

What I Wish My Teachers Knew

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Short Abstract

Having the opportunity to speak about my life is something that I enjoy doing. One of my roles at Two Way Street has been to go into schools and talk to the students and staff.

Both workshops are different: when speaking to the students I chat to the about how important it can be to always try our best at what ever we do. I use a poem called the Triantiwontigongolope. It was one I learnt as a child, and I remember reciting the chorus "tri, tri, tri-anti, tri-anti-wonti, Triantiwontigongolope" whenever I was doing anything new or tricky.

I then go into talking about a Confidence Tree. The Confidence Tree is something that I invented to illustrate how our confidence is much like a tree, because as human we can gain our leave of confidence, and we can loose them as well. I also spend time talking to the teaching staff about their role in nurturing the confidence trees of their students.

By sharing my experiences of school and some of my life after school, I always hope that it encourages teachers too want more for their students; and for the students to dream big, and expect too have a life that they choose for themselves.

Long Abstract

Having the opportunity to speak about my life is something that I enjoy doing. One of my roles at Two Way Street has been to go into schools and talk about some of the things I wish that my teachers knew.

When I get this opportunity, I first preface that what I present in terms of experience and opinions are my own, and that I do not speak for others living with communication disabilities.

What I do speak about is how school was for me, and how for the most part I had a cordial relationship with the majority of my teachers; as with anything there was the odd teacher who had an issue with me, but on the whole, I was just another kid in a country school.

I begin the narrative by saying that one of my most enduring memories of my childhood, spending time with my mum practicing my words, and filling me with the confidence to use my natural speech and to be prepared to repeat myself 2, 5, 10, even 20 times if I needed to. Fortunately 5 timeless would be ample for most people.

Grew up in the country, I went through mainstream primary and high school. As hard as it was, and how much I hated it at times, mainstream school was what made me who I am today.

Going into schools gives me the opportunity to speak to not just the teaching staff, but sometimes I have the privilege of speaking to the students. Speaking to children is somewhat humbling. I start by reading a poem via my iPad using the voice of the little creature. The poem is one that I learnt at school and has stuck with me to this day. Probably because of the repetitive chorus with its hidden meaning. The chorus of the Triantiwontigongolope poem is “tri, tri, tri-anti, tri-anti-wonti, Triantiwontigongolope. It is the “tri, tri, tri” that I remember the most. Again, thanks mum.

Over time the concept of the confidence tree has evolved. I encourage the children to have a big goal, which sits high up in the tree, and then they create lots of smaller goals to help them to achieve the big goal. The purpose of achieving many smaller goals is that they would see how far they have come by achieving all the smaller goals. This is not only so that the students can see the end goal, and the many steps it has taken for them to reach that goal, but they can also grow in confidence.

I then talk to both the staff and students about some of the things that I have done since leaving school. I do remember the response from one of the staff when I said that I have worked and lived overseas. It was a lightbulb moment for her, and she wanted to encourage her students to dream big, and not be limited in their own lives. It is these moments that give me hope that children who attend special schools can have the same dreams as any other student, regardless of school setting.

Using a different tact, I talk to the teaching staff about halving memory’s of teachers who cut into my confidence branches with their off-the-cuff remarks. An example I always refer to, occurred when I was 5, and liked to create my own songs - a very common thing for children of that age. However, my eagerness to share this with my classmates was met with a groan and “oh not again” comment (I never actually sing this song, and to the potential audience for this presentation, you will be safe!).

I do spend time talking about my experiences of the mainstream schooling system, and being just another country kid in a country school. I share that while I enjoyed a cordial relationship with most of my teachers, and the marked difference between primary and high school. I also talk about my latter years at school and how despite my participation in the work experience weeks in years 10 and 11, it seemed as though little thought was paid to what my post school options were. Being the 80’s, assumptions were that I would continue on with my schooling and probably go to work in the only place that people with disabilities could work.

The last portion of the workshop for staff explores the ways in which schools are supporting students with disabilities to have confidence to build confidence in decision making and speaking up for themselves. Both are important skills for all of us to live the way we want to live.

It is my experience that people with communication disabilities are not afforded the experience of making mistakes, or being able to make decisions for themselves, lest they make a mistake. But mistakes are how we learn and grow.

Since doing these workshops, I have probably learnt as much as I have shared. Whether it has been via the mainstream or the special school system, EVERY student are worthy of an education that set's them up to lead safe, happy and meaningful lives.