

## Occasional Address

University of Canberra

Education Post-Graduate Graduation Ceremony, 20 April 2021

**Title : Yindyamarra winhanganha – the wisdom of knowing how to live well in a world worth living in**

Hello/Thank you for that introduction.

I acknowledge the Ngunnawal people, the traditional custodians of this land we gather on.

I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I also acknowledge that Australia's first peoples have been educating their nations for thousands of years on this great continent and continue to do so with generosity and insight - enriching all our lives.

I wish to acknowledge the Chancellor Professor Calma, AO, Vice Chancellor – Professor Nixon, Dean of Education, Professor Dalgarno, staff of the university, supportive family and friends, deserving graduates.

Thank you for the invitation to be here today to celebrate your achievements.

I congratulate you on what you have achieved, and the dedication that led to being awarded your degree. For those about to launch your professional life and those advancing it, your university and supporters have played a crucial role. This too I acknowledge.

In my role, as the Director-General of ACT Education I probably had hundreds of speaking engagements. The combination of my retirement and COVID means I am strangely a bit nervous today.

I mean I haven't had occasion to wear smart clothes or makeup for about 6 months! So again, thanks to the Vice Chancellor for the opportunity to get out and frock up.

I remember my graduation ceremony very well. I don't remember the graduation speech AT ALL.

Neatly setting myself a low bar there.

Assuming nothing much has changed in graduation ceremonies let me give you a first reminder of the one thing I hope you do recall - among all the things you may well forget.

“Yindyamarra winhanganha” – this is an elegant Wiradjuri phrase from around here which calls for the “wisdom to know how to live well in a world worth living in”.

By way of rote learning and in the interest of remembering, can I suggest you turn to the person on your left and repeat the phrase “Yindyamarra winhanganha”.

Explaining this term will not be the only important lesson I provide here today.

No, I will also tell you to avoid selecting the desk by the door in the staff room - as this is the position most likely to be interrupted by students asking pesky questions at lunchtime. If you are a new teacher, you may need to earn the right to make that choice – sorry!

I could also warn you of the hazards associated with Year 9 boys but that requires a whole other address in itself.

So, let me focus on Yindyamarra winhanganha.

I was 21 when I graduated as a health and physical education teacher from the University of Queensland.

I was ready. I felt I had paid my dues to educational institutions and had all I needed to get my career on the road. I was finished with studying and exams. I was hungry to get on with my life.

I knew I didn't know everything, but I was confident, optimistic and full of enthusiasm. Maybe just like you.

I was also quite frankly naive, with a dose of ignorance.

I had the knowledge to teach and some skills, I could write a polished lesson plan.

My bubble burst in my first year of teaching when I realized that if I had administered the student assessment task at the beginning of the unit, I would have gotten the same distribution of achievement that I recorded at the end of the unit. As far as impact was concerned I had little to show.

That insight was just one of many lessons I was learning as I gained wisdom.

What I was good at was developing relationships with my students, I cared about them, I noticed when they were away. I engaged them.

Over time, with the support of great mentors, AND my openness to learn, my teaching improved. I loved my work; I developed my teaching practice and embraced every opportunity it presented to me.

Teaching then led to a broader career in public service.

I believe the skills and experiences mastered by teachers are transferrable to so many contexts. But it is the vocational commitment to continuously improve, in order to make a difference and the hard wiring of lifelong learning that is the most precious gift you have received. Yindyamarra winhanganha.

Lifelong learning is a core component of knowing how to live well.

The best teachers and the best leaders are not the ones who know the most. They are the ones who recognize the importance of continuing to learn and grow throughout their careers and lives.

October 13 is celebrated each year in Finland as National Failure Day – a day to celebrate all those vain attempts, rubbish lessons, bad business ideas and failed policies.

The idea behind Failure Day was to encourage the community to recognise the intrinsic merit of trying and failing - and trying again. Something most kids do naturally.

But as adults, many of us are imbued with fear of failure and some unhealthy concern to be seen to be right all the time.

Learning, trying, failing, trying again is how we get better at things. And this process does not, must not finish when kids leave school, or indeed when you graduate from university.

Of course, the Wiradjuri have been educating their people on this land for 60,000 years so it is no wonder they are interested in the long game. I've heard that learning the deep meaning in song lines takes a lifetime.

Lifelong learning is the key to living well.

This seems deep and wise to me.

As teachers this means attending to your skills and interests throughout your careers.

And as teachers it means working to encourage this love of learning in your students.

But of course, there is a second element to the phrase Yindyamarra winhanganha – it is not just about the art of knowing how to live well but also in a world worth living in.

Existential issues like climate change and pandemics can elicit feelings of despair or hopelessness.

But so can more personal matters like stressed relationships, unemployment, and financial worries.

It is easy to lose sight of the main game in thinking about what qualifies as a world worth living in.

The former consumer mental health commissioner of New Zealand was asked for her description of a fulfilling life and she said: A place to call home, a job and a date on Saturday night.

Another version of this you may have heard is that everybody needs: Something to Do, Someone to Love and Something to Look forward to.

These have been called the simple pleasures of life. THEY make the world worth living in.

As teachers you are uniquely well placed to help emerging adults appreciate these simple pleasures as they aspire to live fulfilling lives. What's more you have an obligation to equip all young people with the wherewithal to find that fulfilment in whatever future circumstances they find themselves in.

Education leads to opportunities, to think, to create, to do.

Education overcomes ignorance, it breeds the resilience we know is needed to navigate the complex world we live in now and in the future.

You my friends are the stewards of every one of your student's educational experience. And by extension their parents and whole communities. You will ignite our love of learning or extinguish it.

Teaching requires extraordinary energy and emotional generosity. To be at your best you need to look after yourself. Wisdom to live includes self-care.

I wish you well and I hope you are as excited as I am about the rewarding life that lies ahead for you. Let me conclude by sharing one of my most rewarding moments. It is a story about a little girl I will call Sofie.

In the last 10 years of my career, I lead both the Community Services Directorate, that provides disability and child protection services among other things; and the Education Directorate.

When in Education I was visiting a local primary school and learnt that the youngest child of a family, who had outstayed its welcome in several schools and neighborhoods, was in kindergarten at this school.

Years before I came to know this family all too well. You see, I was involved in a shift in the way child protection services approached this family, deeply damaged by trauma and where chaos was the norm. Rather than remove Sofie from her parents, my team focused on giving this child all the support needed. She was enrolled in the early childhood service collocated with this school as a baby. The school by the way is renowned for its genuine belief in equitable education - no platitudes tolerated by the principal of this school.

Naturally, I was eager to learn of Sofie's progress. I was told she was flourishing, benefiting from a range of educational and health interventions. As I watched Sofie play she look past me, I turned and down the passageway and towards the class came her Mum. Sofie ran as fast as her little legs could carry her into the arms of her mother, they pirouetted hugging each other in a pure expression of love. Sofie had forgotten her lunch and her Mum who had been banned from so many schools, but not this one, had brought it to her - as Mum's do.

The teachers in this school are educators and stewards. In concert with their colleagues in early childhood and health services they have changed this child's life. They have changed the lives of Sofie's family, they have improved community life. These teachers know how to live well in a World worth living in. Reach for Yindyamarra winhanganha.

Thank you.