

My Future,
My Culture,
My Way.

NSW Department of Education

Case Study – Tannika Lewis

Who I am?

Greetings, I'm a proud Biripi woman with strong connections to the Biripi Country, where I've grown up most of my life. My position is the Senior Leader Community Engagement Officer at Taree High School and I have been at the school for 8 years now. I have worked in Aboriginal education since I left school. I love it, it is my life. I am also secretary of the Biripi Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG).

Connection to culture makes you feel complete

After I finished school I really started to understand that being Aboriginal was much more than just identifying and I started to learn about my culture. I learned about dancing and going out on Country, wildlife, bush tucker and bush medicine and the respect for dreamtime stories. I thought that was enough for me and then I learned the language. As I started learning more and more it was like I was given the key to unlock the rest of me. As I formed those connections I've really grounded myself. I've raised my kids here and they're totally immersed in their culture and they're named in language. I love how it makes you feel as an Aboriginal person, making those connections. That's why it's so important for our kids to have the opportunity to connect to their culture, because it just changes them completely, it changes their whole world, makes them feel complete.

We run a program at Taree High School called 'Wakali' that was developed by our head teacher of Aboriginal Education and Languages and implemented here at the school. It's a cultural program where we take the students out on Country and teach them about our culture. Yesterday, for example, we went up to Laurieton, Biripi Country. We tracked the bush and talked about native wildlife, plants and bush tuckers and learnt about the significance of that area. It was a very special day that I got to experience with the students.

Dance strengthens connection to Culture

About 7 years ago one of our Elders told me that I was ready to learn our traditional dance. Since this time I have been learning and teaching traditional dancing to our students. I started the group to really build up our girls. It started as a group of 10 and now we have about 25 students in the dance group, boys and girls. It's amazing because you see the kids that have started off in Year 7 with us and they go all the way through to Year 12. It's that connection to culture too, it's much more than dancing. Students learn the cultural protocols and respect. When we dance for our community or represent our community, we have the highest respect for it. It's about empowering these kids. When the students start off they're often just so broken and disengaged from who they are and when they get involved in dance group or the 'Wakali' program you can just see the change in them.



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Aboriginal artwork created by Felicity Adams who is a proud descendant of the Kamilaroi people, currently living and learning on Dharug Country.





Tannika with the Taree High School Dance Group

It's amazing. They start to grow and school is a much nicer place for them to be. If you have that strong connection to who you are and if you have pride and show your respect to your ancestors and your Elders, then that's the most important thing.

The girls in the group really sit down and talk to each other and offer each other support. The strong friendships they form in dance group are something that's really encouraged them to continue coming back to school. The students understand that it is a privilege to participate and they have to make sure their exams are done and they've handed in their assessments to be involved.

We don't have to be on the same level. We can do bigger and better.

It is important to have Aboriginal kids finish the HSC to make sure that they're up there and they have a chance in life. I push the students to complete school, but I'll also push them to go in the direction that they want to go, push them toward whatever goal they want to achieve.

We've just had 14 Aboriginal students that have finished their HSC, and that number keeps growing every year, which is amazing. At the moment I'm helping them with their transition and the process of applying for jobs. The majority of our students have left school and walked straight into work and study. One of our girls started at a local childcare centre as the cultural officer, she's loving it. Then we've got one of our graduating boys working at Taree Public School as the Community Liaison. Even though they've finished school and started in their work roles, I'm still continuing to support them.

I've been a strong driver for School Based Apprenticeships or Traineeships (SBATs). My Nan worked for the Department of Education for a long period of time, she was someone that I looked up to. I saw the changes that she made and I really wanted the same, I wanted to help people. I knew that if I didn't finish my Year 11 and 12 that I probably wouldn't get the chance to do that. I felt I was missing that cultural connection and felt a bit lost. I knew that a school based traineeship would suit me and I really pushed for the opportunity. It was the best thing for me, and by the time I was in Year 12 I loved being at school. I successfully completed my traineeship in a bank. These traineeships allow the students to see a purpose. A lot of them feel like they're just doing their HSC, and no one is going to want them after they finish. Then they get that position working in their traineeships and it completely changes them. They're working and they have a purpose and then they're going off and they're doing all these amazing things.

Recently we had 2 students apply for 2 different positions, one was at the hospital and one was at one of the local banks. They were both successful in getting the traineeships. I did a lot of prep with them to make sure that they were ready for the interviews. We went out and bought interview clothes for them and made sure that they looked deadly. Not only did they get the positions, they completed their 2 years and have the qualification. Every time an SBAT position would come up, I'd jump on it and we'd do the application with the student.



Tannika with the Taree High School Dance Group

I would go out and get all the paperwork signed by the parents and I would sit in their meetings to make sure that their signups were done. It became this big thing, we had students coming to us every year saying, 'I want to do that thing that that kid did last year'. It's not even me going out and approaching them anymore. The students are seeing this success and they really want to jump on board with it, they can see that they can finish their HSC and walk away with certificates and potential employment straight after school, which is amazing. We ended up with the highest number of Aboriginal students on SBATs in the state. Last year we had 14 on SBATs.

Success is reaching goals, small or big

We also work with parents, carers and teachers to develop goals for our students. Goals that we set can be small, like attendance. We work on building up to and achieving these goals and then celebrate success. In our learning hub, we have a deadly board. On that board we will have a tally to celebrate attendance, or I'll put something on there to celebrate someone getting a job. Every time one of the students does something that I think is amazing, whether it's big or small we celebrate. Success is not always these big things, success is all these little things in between. I want the students to know if they can achieve a small goal, they can achieve a massive goal.

To keep the students engaged, I started 'Durong' about 3 years ago. Durong means pride in our local language. We had noticed our students leaving in Year 10 and wanted to encourage them to stay at school. In the program we have

conversations to find out what the students' goals are and work through how we can achieve them together. I work with 5 kids at a time, we talk about their interests and then I help them to make a 'deadly resume'. We want to make their resumes the deadliest ones out there, that's how we're going to get them their jobs. I also teach them to update their resumes and keep them current, how to do cover letters and how to apply for work.

It is important to have parents and carers involved in the school

Part of my role is to get community; parents, carers and elders into the school. I run the school Reference Group (SRG) and their meetings that happen every month. The school principal, our head teacher of Aboriginal education, local Elders and the President of the local AECC all attend. I'll send out invites and Flyers to all our parents and carers. They are invited in to come and have a yarn about their child's education and how we can improve. We don't have all our parents attend, but they're comfortable enough to phone up and talk to me if they are worried about something. The SRG meetings are great because parents and carers feel comfortable enough to express how they're feeling and tell us what we need to improve as a school.

Finishing school is amazing and will open so many doors for students

The most rewarding part of my role would be seeing our students finish at the end, seeing them get work in a full time role that they love or studying something that you know is going to get them closer to their goal. It's the hardest thing, the students thinking that they're not good enough. I just love seeing them achieve their goals, seeing that they can and knowing that they're good enough. They say to me, "if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be doing this" and I say "no, it's you. You're the one that gets out of bed every day, I'm just the one here kicking you a little bit further!". Moving forward it is important to build connections with our students, to really know them on a personal level and value them.