



Haley Tancredi: Welcome to making inclusion happen. Well, thank you so much for joining me today. I'm so excited to be podcasting from a school site on the south side of Brisbane. So if you hear a bell, you'll appreciate that schools have noisy things that happen. And that's okay. I'm joined today by two staff from MacGregor State High School. I'm so pleased to be joined by Nathan Christensen who's the Head of Learning and Digital Innovation, and Kathy McKenna who is the Head of Department English. Both Kathy and Nathan have been involved in the Accessible Assessment Project. I'm really excited to hear today about the work you've been doing here at MacGregor and how that interfaces with leading inclusion more generally. Thank you for joining me.

Kathy McKenna: Thank you.

Nathan Christensen: Thanks for having us.

Haley: I'd love to hear a little bit about your context here at MacGregor State High School. So, maybe I'd love to hear a little bit about your role and also about your school's vision for inclusion.

Kathy: Okay, MacGregor is a co-ed state schools on the Brisbane south side. We've got about 1,300 students. Our families are fairly aspirational families, and the desire for ATAR still figures very highly in why they're here. But increasingly, we do have more students looking for that VET pathway and doing certificates and things like that. Having a day out on apprenticeship or a day out at TAFE. There has been a shift in what students want from high school. Our students are pretty diverse in their background and we've got a round about 54 different languages spoken at home. As long as I've been here, it has been a very multicultural school and often our ethnic and cultural backgrounds mirror immigration that comes into Australia. So we see waves of certain cultures coming through, depending on what events are happening in the world. Many of our students have parents who are not familiar with our educational system, and many students themselves are new arrivals too. Which definitely brings some challenges to teaching explicitly and to supporting our students. However, it brings a lot of richness as well, because we have great diversity sitting in our classrooms and sitting with our families. But from a curriculum perspective, I suppose it's challenging. And that they don't all share the same cultural capital. They don't all have the same experiences. And obviously language can be a barrier for them. As a result, though, we really do value explicit teaching in this school. And like opening up learning, opening up how our students access learning. So, accessibility does feature highly in our agenda, I suppose, for how we want to educate our students. We've got a whole school pedagogy based around that, which Nathan might want to speak about, that is about how we show success to our students. And how we teach them or encourage them to use strategies to attain that level of success through their learning.

Haley: Excellent, thanks, Kathy.

- Nathan: Yeah, I guess to add further to what Kathy has said, I think our current data for English as an additional language at home, it's around 60%, so we do have a very diverse student body and for us, a lot of our pedagogy focuses on how do we keep things simple and clear given our work with QUT in particular is focused on, I guess, what's good for those students who have either language or attention difficulties. It's also a great practice for the other students in the classroom too. That's probably been a big motivator for those involved in the programme this year. But also as we look to build upon that development professionally and and seek to expand that across the school.
- Haley: Great. Because you are both in a lovely position in that you have been participants in the Accessible Pedagogies Programme of Learning, for example, and also the Assessment for Learning aspect of the project. But you've also been supporting your team's involvement in that project. Yeah. You've definitely been now, you know, key stakeholders in kind of, you know, really making that all happen at the school, but also seeing the impact beyond just your own classrooms, I'm sure. Yeah, so, middle leaders we know face challenges in your work. It's kind of the nature of that kind of role, but there is huge scope for that influence, for real change. I'd love to hear from, you know, what have been some of the challenges but also the opportunities that you've encountered in your roles as middle leaders.
- Nathan: I think challenge wise teachers are often faced with a lot of new learning, whether it's a new Australian Curriculum Version 9, whether it's new professional learning that's maybe being decided by an executive leadership team. I guess the challenge is: why? Why is this something I need to consider for my students? And I think one of the most powerful stories from this year personally is someone who actually sits in Kathy's team. I've been teaching for a while. I'm a little bit stale if I'm being really honest. Right through the program I said I really feel invigorated from this. Even some small simple changes to how I do, what I thought were, you know, the fundamentals of teaching has me seeing a great shift in culture in my classrooms. Kids are more engaged, behaviours improved, those kind of things. Because all of a sudden they're getting it because barriers are being removed. I think there are obviously challenges, but when we can buy into people's kind of heart for why they became a teacher and see that fruition and they tend to go away, I think obviously, a bit of persistence from leadership and hopefully, I think we've been very fortunate here to have Kathy lead her team through the project before it was kind of a wider school approach. Fortunate that my role was created after Kathy had done that, so we had kind of multiple people leading that and then a very supportive deputy as well, who's enabled both of us to lead both the English faculty and, and wider school approach.
- Haley: That's a great story, Nathan. I mean, it's invigorating obviously for the teacher and the students. But also to hear that, that work, you know, those little refinements, I think that's what we talk a lot about in this work, is that we know good things are happening. Just where can we up the anti on practices that

maybe we do take for granted or those micro decisions that teachers often make. But just slight tweaks can have huge impact. And to see it in things like behaviour and student engagement, that's huge, isn't it.

Nathan: Mmm, very much.

Kathy: And I think teachers can be cynical about change and the why, as Nathan said, and I think people, me included, you can become comfortable in your practice, and I think you also become comfortable in the behaviours that you see students exhibit, or you become comfortable in finding reasons why students aren't achieving. With that comfort comes a sense of you can take your responsibility away from that a little I think because you think, oh, this is just how they are, this is how they've always been And it's disempowering and I think you become a bit resigned to it. And some of the learning that we have done through this project has shown us that little things can make a difference. I mean, it's deceptive because they seem like simple changes, except they've got huge volume of scientific evidence based behind them. On our end, people have already done the hard work for us. And it's really is just us looking at, oh, did you know that you could do this or have you thought about trying that? It's just really encouraging then when, um, those simple changes can actually have a great impact, it's very gratifying and I mean, everyone likes seeing data improving, everyone likes seeing, learning and behaviour improving. It becomes a really self motivating project because you keep seeing the success. And then you can push a little deeper or do something different and you're getting that kind of reaffirming feedback.

Nathan: I think further too, in terms of overcoming challenges, sometimes pedagogical research can be a little bit 'Well, that's from a university and it was probably based on 24 year olds' and that side of thing, or it's run by other teachers, where the lens, I guess, of cynicism can be a little bit like what they know they've only taught in the one faculty or in the one school and that kind of thing. So I think what's really helped overcome challenges and been really powerful is this is a collaboration of the university level of research, but actually enacted within not just the school that we're in, but other schools as well. And we're seeing that kind of unity between two levels of institutions and seeing a product from that as well.

Kathy: Yeah. It's very context friendly and very context aware. And certainly my feeling throughout our earlier engagement with the project was it was about our students. It's not about another set of students. They are definitely ours. Our task sheets, our classrooms and our people.

Haley: Yeah, that's great. I guess following on from that, as through the project, one of the key focus areas of learning has been around inclusive education. And as you've mentioned, like addressing barriers and thinking about what those barriers might be, has that kind of learning journey asked you to rethink some of the, whether it's been processes or practices that you see as being part of

your team's work or even in your own practice. I guess I'm really interested in that rethinking, critiquing, within a lens of how can we improve quality assure.

Kathy: Yeah, the rethinking has been really pivotal, I think. Now we are much more mindful in how we think about success criteria and learning intentions, which I know has come from the Assessment for Learning side. But for me, I think one of the biggest learnings was looking at how you remove barriers from something like a task sheet. Which is absolutely a core artefact of every faculty within a high school. And say, a Year 7 English class, there's four task sheet experiences that they have that year. The impact of those, and how they can be adjusted to be far more powerful and meaningful, and direct, and far reaching. I was quite blown away by some of the things that we just thought had to exist in a task sheet. And then it was a real challenge, just to sort of go, why do we have that and why is that in a box? Is that information for me or is that information for the student? Where should the task be centred? And all of those sorts of things. That has had a really big impact on the English faculty. And we've taken those changes and we've run with them and what our task sheets look like now and the feedback from the students is overwhelmingly positive.

Haley: Oh, amazing. That is amazing. I mean, your faculty, Kathy, have such a beautiful culture like, you know, as a team that you have a really nice open space for those conversations. Are those kinds of conversations, you know, coming up through the team chats that you were having...

Kathy: Absolutely, absolutely will affect absolutely. We were working on a year eight task sheet the other day and someone said, oh, now when we put our glossary of terms on, do you think we should have this or this? And it was that idea of the quality assurance. Well, let's go back to the task statement. Okay, we've got the cognition there, obviously we would define that. But what are those other key words that might just need a little extra so that student can take that task sheet away and understand it on their own. I think we got into a fairly bad habit, because we made our task sheet so cognitively dense that if the student missed the lesson when the task sheet was handed out and missed your explanation, which of course you would still do, they really missed a big chunk of what the task was about. Also, we had a bit of a habit of almost like, well, here's the task sheet, oh, and here's this bit that goes with the task sheet. So they ended up with too many things to which really should be like a two page in the junior school, maybe three page in the senior school document for them and their parents. And whoever looked at it could look at and go, oh, I see what you've got to do.

Haley: Yeah. The power of simplification, right.

Kathy: For everybody and for the teachers too. Like they know what to do. And when you've got teachers teaching out of your faculty whose main area isn't English necessarily, and they devote 80% of their brain power goes to their drama class or the media class. The clarity for them, and then the impact that that then has on their ability to deliver the curriculum. It's really powerful.



- Haley: Nathan, you're a science teacher, correct?
- Nathan: Yeah. Yeah.
- Haley: So your role in this project, I'm sure you're thinking, you know, you can't help but think as a science teacher would. Yeah, I'd love to hear a little bit about any rethinking that this work has had for, you know, you've been more involved in the pedagogical space, but yeah. Has there been any rethinking from your part or the team that you support.
- Nathan: I think, the challenge for me this year, given it's a new role, I don't actually have any classes. This year it's been, I guess, interesting, but also a nice challenge for me where I'm almost chomping at the bit to get back in the classroom. And it's actually inspiring in a way because it makes me want to go into other classrooms and celebrate practise. And then it gets me thinking, oh, do I do that as well? That's really good. Do I do that as well? Actually, I've learned now that a simple tweak to that, can see some big benefits, I would say from the science perspective, depending on the substrand of science you're looking at, there can be a lot of text information side of things. Thinking about things like how do we maybe engage students differently in that way? How do we break up sections of lessons? How do we break up text? How do we look at other ways to do it? Like using diagrams for example? Even colour coding different systems. And that's so students know when to write, when to listen, those side of things.
- Haley: Yeah. Because I mean, one of the things I love about science is all of the vocabulary that kids are exposed to, usually for the first time, unless they're kids that have had a natural inclination, you know, science is like this whole new world, so yeah, I agree that in terms of making that accessible, but also, you know, accessibility as a kind of conduit to new learning and really embedding that learning, it is an exciting space.
- Nathan: Very much, yeah.
- Haley: Yeah. Excellent. All right. As both working in that middle leader space and on the back of the project that inclusive education is one of one of the big ideas that we've been working with. How has your role supported you to be leaders in inclusive education reform here at MacGregor?
- Kathy: Still having a teaching load has meant that I can be in there walking the project with everyone else, trialling the strategies, designing the task sheet, thinking about my own pedagogy. So, when you speak to people outside the faculty and our executive leadership team, or other members of the senior leadership team, you can authentically talk about what it's like authentically share those experiences. And more really importantly, sharing the stories and the successes that has really enabled me, I think, to speak with passion and with authenticity about the impact that is actually having, actually seeing it's not just observable, it is real, and it is being enacted by people in our school across a variety of classes. Um, so that's been really powerful.

- Haley: Yeah. It's a really beautiful reflection of that instructional leadership, isn't it? That you're doing the doing. Then you're collaborating with your peers to talk about how you have each applied that in your own unique classroom context. And you know, you're all working with different students, but you're sharing some of the common benefits.
- Kathy: Yeah, absolutely. And I think, you know, we do like to hear stories are really powerful and even, you know, the naming names of, you know, students in particular that have been impacted. It's not just a piece of data or, you know, it's actually someone that people go, ah yeah and that's really powerful.
- Haley: Amazing. What about in your role, Nathan? I guess, you know, your role is probably more through, you know, bringing, you know, team teams with you and setting that vision and helping teams to enact that vision.
- Nathan: That's right.
- Haley: Yeah. So I'd love to hear a bit about that.
- Nathan: Yeah. I think often, like what Kathy said, when you're doing it with someone, that's such a powerful thing. So one of the big challenges in my role this year was I hang on your leading pedagogy, but you're not teaching. So I think that kind of showcases that, I guess, importance of your leadership style to be relational and fortunate enough to have been in the school for six or so years before taking on this role and have always taken that relational type, um, leadership model, I guess, to how I do things, whether you're a cleaner or the principal or everyone that sits in a role in the school, that's I guess given me some, I guess, leverage with the teams across the school already. I think the flip of that as well is I've got a wider perspective than most would have because I have the ability to pop into an English class or pop into a drama class, or go back home in a way to science. I would love for that. And I spoken to Jill Willis from QUT a lot to. Yeah. How do we enable that observation to happen more? Because very eye opening for me, Such a wonderful experience this year to hang on. English looks very different to what science looks like, but modelling is still a key thing in English. You walk into a dance class and exactly what that teacher models is what those students do. If they don't model well, then the students don't execute well either. Just such a powerful thing to see different techniques. In particular, as I said before, things around making text accessible. What does that look like in English where maybe from a non English perspective, maybe there's some mental models around, it's just poetry and there's no structure to poetry, and that kind of stuff, really English has some really strong structures in the way that writing occurs and comprehension happens. So there is a lot of, I guess, key practice around accessibility that exists. It just looks different. And the strength in my role, leveraging, I guess up and across and to teachers as well, has been that I have not just relationships but also perspective across the school as well.

- Haley: One thing that I often, you know, appreciate about that opportunity to go in and serve classrooms, Just as you say, you get to see great practice in action. And it gives you those examples to kind of, you know, spread that good word to other colleagues. There is also the other side of that though, which might be that you see practices where you think, oh, that refinement, potentially, would be helpful. And they can be really difficult and delicate conversation because we value our teachers and we want to make sure that people are feeling supported. Have you got any little strategies in your roles where, where you want to have that kind of conversation? And you've been able to gently lead your teams to make refinements where maybe they might not have spotted that things could have been done differently.
- Kathy: Yeah, that is challenging because you know the bottom line is, you respect people's professionalism. And as an observer walking into a class for a 40 minute or a 70 minute period, you don't really get the whole picture. Everyone is human. People have their good days and their bad days. I think one thing that's a really powerful way of trying to not make that person feel like what they're doing is unsuccessful, even if you can see that there is a better way to do it, is using our faculty meetings to share strategies and to share successes and examples that can be really compelling and then having that opportunity at the end of that session to build in some reflection time. Just, what did you see? How do you, do you think you could use any of these things? You can do it in a generalised fashion. I suppose if a problem persists, you do ultimately have to have a conversation about it. But I am always a fan of a gentle way of encouraging people like using a positive framework rather than, you wouldn't want to be punitive anyway, but as a negative framework about what's not occurring. Yeah, that's certainly something that I try and do. I also think it's important as a leader to show your vulnerability as well. And to share stories where you tried to do something and it didn't really work and so you reflected on this and now I'm going to try this instead. And I should have done this. And so I think if you're modelling an example that it's actually okay if it doesn't really go the way that you want. But also everyone should be reflecting on how to be better.
- Haley: Yeah, I think that's a lovely example and I think the practice examples and the impact on students, they're such a huge opportunity to say, you know, we tried these things and this is what I've achieved and that open dialogue. What about for you, Nathan? Are there any other things that you've tried in your practice?
- Nathan: Probably, yeah, I'd echo what Kathy's saying around whether that's a champion model looking at your early adopters, those people. But I think once you delve into the harder people's 'why', whether that's personally or why should I change or why should my practise be adjusted. I think there's often a sense of, well, if you're telling me to do something different, I must be doing this wrong. Yeah. Appealing to those who naturally want to jump on board. And then working through why change. And then the next question is how change? And that's when, I guess it's almost two layers deep, of modelling what you want to see given how important modelling is to accessibility as well. Yeah, that can be a

huge part, I think, in bringing people on board. But also then you can say, well, you're actually doing this really well and using that, kind of, questioning techniques around, well, what would this look like if or have you considered that it's not a top down type model.

Haley: Yeah, and it's not a quick fix. Right. Like this is, this work is all a long game. That the way people teach, as you said before, it can be tricky to sometimes notice and react to things that you've historically done. It's just human nature. So yeah, I really like that idea of yeah, bringing people with you using the good examples. And then as a Kathy, you have a conversation that doesn't come as a surprise because we've been talking around these ideas already.

Kathy: I think as a leader too, you have to be prepared to be generous with your time if you want your team or particular members of your team to have that opportunity to reflect and maybe improve, well you have to enable that. And whether that is utilising a faculty meeting or a series of faculty meetings to actually focus on that and even things setting up some observational opportunities as well, particularly with beginning teachers to let them go into someone's class. And it might mean that you as the leader then takes their class to allow them that opportunity. But if you want people to be reflective and to continue to strive to improve, it can feel like pressure. If you want that to feel like support and encouragement, you have to be very generous with how you phrase that and how you allow that to actually occur.

Haley: Yeah, it's a real investment, isn't it?

Kathy: Absolutely is.

Haley: Investment in your teams, investment in the kids

Nathan: Even I think the lunchtime conversations or the playground duty conversations, those kind things make people feel heard and not just that you're investing in them because you want something or you want something to happen, that can be a huge thing. The other thing I'd probably add is we've used language for a little bit about unity, not uniformity, that sometimes it can look a bit different. Or there's some schools I've spoken to recently about pedagogy that talk about swimming between the flags. That you're not all swimming at exactly the same spot, but here is the space to swim in. It might look a little bit different for you depending on your teaching style or your year level or your subject and that. But there is still a level of consistency.

Kathy: And the dynamics of the class have a massive impact, the success or otherwise of things that you try. Your classes can, even if you're experienced teacher who can teach with their eyes closed, most of the time, your class can be derailed by just the dynamics that exist in the classroom that you don't have a lot of control over. I think you always have to be really mindful of that context that that teacher is operating in as well. Because you could see them do the same thing in a different class and to be completely successful. So you have to really



mindful of how you approach those conversations. It's probably about knowing your people, isn't it Nathan, and you know the people that you lead and you value them. And your bottom line is you respect them. And you start at that base. And challenging conversations can become less challenging if that's the culture you've established.

Haley: All right, in your roles as middle leaders, you both no doubt are using strategies to also influence upwards. You, through this project have gathered new learning. You've come to your roles with an immense knowledge base. What are some strategies that you've used to be able to feed the great work of your teams upwards through your leadership team, but also have influence with your teaching colleagues.

Kathy: I think we've been really lucky, Nathan, in this school, in that our voices are really respected and really valued. And we are given many opportunities to present to whole staff and to present to the executive leaders and the senior leadership team as well. You don't have to fight for space. You feel like people are ready to listen to you. But I think that upward influence, for me, it still comes from sharing the success. Sharing the data is important too, and naming the data is really important. I think there can be a temptation that people want to rush to the bottom line and want to assess a project or, well, what is the outcome? What's actually achieved, which is reasonable, because there's a lot of competition in this space as well. But putting the stories behind that or before that, I think is a really good way to be persuasive and to, to influence people who don't necessarily sit in the classroom every single day. And, and, you know, understandably there's some distance between them and the every day grind. Sometimes they're trying to get students to learn and to be successful. I think any time when you can find a space to share a story is really important. And I think you have to back your team when you're doing that. And you're celebrating the stories of the students, but actually what you're also really doing is saying, this is our people at work, this is what they're doing. Story is always important.

Nathan: I probably, we talk about pacing and a big eye opener. For me, not teaching this year. Apart from trying to balance being in classrooms and having conversations we've spoken about already, is obviously you've got a bit more freedom when you don't have classes, given how structured schools are to get your work done and when you want and how you want. I think it's important for higher leaders in schools to be aware of when things are happening and how long that takes. But also consolidation too. I feel it's really important for middle leaders to have a really great relationship with their line manager, with other deputy principals or their principal, but also the short term, mid term, to long term goals. And talking through that, this is what we're doing right now, and this is why we're doing it. And at this stage, we should be here. And as Kath said before, modelling that we're all human and sometimes stuff doesn't happen. And that's okay too because we're all learners. So I think that kind of relationship side of things and goal setting and just being real, really shows a value. I think again, as Kath we've been lucky here where there has been time for consolidation,

Sometimes schools are: what's next? What's the next guest speaker at the next student free day, that kind of thing. So to be able to focus on learning for a fair chunk of time here and have a, I don't want to use the word coalition, but that's the one that comes to mind. A group of committed people who are really passionate about pedagogy. And not just pedagogy for pedagogy's sake. Pedagogy to see young people become better people, not just get better grades and results as well. I think it has been a real driver of change and hopefully progress to in our school.

Kath: I think the more we learn about those barriers that exist with accessibility, it's so empowering because you really do see the reasons behind some learning behaviours and why some data, and I hate to reduce it to data obviously, but data is also very compelling. And it's very compelling for executive leaders to look at something that's going to uplift the data. That's what everyone wants. But I think, yeah, just that knowledge that now exists and is growing through this project for us is these are actually the things that other reasons why this might be so. But also here are some things that are evidence based things that can help us overcome those barriers. It's a very compelling story to be able to tell to our executive leadership team that yes, this is the stuff that is causing the barriers. But look, here is also some evidential methods that will help us, help our students succeed. And even the most transactional leader who only wants to see improved data can see the value in that. You've got to look for the story that is going to get the most traction if that's all it is, if that's what you have to leverage, there is, there's evidence behind this, we've seen it work.

Nathan: I think, despite upper leaders' journeys, they were once a teacher. Yes. So I think that story that Kath's talking about and you know, again, that why is a real leverage point.

Haley: Thank you both so much for your time today. I think we've really ended on a really critical point around finding that common thread to help, you know, evidence the work that you're investing in with your teams. And you know, that you really, as you identified, Kath, it's looking at what those barriers are that might exist in assessment or in the classroom for students, and, you know, minimising those and the impact it has. And that's the story. Thank you.

Kath: Thanks Haley.

Nathan: Thank you.

Haley: Thank you.