

Sarah Webb has spent the majority of her career serving disadvantaged schools in south-western Sydney and the Illawarra. She joined the Fair Go Program's Teachers for a Fair Go as an 'exemplary teacher' with a passion for providing students with purposeful, rigorous, supportive, challenging and enjoyable schooling experiences. In Schooling for a Fair Go, her passion for engaging students broadened to encompass a passion for empowering teachers and leaders to substantively engage their students in schooling. This was carried into the extensive work of the Illawarra Student Engagement Network. Her most recent work as a Numeracy Instructional Leader and as a Primary Maths Lead Specialist for the NSW Mathematics Strategy has seen these experiences applied in the space of engaging students and teachers in the teaching and learning of mathematics. Below, Sarah describes her initial work with the Fair Go Program, then how she explored and developed the ideas around student engagement in subsequent research and professional development throughout her career. Brad Tate began his teaching career in a school in south-west Sydney. In this article he describes his early experiences in the time leading up to his involvement in the Fair Go Program when he was mentored by Sarah Webb. Brad goes on to tell how changes to his approaches to teaching took him to further leadership opportunities in other schools, where he has used Fair Go ideas in the mentoring of other teachers and wider research/professional development in the Illawarra Student Engagement Network in partnership with Sarah Webb. He is currently Deputy Principal at Nowra Public School.

Sarah's story

Through my own involvement in the *Teachers for a Fair Go* project as an 'exemplary teacher', I reflected on the entrenched practices of my teaching and of my school that indirectly, and at times directly, sent messages to our students that we valued compliance over learning. Streamlined processes, calm and routine were school priorities and teachers who had the quietest classrooms and exhibited the most control over their students were held in the highest regard. It became apparent, however, that our students were receiving disengaging messages, and our teachers were too. With all the best intentions, the school's motivation to gain consistency in quality practice and to 'help' our teachers was simply creating lock-step scope and sequences, generic teaching programs and common assessment tasks. Moreover, we were unwittingly sending disengaging messages to our teachers that we did not trust them or their ability: they had no voice, and as a result were disempowered to truly respond to their students' needs, abilities and interests.

As a result of my involvement in *Teachers for a Fair Go* and the influence of the *MeE Framework*, the school made a marked shift at the executive level and established a vision to change the way we measured and improved both teacher and student engagement. To facilitate a culture of reflective, responsive practice in our teachers, we established a coaching and reflective practice program where each teacher was assigned a coach and given time and support to question, challenge, reflect, respond and improve their pedagogy and the way things were done at the school. Teachers were coached and supported fully in their pursuit of new and improved pedagogies by putting systems and procedures in place so teachers could teach together, observe each other and talk with each other about what they did in their classrooms. As a result, teachers had a shared vision and purpose, a shared understanding of quality teaching, and a mind shift from a focus on control and behaviour to one on learning. Teachers were receiving positive and consistent messages about the school's commitment and vested interest in their professional journeys and teachers' willingness to learn, experiment and transform did not dissipate.

Along with Brad Tate, after both moving into new schools, and following the successful transformation of our own teaching and leading practice, we established the Illawarra Student Engagement Network around the research of the *Fair Go Program* and the *Motivation and Engagement Framework (MeE)*. The network was informed by the compelling evidence that we had seen in our previous schools, specifically, that high levels of substantive student engagement were at the core of educational success. The network was underpinned by the question, ‘What kind of teaching practices will bring about improved social and academic outcomes for students?’ The aim of the network was to develop and sustain a culture of reflective practice within and between schools across the Illawarra. The network saw the involvement of 35 teachers across 8 schools provided with an opportunity to make strong links with mentors and to seek advice and constructive feedback from mentors from other schools. Teachers shared their stories of improved levels of student engagement and learning, and about the application of the research of the *Fair Go Program* and the *Motivation and Engagement Framework*, as well as the authentic engagement of teachers in meaningful and deep reflective practice, resulting in improved levels of teacher and student engagement.

Brad’s story

The exact wording of what was being offered to me when I was asked to join the *Schooling for a Fair Go* project escapes me these days. Accepting that offer, however, had such an impact on my teaching and leadership that I will never forget it. Whether it was dumb luck, or inspired leadership from my then supervisor, Sarah Webb, I am not quite sure. Perhaps it was a little bit of both. To this day, however, my involvement with the *Fair Go Program (FGP)* remains the single greatest body of professional learning that I have experienced.

In 2012, I was a classroom teacher, and honestly, it was not going all that well. I was around six-seven years into my career and in many ways, my classroom was a battleground. My students did not behave very well, and rarely produced quality work, and student growth was slow. I blamed them, I blamed their upbringing, their parents. I never looked hard enough though at myself, the adult in the room, who was actually responsible for creating a better learning environment. My students had no choices, no voice and no control. My messages were disengaging. They got those messages loud and clear. It was not stuff that I am proud of. To be fair to myself though, I was ill-equipped for the task.

My supervisor, Sarah, however, gifted me an opportunity that would change everything for me, and to this day, I am so grateful. Every class of students, and team of teachers I have led, or schools I have led, have benefitted in some way from what I learned through the *FGP*, and how it fundamentally changed my way of thinking and acting. The initial breakthroughs that I had with my class in 2012 were little compared to the sophisticated classrooms that I developed in subsequent years. These days, I am not in the classroom, yet it was my final year of classroom teaching which I still consider to be my ‘peak teaching’ moment. That year was the culmination of everything I had learned, where I was able to put forth the most cohesive combination of classroom pedagogy and applied understanding of student engagement. I will always have pride in myself during that time.

Currently, I am a Deputy Principal. In this role, there is increasing pressure to demonstrate the impact of the work I do, as an educational leader. I should add, I can understand a system that wants to see leaders making a difference. So, in overseeing the instructional leadership team of the school, I ensure that we analyse classrooms for evidence of engagement. Feedback is provided to teachers around their classroom



Developing a Culture of Reflective, Responsive Practice



message systems. Students commonly give teachers feedback on their engagement levels, talking about cognitive challenge, productivity and their level of emotional care for the work. In an era of having to provide numerical data to justify my work, I have developed meaningful tools that help me to demonstrate my impact, and the impact of my colleagues charged specifically with making a difference and improving student learning outcomes.

One point to make specifically around engagement is that I urge teachers to consider student engagement as classroom management, and as student wellbeing. I say this as key documents, such as the Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation's (CESE) 'What Works Best', identify practices that are deemed to be high impact, whilst not listing student engagement. Whilst highly prized by the Department, their exclusion of engagement is completely at odds with my learning and my experiences.

The *FGP* experience, for me, fundamentally changed the way I thought, and acted, as an educator. An unexpected effect was the impact it had on my career. Learning from Geoff Munns and Wayne Sawyer added fuel to the engine driving my career and propelled me into highly impactful school leadership roles. I understand that I am not the only one to have benefitted in this way.