

A perspective from urban Aboriginal Australia Danielle Sandler*

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* Danielle has been a secondary school teacher for twelve years. She has been involved in campaigns in support of public education since she began teaching and has a particular interest in the experiences of Indigenous and economically disadvantaged families within the education system. Danielle Sanders is a pseudonym.

Danielle Sandler spoke to Amelia King (not her real name), an Aboriginal PhD scholar, about her experiences in, and views of, the education system.

DS: Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed for this first issue of *Breaking Out*.

AK: Actually, thank *you* – I'm really glad I've got the opportunity to talk about this, because it's important for people to hear a perspective from Aboriginal people in urban areas. A lot of people think about the communities in remote areas when they're talking about Aboriginal experiences, and there can be a bit of an idea that those of us who aren't in remote areas aren't 'real' Aboriginal people, so I love that you decided to include an urban perspective.

DS: It seems to me that there has been a decline in public awareness about urban Aboriginal experiences over the last decade or so. For example, I used to hear a lot about community organising in Redfern, in Sydney, but recently it seems to have not been discussed much, even in activist circles. Do you think that's correct?

AK: I do, I definitely feel that this is true. A lot of research that comes out, or is talked about or publicised, focuses on 'real' – remote – Aboriginal people, and because we live in cities sometimes we're kind of forgotten or ignored or silenced. And so I do think that urban Aboriginal voices need to come back stronger than ever in education, and actually in every social justice realm.

DS: What do you think these voices should be saying?

AK: Well, a lot comes from my own experiences. Like, my 12 year old son, in high school, gets stereotyped, pigeonholed and is getting a bit tired of being asked, 'What part of you is Aboriginal? Why are you light skinned?' And some of that comes from prejudice, and some of it is just curiosity, but it can get exhausting to have to be in the role of educating the rest of our communities all the time, especially for a 12 year old kid. It shouldn't have to be his role to justify his identity, that 'my dad is this & my mum is light skinned...'

DS: Do you think this the most challenging part of Aboriginal people's experience in education – the need to justify or explain or define themselves?

AK: I'm not sure if it's *the* most challenging thing, but sometimes it seems to be the thing that comes up most often, day to day.

DS: What about your experience in the education system? You've obviously worked through it very successfully, having received your PhD. What barriers do you think you've overcome? And how have you done that?

AK: I think if it wasn't for the family I come from, and the emotional intelligence they've given me, I wouldn't have had those successes. That resilience which my family has given me ties so closely to education, because it's helped me get through the institutions that really are set up in ways that fail us, overall. We need to teach our children how to survive it, so in that way, I've been really lucky.

DS: What do you mean that the institutions are set up to fail you?

AK: It's so deep and sometimes it's really obvious but sometimes it's a lot more subtle... they fail us through ignoring us, through their lack of acknowledgement or through a token and meaningless acknowledgement ... It's just lucky that I've been educated outside these institutions, to get through this, and I feel really lucky that my two boys have been educated like this, too. But it's all informal, nothing organised or institutional. And we can only do that in tiny chunks. One of my boys is in preschool, one is in highschool, I was at the high level of doing a PhD, and I still went through the same things as my two boys.

DS: What sorts of things are you talking about?

AK: Well, I'm still grappling with the emotions, seven years later, of something that happened when I was working through my PhD, and having a coffee with my supervisor, and she asked me about my finances. I felt pretty uncomfortable talking about it, and really felt like she wouldn't have asked a white woman that sort of question, but I tried to be diplomatic and just brush it off, so I said something like, 'Oh, we manage, you know...' Then she asked me why I didn't just get Abstudy because it was so much money. This is a woman who'd done a lot of research with Aboriginal communities, and still thought that getting lots of money for education costs was really easy for Aboriginal people and that it was a lot more than Austudy.

DS: I think it's a pretty common idea in society that there are some financial advantages for Aboriginal people, that they get extra payments for education or free houses or whatever. When I was growing up, I used to hear all the time that Aboriginal people got a free car every year or got given a house or extra welfare payments. I still hear that now.

AK: People do think that Aboriginal people have access to all sorts of advantages that non-Aboriginal people don't have. I've come across this idea a lot... and quite often it's just that people have been told these things, & never made the effort to actually see what the real situation is or sometimes it's that they haven't wanted to ask an Aboriginal person in case they offended them. But really, if you're coming from a position of respect, there's no reason not to ask, and I actually really appreciate it when people ask me honestly about something and then I can tell them honestly what the situation is and then we can have a discussion.

But at the same time, sometimes the ignorance is incredibly frustrating. When my family moved into our house, the moving guy said to my partner, 'You're lucky you married an Aboriginal woman – you couldn't afford this without all the extra payments and grants they get.' And I'm sick to death of justifying government policies that we haven't been part of making but that we then have to defend ourselves. Abstudy & Austudy are the same payments. It's true that there are some extra payment options for Aboriginal students, but it feels like because of that, I'm forced into defending government policy, when I don't see those policies as supporting people like me at all. I think this has the benefit of distracting non-Aboriginal people from other ways that the government is attacking *them*, because it's making non-Aboriginal people feel like they're being discriminated against.

DS: I've read several times the idea that the attitudes of non-Aboriginal people to Aboriginal people stem a lot from what they are taught at school. Do you think that's true? What difference would it make if the education system dealt differently with Aboriginal history, or Aboriginal people and cultures today?

AK: I don't see that a lot has changed – you can open an education support unit, or write a manual or whatever, and these things are at all the primary and high schools, and unis, and even kinders, but what matters is what is being taught there, and from what I've seen from my son's high school units, it seems to me that what is being taught isn't about how historically the authorities have tried to breed us out, to kill us, to rape us.

Curriculum change can help, and that should be looked at, but it's just a small part of the change that needs to happen. You could also employ an Aboriginal person to talk to a class, but if they don't know their history, that would still be limited. The textbook presentation of Aboriginal society is usually not the way that Aboriginal people are; we have a strong oral history, for example, that's not the way that we teach, we teach on a whole different level.

DS: So, how do you view the interaction of traditional education in Aboriginal communities with the current Western education system in Australia?

AK: Well, I do value that piece of paper, but on the other hand, the education that my mum gives - she's a teacher, a qualified teacher in the Western world, and she's lecturing - her teaching of that emotional resilience, the tools she has given us about how to navigate through the system and survive to tell the tale is so precious because how would we get through without that? And what happens to other Aboriginal families who don't have what we have?

DS: And your sons? How do you do that kind of education with them?

AK: For us, their education, particularly for my son who's in high school, is about dealing with his emotions about what he hears at school. So he can ask us questions and we talk about things like, 'This might make you feel angry, this might make you worried.' Education for us has always been in our home because the institutions keep failing us. I mean, how does someone, a kid, handle being thrown into this system, highschool, without the tools to survive this. That's how I feel about the system. It's not going to work for us, it's not designed for us, or with us.

DS: I understand you had some challenging interactions with the school that your nieces went to when they stayed with you for several months, and that you had the sense that the reason things were so difficult was in large part because they were Aboriginal. Could you discuss this at all?

AK: For one thing, there were a lot of assumptions about what an Aboriginal student will be interested in or should be interested in. Sometimes these stereotypes shut us down before we even get started. Also, I suppose it just usually felt like they didn't listen to us or really care much about the experiences of the girls. They had some problems concentrating in class sometimes, and one needed to sometimes leave to cool off so she wouldn't act out and cause problems for other kids in the class. But they weren't very receptive to dealing with this in flexible ways. I'd always come and acknowledge

behaviour that was inappropriate, and I'd never defend behaviour that was disrespectful or aggressive. But we had to talk about the reasons why this was happening; one girl was angry that she couldn't talk to her mum, they were both upset that that they'd been displaced from their homes. But all these stereotypical ideas about foster kids, especially Aboriginal foster kids, kept coming up. I was trying to break through the stereotypes, but it never seemed like they were prepared to listen in order to change anything. There was a very one-way street in terms of understanding the other perspective – I didn't get the feeling that they were prepared to address or acknowledge their own power and privilege, and that the whole institution has that power.

DS: How do you think the school saw you and your family?

AK: It seemed clear to me that some of the teachers really saw us as parents who weren't interested in our kids' education or supportive of the school, but it was more that we were trying to get the right support for our kids. But in the end, you know, how many times do you have to be shut up before you just give up and say, 'That's enough, I'm not doing this again'. But then, of course, you get blamed for not being invested in your kids' education.

DS: If you could say something to people working in education, or involved in the education system in some way, what would you want them to know?

AK: One thing would be that advocating and explaining all the time can be exhausting. You're struggling with the balance of wanting to educate people and talk to them, but also not wearing yourself out, because that's how people lose strength, they just get tired. How much stress can we take? If it was just one thing, that'd be manageable, but it's like it's one thing here today, and then two things somewhere else the next day, and this is something we're trying to deal with every day. You're having to address stereotypes from the minute you come out the womb, and it's not just us now, it's generational. You know, when people keep asking questions, or wanting resources or help from us, even when they're doing it for good reasons, it can get really tiring. We can get defensive, even.

Really, I'd ask them just to think about the assumptions they carry, because there are stereotypes that you carry into the classroom, or wherever, whether you know it or not. I'd like to see Australian institutions actually challenge people on what they think they know about Aboriginal people. We all have ideas about people, but it's always a breath of fresh air to meet people who ask honestly about things, because that way we can share. Then there can maybe be a shift.