he was the ex Vice-Chancellor of James Cook University. His name was Professor Ray Golding, and he had a yarn about all sorts of things and, and I'm the eldest.
So he kept saying, you know, what's, what's Marnee doing when she's finishing school, she's going to go to university. And so Mum's trying to relay this. And then in the end he said, I really want you to bring Marnee to our home. So he and Mrs. Golding requested us for a morning tea and then they kept getting us back and he kept talking to me about why it's important for me to study and the significance for me in terms of who I am, my family, my culture, my background.
And he used to have a number of Indigenous colleagues who he was quite close to, and he'd tell me about their stories. And then he introduced me to them and he ended up helping to choose a college based on his connections. And it was an indigenous college at Southern Cross University. He even helped because we had no idea, of course, about, you know, how do you even apply for university or all of those sorts of things.
So he even said to me, You'll do a PhD. At that point, I had no idea what a Ph.D. was, and I still didn't know what even ten years after that. Going to an indigenous college where all of my lecturers and teachers were almost all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was just a transformation. And for me it was such a positive experience and it just sparked this. Yes, something in me and here I am.

JANE HUNTER 17:17
What a wonderful story. And you know, you're a living, breathing example of what we need much more of.

MARNEE SHAY 17:25
Yeah, he was, he was a wonderful man. He and Mrs. Golding have passed. Now what I always acknowledge them.

DON CARTER 17:31
Marnee, you may or may not know that in our podcast we asked our guest to do a 30-second rant on a topic that bothers you. Might make you feel under the collar, etc., or something that you're really passionate about. So we're going to hand over to you with 30 seconds, not 30 minutes. Right. 30 seconds about something that you feel passionately about and want to rant about. Thank you.

MARNEE SHAY 17:57

Thank you. I'm going to say I'm actually not much of a renter. I don't like to complain because it actually is not good for your body. It's not good for your spirit. And yes, I sort of if of course, I feel frustrated, I've got a lot to feel frustrated about sometimes. You know, we live in a state that is just one of the very first things the new government did was repeal some legislation that was about truth telling, reconciliation and no treaty. So, yes there's a lot to sort of get frustrated about, but I do try and channel it in a way that is constructive and helpful. I'm not really a renter.

DON CARTER 18:39
Now that's fine. And you've highlighted some things with regard to frustration. You're looking after yourself by not getting too hot under the collar about it. I think that's a very positive.

MARNEE SHAY 18:52
I do. But I've got such wonderful mentors, aunties and elders and family that, you know, I think about what they live through. I've had comparatively such a wonderful life and experience. Things have changed. So it's again, thinking through that strength-based lens where we don't get stuck in in that negative cycle. It's not helpful for anyone. There's a lot more that needs to change, and I hope that happens in my lifetime. And yes, I think it's just important that I keep working hard too. Make some sort of contribution towards that change.

JANE HUNTER 19:27
Excellent. Well, I'm curious to know what you think about the Federal Government, I mean, they've allocated around 110 million in the May Budget to Indigenous education, and I'm just wondering if you think, you know, how is that going to make a difference? And what do you think about the necessity of focusing on particular areas? Because I'm very conscious that we certainly at UTS, we have a handful of Indigenous students. We have had over the years and certainly we had the wonderful Randall Mumbulla who we interviewed in our last podcast series. And I'm just wondering, you know, how can we attract more Indigenous young people to become teachers, given the fact that Jason Clare is certainly wanting to make that a priority?

MARNEE SHAY 20:29
Well, I think you have to look at who's in academic roles as well. So start there. And that's why I'm I spent a huge amount of time investing in our future Indigenous education academic workforce through the ideas. And I think what happens when we are there is more mob want to come.
So it's not attractive for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to go and work in the all-white or non-Indigenous setting where you're the only person. It's not very much fun being the only person, but it's also quite stressful and it can be difficult to make any significant change. So when I started at UQ, there's myself and another indigenous academic.
We were the first two appointments, and we weren't in identified roles, but we were the first Indigenous academics full time to be appointed in that school - ever - in 2018.
So that person, my colleague, left quite reasonably quickly and then I was there by myself. I thought, I'm not going to survive this if I don't get a big model community around me. And so luckily for me, I had people that I know from community and my networks that wanted to do PhDs and who were interested in research.
So I employed indigenous research assistants as well. And we had a vacancy come up where we really want to have a second at least one more Indigenous academic. But we now have three

Indigenous academics on staff, which is excellent because we're a pretty small school. So my point is that where you have a group of people, it's more attractive.
So but how do you get there? Well you look at the culture of your organisation, the messaging that you put out, what your organisational culture is in terms of literacy, racial and cultural, all that sort of stuff. Because people can say from afar whether you're interested and present in terms of Indigenous engagement, we have an excellent head of school, Professor Robin Shields. He comes to community events, doesn't matter if it's outside of his work time or if he's invited by elders, he shows up and that's been really noticed by our community. So, it's those sorts of things that I think really help. It's a slow burn as well. It takes time.

JANE HUNTER 22:52
And trust must be a huge part of that, you know, given history And I mean in New South Wales we've just had a look at the curriculum in HSC and you know, the whole notion of deep time has been skipped over and that's been in *The Conversation*, for example, in recent times.
And it just strikes me that, you know, still when it comes to, you know, school education and what's being touted as being important and there's so-called consultation. But often if you actually drill through that consultation and in some of our regulators are not really doing that in a way that is being transparent, it's sort of often lip service and then that history gets skipped over. And that worries somebody like myself.
Having taught HSIE for a number of years that those concepts, how do you sort of create that sense of belonging going through the school system and then to want to, as you just carefully outlined, you know, then want to go into university and be taught perhaps by Indigenous teachers and lecturers so that that can, you know, foster that sort of feeling of safety in terms of your own intellectual development, but also what you might consider giving back to a profession like teaching.

MARNEE SHAY 24:23
Absolutely. And I think it's equally as important for non-Indigenous people to encounter Indigenous people not as the cleaners or the aides, as professionals, as teachers, as school leaders, as principals, as guiding services, as lecturers, as professors.
It's very, very important for anyone who is part of that system to see that. And that's part of shifting some of the racial dynamics and also perceptions about who indigenous people are and what we're capable of. And I don't know if you've got time to talk about this. I just want to say you talked about the term consultation and we've been doing a lot of work myself and Professor Sara and Jo Lampert and Jody Miller on some research on co-design in education, Indigenous education policy and practice. And what we're wanting to do is use the evidence we have from the research we're doing is to really distinguish what's the difference between co-design and consultation and consultations really being the predominant way in which education institutions in Australia have worked with Indigenous people over a really long period of time.
So consultation means that you take ideas and you go and talk to people and then you get to decide whether you take on those ideas. Co-design according to our data and particularly informed by Indigenous people, is a different way of working.
So I think it's really important that we disrupt the dominant ways in which Indigenous education has been done over a period of time and we try some new ways and give also education leaders and educators frameworks and different ways of thinking about their engagement with Indigenous people that is, you know, relationally based. It's reciprocal and it's strength-based.

DON CARTER 26:20
That's really interesting mainly, and I think a lot of people listening to what you just said would agree, and particularly those people who are upset about the new drafts of the drama syllabus and the music syllabus, for example, co-design is something worth exploring, but we're at that point of the interview when we're going to have to wrap it up. It's always a little bit sad to say thank you, but it's been great. And I know Jane wants to say a couple of things before we do wrap up.

JANE HUNTER 26:53
Thanks so much, Don and Marnee. Just one before we do finish. So if you had a message to indigenous school leavers about going into teaching, what would that be? What would you say to them?

MARNEE SHAY 27:08
I would say that teaching is one of the most rewarding careers that they could choose. I think we're as a culture. I mean, all Aboriginal cultures are different and Torres Strait Islander culture is different, but generally we are culturally very much about relationship and good teachers, good at relationships. So that's the starting point for excellent teaching. And I know many mob that are teachers that love their jobs and they've stayed despite the challenges and I think it's an excellent career choice.

JANE HUNTER 27:42
Thank you so much, Marnee. We're really grateful to the work you do and are doing and continue to do have done and amazing to hear that story about Professor Golding and it often it just takes one person. Doesn't that really sort of can set a different course and you were open to that and your family, your mother and so on. It was really a terrific story.

MARNEE SHAY 28:07
Thank you. And of course, my mom is the one that made it. So of course I acknowledge my mom to I'll dedicate this podcast to mom. Actually, I'll make a list of.

Okay, Thank you. Thank you. Thanks to you both.

DON CARTER 28:28

Oh, Jane, what did you think of that interview? Tell me.

JANE HUNTER 28:33
Marnee is probably one of the most foremost indigenous education teacher educators. We don't even need to necessarily note that. And the work that she's doing and has done for some time is not only making a difference, but it's building a team of indigenous educators to take and make sure that young people from her communities and more broadly really consider going into teaching. And we just need that replication of monies across the country, in my view. What about you, Don?

DON CARTER 29:12
Yes, look, I would agree with that. And Marnee is a real change agent and she's doing it in a very scholarly professional but also agreeable way, if you know what I mean. I mean, her rant wasn't really a rant. She doesn't want to rant because of self care, etc. But she was able to table a number of ideas that are food for thought. And I particularly liked her point about consultation and co-design. That's something for us all to think about and her point about the word excellence not appearing in policy documents.

JANE HUNTER 29:48
That's absolutely shameful. Yes, but I thought that this idea of co-design and so will include in the show notes some of that work that has been recently published around that. But it's really this idea of a really different way of working and really disrupting the ways in which we've excluded and often that's been done possibly from the point of naivete as opposed to being deliberate. And so if we can think about how the exemplar of the work that Marnee's doing can be replicated in more places in teacher education, then I think there's a real possibility of realising what she's talking about here. So terrific. I absolutely enjoyed that. So thank you so much, Don.

DON CARTER 30:39
Thank you, Jane. Very, very enjoyable interview for sure.