

## Des English Memorial Lecture—Walking in the Territory

*Nancy Devlin, Deborah Hall and Rachel Kroes*

Hello everyone. Let me begin with some important thank yous and acknowledgements. Thank *you* for coming to our talk, the Larrakia people for welcoming us to their country, AASE for this opportunity to speak, and Deborah Hall and Rachel Kroes for co-presenting with me today. When you add it up, the three of us have lived and worked in the Territory for almost a century. I also invited another longstanding friend, an Indigenous woman, whose story would have added a much-needed dimension, but unfortunately, she was not available.

As long as I can remember, I have considered that I was born lucky. I have never been starving, nor have I been in a war zone. I have never suffered from serious trauma. I know I have been loved and respected. I have had opportunities to share and choices to make. This is what I have always believed *all* people deserve. My question to myself, and to you, is “How do we achieve this?” How do we enable *others* to have a rich, full and productive life? One that allows them many choices too.

### *USA*

As many of you know already, I am a native New Yorker. I had never thought about leaving my home environment except to travel, but my life was meant to be different. Shortly after graduating, a friend I have had since I was five asked if I wanted to go with her on a trip around the world. I agreed, and raised my own fare through my summer teaching. We stopped off in Australia to see her grandmother, who'd given her the money for the trip. As they say, the rest is history.

To be a teacher of students with special education needs was something I had wanted to do since I had been in high school in Connecticut, when I had tutored students in a slum area nearby. Later, when doing my degree, I specialised in teaching ‘exceptional students’ and began working in Harlem in an experimental program developed by an adjunct professor at Columbia. We visited their families to tell them about the program before we began.

I *loved* that job, because it opened up a whole new world for me and I was part of a teaching team with a qualified person approved by the New York City Board of Education (me) and a community person who did not have a teaching degree. Working in four family groups we used reel-to-reel video and scripted role-plays so that fifth and sixth grade students could see themselves, and we could deal with their truancy and help them catch up on what they'd missed in school.

The professor told me at the end of the summer program that I was his biggest surprise. He hadn't expected the students to relate so well to me. I had never expected them not to, as I cared about them, and I knew they cared about me. The fact that I was the only white girl in a large school building usually didn't register, except when I went home and saw my pale green face in the mirror or noticed on our videos that I was always ghosted out.

I felt more protected during the day around 126<sup>th</sup> St. than I did downtown where I lived, because uptown was really a neighbourhood and I was known to be working with the kids.

As I had never worked in a team teaching situation before that experience was very influential. I found that working this way was better for the students and for me. We needed the support of others to contribute fully. *Teamwork, collaboration, cooperation, communication and community.* These were the foundational concepts.

It was all a wonderful experience—one I expected to go back to after my trip.

However, I didn't return to New York as expected, but began working at Travancore Special School in Melbourne in 1971. Travancore, had recently changed from being a boarding school for what were then labelled as 'retarded orphans', and was still in a transitional phase.

At this stage of my presentation it would be appropriate to honour the man whose name is associated with this keynote address, for in my second year at Travancore, my first teaching post, Des English was appointed principal.

I immediately knew how fortunate I was. Des listened to the teachers, even to me, a young American teacher. Cross-cultural misunderstandings occurred. However, he listened and made changes to suit all his teachers. I was a new teacher, but he gave me confidence and advice and made the school a very welcoming place to work in. Des also invited all of us to his house for dinner and this personal warm approach helped me to adjust.

He had come to Travancore from head office, because he wanted a challenge and had lots of new ideas he wanted to try. Our school was a part of a new plan, to work as a multi-disciplined team with students who had social and emotional needs. We had weekly group meetings with the psychiatrists and therapists who were also working with our students. It was the only school of its type in Victoria.

I won't go into my class and personal experiences there, but I'll just say that I lost so much weight at Travancore that that when my doctor in America saw me at the end of my first year, he said I had to change schools. Well, I didn't do that, but Des gave me a different group of students and lots of support. Most of my old students went to a very experienced teacher, who said after one term that the

students I had had *were not a teachable group*, and so Des arranged for the class to be changed too.

Many years later, after having lived and worked in Papua New Guinea for five years and with two children in tow, my husband and I moved back to Australia in 1979.

Over the next five years I worked part-time in three schools on the Gove Peninsular in Arnhem Land. In those isolated places, there was always work for a qualified teacher.

First, I was at the mainstream area school in Nhulunbuy, which then included all year levels, and was at the time the largest school in the Territory. I worked there from preschool to high school levels as a relief teacher.

The second school, Yirrkala, was also for preschool to secondary aged students and had a bilingual program for preschool and primary students.

My third school was Dhupuma, a boarding school for Indigenous secondary-aged students from Arnhem Land remote communities.

At Yirrkala and Dhupuma most of my work involved students with special needs. The older students in these schools had not gone through a bilingual program and, as a part-time teacher, I assisted them with their reading. Using *The Standard Reading Tests* from Daniels and Dyack (1958). Using subtests, I sought to uncover whether the students' hearing or vision was a part of the issue. In the main reading test students are asked to read a question. If they couldn't do this, I would read the question to them instead. The early questions are simple and not culturally inappropriate. For example: "Is a red flag black?". I could tell what reading errors they had. They would know if they had answered the question correctly, and we could share a few laughs about the ridiculously simple questions they had answered correctly. The higher levels of the test and standardisation were not culturally appropriate, but I didn't use these.

My experience at Dhupuma was the most satisfying. Once, when I was asked to take an art class, I began by telling the students what Yolngu family I had been adopted into. As all the students were from Arnhem Land, they then knew how they were related to me. It was interesting watching how they did specific tasks that related to their own family groups. I was a relief teacher in that class but I'm sure I learned as much as the students.

Sadly, Dhupuma was closed down at the end of second semester 1980. As Galarrwuy Yunupingu said, it was done 'with a stroke of a pen'. It was a big shock for everyone involved, especially the Indigenous people of Arnhem Land.

I continued to do relief teaching in Nhulunbuy until we left for the USA at the end of 1981. The ex-Dhupuma students were offered places at Kormilda in Darwin but few families wanted to send their children there, as it was so much further away and in a much bigger place.

After a year away in the United States my family and I returned to Australia in 1983, to Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island, where my husband took up the position of principal of Shepherdson College. I hadn't planned to work full-time, but as the school was short of teachers and my youngest child was school-aged, I agreed to do so, until the Education Department could find another teacher, which never happened.

I taught in different sections at Shepherdson, beginning with the secondary-aged students, then I was the visiting Homeland Centre teacher part-time, and did some special needs work. The following year I taught in Year Five, working with the older primary students in the bilingual education program, and then in my last year I became a full-time Homeland Centre teacher. I loved all this work as, once again, I was part of a team teaching with a person from the community, and doing what the people in the community wanted.

I was lucky too because these experiences in Arnhem Land helped me to grow as a person. I was also able to draw on my special education background to figure out where the students were performing.

If you are interested in Indigenous education in Arnhem Land have a look at what some of the independent schools are doing. Two of them, Gäwa and Mäpuru, were places that I visited back in 1985. Also read Galarrwuy Yunupingu's 2016 article in *The Monthly* and a new book that has just appeared: *History of Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory* (2017).

I decided when we came in to Darwin in 1986 that I wanted to take up a full-time teaching position in Special Education again. As a firm believer in joining professional associations, I joined AASE. I was shocked and saddened to find that there was a Des English Memorial Lecture in the National Conference. Until I saw that program, I hadn't known that Des had died. As you know from past presentations of this address, Des was instrumental in getting this national association for special education started.

The inclusion of students with special education needs has improved over the years since I came to the Territory. I arrived in 1979, before the United Nations Year of the Disabled. At that time, even expecting buildings to have access was unusual. Over the years more buildings, streets and toilets have become accessible, but when I came to Darwin and began working in the special unit of a mainstream primary school, students with physical disabilities were still not able to attend because its doorways were not wheelchair accessible. So those

students needed to attend special schools. Since then, I'm happy to say, that school has created accessible entries and other facilities.

'My' Darwin students, who were all physically able, had learning and other disabilities. They could be in the school, but had to be on a special unit roll book, as none of them would automatically be enrolled in a mainstream class. This meant that I was officially responsible for them, not the teacher whose classes they attended for varying periods of the day. In my first year there I tried very hard to make my students a part of the school, but in the second year, although it was against my personal philosophical position, I withdrew them for a specialised program that involved lots of experience-based learning, because I was so frustrated by many teachers' attitudes.

So the class and I visited the Crocodile Farm, CSIRO, Berri Juice, Paul's, Middle Point, Graham the Snake Man and many more interesting places. I learned lots about Darwin and the rural area. We all enjoyed ourselves, and used what we saw and learned to support our Maths and Language program. We wrote some great books too. The other teachers were happy as they felt this is where the students belonged—in a special program that really had little to do with them. I wasn't happy about it, as *I felt I was preventing my students from being a part of the school community* and not allowing them to develop in the way I knew they could. All of these students had lots of abilities too, but because they had been withdrawn, only our class assistant and I could see how *able* they were. A more important point is that the students couldn't see how able they were either!

At the end of the year I had a long talk with the principal and he agreed that my class needed to be more integrated into the rest of the school, otherwise, why were we there?

I had one of the best co-workers and I knew she would be a great benefit to other teachers, as she was a super able person. Part of the agreement, in our third and subsequent years, was that when our students participated in mainstream, age-appropriate classes, my co-worker would support them, rather than being with me.

I took on other students too—far more than the 10 official ones, and we would do critical thinking. I had to persuade the other teachers of the benefits that could flow for those were part my special critical thinking group, which was not just for compliant students who worked hard. Over the next six years these groups developed and my students were able to participate more and more in the mainstream of the school. I was especially happy when one of my original students was chosen as a school captain, having been recognised for his *sporting ability* rather than for his *reading disabilities*. I was very fortunate, once again, to have a very caring principal, who trusted my judgement in regard to the students and their abilities. Soon, most of the other teachers were willing to support the plan too. The school's reputation benefitted as well, because some

the students who did critical thinking became interschool debating champions. At secondary school a few of them continued with their debating and represented the Northern Territory in national debates.

Then from 1994 to 2000 I worked as the schools' consultant for students with special needs in the CEO (the Catholic Education Office). This role, like the Homeland Centre position I held at Shepherdson College, was very varied and involved advocating for students and families at the system, Territory and national level. It gave me the opportunity to visit all the Catholic schools in the Territory, as well as to work more closely with colleagues beyond the school level and beyond the Catholic system.

For those of you who aren't familiar with the Catholic schools system here in the Territory it extends to Wadeye (Port Keats) in the west, Nguuu (Bathurst Island) in the north, and Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa) in the south and east.

Ideally, in the Northern Territory, staff in the various systems combine to achieve and support changes for all students, rather than working separately. When I first went to work in Catholic Ed though, I was the only local recruit supporting students directly. My colleagues were shocked to see how closely I worked with people in the NT Education Department, and how much I expected them to support us, especially in curriculum development. We didn't, and still don't, have the luxury of choosing to be exclusive. It's been great to work hand in hand to support all children in all schools in a much more inclusive way. *We all learn so much more from each other*, and the limited resources we have stretch further.

Early in 2000 I had a Churchill Fellowship to visit programs in Canada and the United States and observed how they catered for students with special education needs in secondary and remote indigenous schools.

I then returned to NT Department of Education and chose to teach in a special school again to be much more hands on after my six years seconded to the Catholic system. After so long looking at things from a more macro perspective, it was nice, but also frustrating to arrive back in a school. I was impressed with the dedication of the teachers, assistants, therapists, families and support groups. I loved working with students in my class, especially the ones with more complex needs, as this was my first love when I began my education career. However, I felt frustrated by the *isolation* of that special school and the students, even though we had outreach classes and outreach programs. I can remember how staff in the primary school that my class was attached to were surprised that I came to their staff meetings as well as those in the special school. I was surprised that they were surprised!

It was how I'd felt when I first came to Darwin to teach. Yes, it was good that most children in that special school participated in mainstream school programs, but there was a chasm between them. Also, I felt that some students in my class

saw themselves as being more different, rather than being more like, the other students in the mainstream school. No children in my class had significant physical disabilities so they *were* more like the other students than they were different. However, they appeared to not feel that way. In their view, they were not *expected* to participate as fully as they were truly able to do. This lowering of expectations, especially from some people who had worked in the schools for a long time, caused me to wonder about what else I could do.

In 2002, after spending three months in Beijing at Tsinghua University, where my husband had been invited as a visiting foreign expert, and I had been fortunate in securing a lecturing position when a teacher had unexpectedly left, I thought about changing over to our local university in Darwin. Before we left for China I had begun teaching part-time in the Vocational Education and Training section as a trainer in the University's Certificate programs. A friend told me that the university was creating a Certificate 4 in Education Support. I loved the idea as I felt it would help give greater recognition to the work support staff did in our schools and, if they chose, it offered them a possible pathway to a Higher Education degree.

I subsequently worked in this area for ten years. During that time many students told me that stepping into the university for the first time had been the hardest part of the course for them. Later they could see some real advantages in doing the course through a university rather than doing a similar course through a non-university based provider.

Many students have gone on, some have done extremely well and a few have won top prizes for their academic work. As a teacher, working with these students has been extremely rewarding. Many support assistants were very capable students in their own earlier years at school, but due to circumstances, in many cases beyond their control, they hadn't continued their formal education. When they made the decision to get back into academic learning they could utilise the great abilities they had in school, *and* draw on their life experiences. Some of you here today have followed this pathway. Those of us, who just went on from secondary to tertiary education, learn a lot from such students.

Most of my time as a university lecturer over the last decade and a half was spent teaching in the pre-service undergraduate degree course. The one thing I would like to share with you is how *much* these students cared about catering for students with special education needs across a broad spectrum, including backgrounds other than English, giftedness, trauma, delays, and disabilities. As a practising teacher most of my life, I hadn't thought this was true. I had thought pre-service teachers didn't really think about children on the margins, but I was very wrong. Time and again I was so impressed by what these students had to say and how deeply they thought about including these children in their classes when they became teachers. It wasn't just the students who were older, and who

had worked as support assistants, or who were parents of children with disabilities themselves. This was the view of the majority of students I taught.

Why is it then that, within a few years, many don't appear to care as much as they had when they were pre-service teachers? Why is it that some now feel that including students with special education needs in their classes is too hard? It is *not* because they don't care. It has far more to do with *us*, and the supports *we* provide and the administration requirements. Many of us are very busy, even exhausted by our own situations, but sometimes finding the time to help other teachers ends up helping us too. This is something we would all do well to remember.

I have visited classrooms and seen students sitting at the back or to one side, doing work quite unrelated to what the others were doing. In recent discussions with people about the situation for students with special education needs, it seems the supports are not as available in schools like they were around 10 years ago, even though the international rights that Australia is a signatory to would suggest that *more students than ever before* should be participating in their neighbourhood schools. Kirby (2016) relates that some teachers in the United States see inclusion as a *privilege* for students with disabilities and claims that really they need to be educated in separate locations.

I have also visited schools where this is not the case, where the principal and mainstream staff are proud of all their students, including those identified with special education needs. These schools make a point of letting visitors know about and see these students too.

As you would have seen on Thursday Darwin has some great new special school buildings. This in itself is not a bad thing as these are better facilities, but at what cost? Sadly, there appears to be a trend to limit support people, including therapists, consultants and teachers, and more of these funds have gone into beautiful buildings. It is no wonder that families are choosing to place their children in these schools. We do need both, but not at the expense of supporting students in schools and in the community. It was good to hear from the NT Government on Thursday evening that the pendulum may be swinging back again to more support for teachers in all schools.

Let's continue Des's dream to be the national voice, advocating for students with special educational needs at all levels, keeping *all* our children in all of our hearts and minds, and following a social justice approach rather than a medical one, even when it seems easier to gain funding within that paradigm. We need to continue advocating for a bigger piece of Australia's gross national product to be given to education at *all* levels.

I believe we work best when we work collaboratively. That is why I planned this address to be from three people rather than just from me. I am now handing over to Deb Hall who will share her walk in the Territory.

## References

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