

University of Canberra, Faculty of Education, Graduation Address 2023

Justin Garrick, Head of School, Canberra Grammar School, 27 March 2023

Good evening, Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Dean and members of Faculty, friends and family of those graduating tonight, and of course the graduates themselves, to whom I offer my sincerest congratulations.

I acknowledge, with gratitude, that we are here on Ngunnawal country. I honour elders and all First People who have carried the knowledge and care of this place, as educators and leaders of community, through countless generations, and I affirm our duty to respect that heritage and hear their voice, in all that we do in living, working and teaching on this land.

It is an honour to share this occasion with you, and a great pleasure to see the pride on the faces of all here. I am not sure what it has been like for the University in having occasions like this restricted over the past few years, but I know from my School's equivalent ceremonies just how wonderful it is to enjoy them again so freely.

They are celebrations, not just of achievement, but of togetherness; one last opportunity before you all go your separate ways to savour the journey that you have shared and the friendships formed along the way. Whatever you may learn at university, just as at school, it's actually the people and relationships that matter most. Enjoy that fellowship tonight.

For me, this is actually a chance to feel the same in being back with friends after the pandemic years. I thank Professor Ting Wang, in particular, for the invitation. Before COVID it was my privilege to travel with her on numerous occasions, to present together at conferences and universities in Beijing and Hangzhou, building friendships abroad in our shared belief in the power of international education. Let's hope that all may soon return.

It's a also pleasure to reconnect with colleagues from the University more generally. Our institutions share not only the name of our city but a fundamental commitment to its character and prosperity. In seeking continually to reinvigorate Canberra Grammar School, I have often admired the University for its vitality, its creativity, and its integrity to community. I am proud that so many students from my School attend the University across a broad range of faculties, including this one.

Indeed, one of my proudest moments at the School was listening recently to a speech by one of our first CGS Indigenous Scholarship graduates, a proud Yuin woman, who went on to study Primary Education at the University of Canberra. At risk of appropriating her story, and with absolute admiration and respect, I can scarcely tell you how moving it was to hear her speak with candour and authority of how her education had expanded her horizons and lifted her aspirations to transform the lives of others through teaching.

I've seen first hand how she and her peers reshaped the school around them, building relationships, challenging assumptions, enriching culture, and I know what she will do to open the world for children, Indigenous and otherwise, who will one day be fortunate enough to have her as their teacher, showing them the power and potential of their education.

That is the awesome opportunity and responsibility that we, as educators, have and must never forget. We change lives. No matter what we teach, no matter what age we teach, no matter in which kind of school we teach, the bottom line is that we teach people: children, adolescents, adults, individuals every one of them, with complex identity, needs and hopes and challenges, and all of them on the journey to who they might yet be.

Our privilege is that we don't just help them on that journey, we influence its destination. We open opportunities, whole new domains of thought, and entire plains of aspiration that our students didn't have before.

A while ago my then 9 year old daughter was selected to take part in an educational activity called the da Vinci Decathlon, which is a thinking and problem solving competition between schools. She was incredibly nervous ahead of it, and not at all sure why her teacher had selected her, but when she came home and I asked her what it was like, she said, "Dad, if my brain was a book, I wrote a whole new chapter just today."

What a phenomenal gift that teacher gave her; not just the experience of a day, but the enduring realisation of her own capacity, greater than she ever knew before.

As I am sure we all can, because I suspect it's why we've all chosen this career, I remember moments of my own like that, when my understanding and the horizon of my possibility suddenly expanded: when my Year 11 Maths teacher gave me just 20 minutes one morning before school and at last unlocked the mystery of calculus that I'd be struggling with for months; when my Year 8 English teacher introduced me to the novel that would set my lifelong code of what it is to be a decent man, "To Kill a Mockingbird"; when a rare international tour led by a passionate Geography teacher revealed the size of the world beyond my suburban imaginings, and altered my life's trajectory, such that I've spent a quarter of it living, teaching and studying overseas.

It's seeing that happen in my own students that has always made the daily tribulations of being a teacher worthwhile; and there are many of those tribulations. I'm sorry it's a bit late to tell you this now, if nobody has already, but it's hard work. Marking can be tedious; reports time is gruelling; parents can be unreasonably demanding; some of your colleagues should have given up sucking the energy out of a room a long time ago; you'll never get on top of all there is to do; students face more heartbreaking dysfunction in their home lives than you ever knew happened in the world; and sometimes they just do dumb stuff.

But then the frustrations and the fulfilment come together. I shouldn't admit it, but I once had to break up a fight between two of my students at the end of a class. I'd worked hard with them all year, and I was appalled they'd let me down like that, but when I'd finally calmed them, I couldn't have been secretly more delighted to find what they'd been fighting over: the interpretation of a line in a poem that we'd just been studying.

I'm not sure it was the best measure of teacher effectiveness, and I can't say that I mentioned it in my annual appraisal, but that they cared so much was the triumph!

The point is that students care when you care: when you go over the edge abseiling with them on camp; when you watch their match on the weekend; when you find that moment before school to help them past a block; when they're homesick and you're the one they can talk to on duty in the boarding house; when they need a person they can trust because life at home is hard; and when they see in you the model of someone who truly loves the work that they do. That's almost all that matters.

Teaching isn't just a job. It's a calling, and I'm going to seem very curmudgeonly in saying that I believe that something of that truth has been diminished in the determination to professionalise, standardise, register, incentivise, accredit and higher accredit the whole endeavour. In the quest to make people take teaching seriously, we've placed hurdle after hurdle in front of teachers, and we wonder why so many walk away.

The trouble, which it's up to you and me to fix, is that we tell the wrong story about teaching in Australia; that it's hard work, devalued, in crisis, that our PISA results are falling (like any actual human being cares about that), and that we can solve it if we just listen long enough at the feet of Hattie, or reflect enough on our five teacher identified hours.

We go to Finland looking for the silver bullet; Singapore might have the answer; maybe the secret is in Shanghai; but the truth is closer to home. Nations get the education that they care about and talk about. What those countries have in common, and we perhaps don't, is a culture that fundamentally values teachers, because they are known and admired as custodians of the life transforming power of education.

The magic of teaching isn't in the AITSL standards, sensible though they may be; it's in the story of the life trajectories that you alter in the whole human engagement that is the true joy of teaching, not just in the classroom, but in the playground, on camp, on stage, on the sports fields, and in the countless conversations that young people need at just the right time with someone who cares.

Our job, your job, is to tell that story: the story I began with of a determined Aboriginal woman who seized her education to take charge of her future and to change the future of the generations to

follow her; of my grandparents, none of whom got past the age of 14 at school, but all of whom gave everything they had to get their children to university and then paid for their grandson to travel overseas on that school trip that opened my eyes to the world; of boys unashamed to argue over a line of Keats; and of my daughter's teacher who saw a quiet little girl just waiting to realise she could write a richer story of herself than she ever knew she could.

You will all have such stories to tell already; it's why you're here, but the gift of being a teacher is that you will add to them every single day. Let that be the loud and proud and constant narrative of our profession; our calling.

I congratulate you, and I wish you every happiness and fulfilment in all that lies ahead. Enjoy it. Thank you.