

I am a First Nations teacher in the Inner North of Melbourne. I have taught at primary school level for the last 9 years and this is my experience of a school that I have worked at for the last four years.

*Comments that I have received throughout my four years at an \*\*Inner North Primary School.*

### **By students at an \*\*Inner North Primary School.**

- I was called 'Aboriginal' by a student when I first started teaching at \*\*. I would often be greeted by "Hey Aboriginal!", or "Hi Aboriginal". This was often said in front of the child's parent. Was taken to leadership but nothing was addressed.
- When I first began teaching at \*\*, I would be pointed at by students saying, "Look! That's the Aboriginal".
- During my first year teaching the grade 5's and 6's at \*\*, I was asked and told:
  - If I paid for university because Aboriginal people don't pay to go to university.
  - If I got free stuff because Aboriginal people get lots of free stuff. This was asked more than once by different students.
  - What do I get from the government?
  - How Aboriginal are you?
  - You're not Aboriginal.
  - A student laughed and made fun of my discussion about Bunjil and Bunjil Dreaming stories. I followed this up with leadership and a parent. Although the parent said that they would follow it up, there was no apology or acknowledgement from the student.
- Asked if I live in a house because Aboriginal people don't live in houses.
- Asked why I wear shoes because Aboriginal people don't wear shoes.
- A student said that Uncle Jack looked like a Gorilla. This was stated while watching a story on the ABC read by Uncle Jack Charles. I followed this up with the student's parent and the situation was acknowledged.
- Asked how I buy my clothes.
- A student told me the smoking ceremonies were stupid and unnecessary. The students also mentioned that they thought that smoking ceremonies were bad for the environment.

- Asked if I go to the shops and buy things like 'normal' people.
- I have overheard the repeated mocking of Elders on educational videos over the years. Making fun of what the Elders look like, what they are wearing, how they talk. It has been a constant problem for four years. I have worked very hard to educate students on how to be respectful on these matters and it is much better than when I started at \*\*.
- During the referendum, a student relayed to me that his parents said that "we've given them enough chances". Obviously, it was not the student's fault but still heartbreaking to hear.
- Asked if I had been to prison.
- Asked if my family had been to prison.

### **By staff and colleagues at \*\*.**

- Overheard a teacher say that we should "lock them all up!" when talking about youth violence, in particular, First Nations children in the Northern Territory.
- Overheard a teacher say a derogatory comment about First Nations people (being criminals).
- An 'Ally' asked me how Aboriginal I was. What was my percentage? Asking me if it was from my mum or dad. Asked if they have white or dark skin.
- A colleague has stated "You definitely wouldn't know that you're Aboriginal."
- A colleague tried to begin a conversation with me about why they felt that they didn't have to say sorry to First Nations people. They had said sorry enough.
  - My principal was doing an Acknowledgement of Country and was attempting to complete the acknowledgement without looking at words, and wanting it to be more meaningful. I overheard a colleague saying under their breath to "to hurry up already" and I heard that colleague mention that this process was "bulls\*\*t".
  - During a recent meeting we were discussing data and a staff member, who was sitting next to me, commented about how the classroom dynamic had changed for a couple of classes (for the better) because 2 First Nations students had left to go to other schools. These two students did have a few behavioural issues. This really upset me. We

have such a small number of First Nations students (I think 2 Aboriginal, 2 Torres Strait Islander) that we should be looking at how to help ALL students with their learning and being successful and safe at school. We shouldn't be putting them in 'the too hard basket'. 'Everyone' has a right to learn. I also brought this up in my most recent interview, for my role next year. Not the comment, just that we have a responsibility for all of our students. I was unsuccessful in securing that role, although I had worked for the school for the past 4 years.

### **My own reflections of experiences at \*\*.**

I came to \*\* as an experienced, educated, strong First Nations woman. I stated that my passion and areas of importance within education was equity for our First Nations students in schools. When I had to reapply for my position, and during my interview, I asked the Assistant Principal how \*\* will look at embedding First Nations knowledge and history into the curriculum. I also asked how \*\* looked after their First Nations students. The response from the Assistant Principal was that 'it wasn't a part of their future plan as it wasn't part of their AIP'.

During the referendum, when it was decided 'no' by the Australian people, leadership sent a Compass post to the community to acknowledge how they might be feeling. No one reached out to me in any way. At the time, I was the only First Nations staff at \*\*. I expressed my disappointment and this was acknowledged by my principal and an apology was made. I was very grateful that this was resolved.

Leadership seemed to use and value the concepts that I would bring to the school as a First Nations teacher. However, this was never embedded in our curriculum or even developed in any way. I was never given the opportunity to develop these ideas further and this 'value' was never shown in action, in that, I never had any job security and was just given contract to contract every year. I feel really used. I feel that they took so much from me and continuously added to my colonial load without any acknowledgement of the work that I was doing. This was so hurtful.

I completed the optional staff survey and explained how I was feeling isolated as a First Nations person at \*\*. I received an email in response to arrange a time to have a discussion about it, however, nothing has happened, and no one has reached out and I was unsuccessful in securing my role for next year. It is obvious that the discussion will not happen and I don't think that a 'discussion' is an appropriate way to address this issue.

I have asked many times to be on Consultative for our school. This was always rejected and a teacher got to wear 'two hats' and was able to be on consult for two seats, where I was rejected.

Update: since I didn't 'secure' my role for next year due to 'merit and equity', I have had very minimal support. I am so disappointed in some of my colleagues. The acting principal, (who was on the interview panel) has not reached out to me in any way after saying that I did not have a job at a school that I have worked at for four years.

I am so tired of people at the school telling me “it’s the process”. How is it ‘merit and equity’. The people interviewing me didn’t have to go through this process. Where does the benchmark of ‘points’ begin? Does it include my four years at the school already? Does it include all of my knowledge as a First Nations person? How do these points, that are supposed to be equitable, show my classroom teaching skills? How does being interviewed by someone, that you know has been against you from day one, make that interview equitable.

I was told in an email that I couldn’t tell parents or students. This was so isolating. I found this so toxic and controlling. I know it is so the school can write their own narrative. They would never say that I lost my job after four years because someone scored more points in an interview.

I am being told by some of my colleagues that “I need to get over it”, “it’s the process” and “it happens”. I don’t think that this is normal. I also don’t think that I have to ‘get over it’. People don’t work at a school for four years and then lose their job because someone scored more ‘points’ in an interview. I feel gaslighted by my team and my colleagues. No one stands up and says anything. They think that it’s ok for leadership to say not to speak to anyone, isolate yourself. They think that it’s ok behaviour for leadership not to check in after someone loses a job. They think that this is an acceptable system.

I went into this school as a proud, strong, educated First Nation’s woman who was excited about being progressive for First Nations culture, history and our kids. I have left without a job, feeling broken and re-traumatized. I feel like they have taken so much from me.

I worked for the education department and became a teacher to change a system that I learned as a young girl, could not be trusted. I now come out of the education system knowing that that system can not be trusted.

### **Reflections for the future for any school.**

Schools have a responsibility to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing into their policy and practice. This is reflected in the Department of Education’s Marrung and Self Determination in Education policies. Leadership must take on and embrace this responsibility. When Mob teachers challenge the way leadership works in this space, they should listen and respect our opinions rather than ostracise us and make us feel like the problem. As Arrernte Alyawarre elder Rosalie Kunoth-Monks said on Q&A when talking about racism and assimilation, “Don’t try and suppress me and don’t call me a problem. I am not the problem”.