



Left to right: Helen Wolfe, Daniela Kavoukas, Manjula Waniganayake, Karen Green, Michelle Wood.

## Friends like us

When Community Child Care Association (CCC) Services Manager, Daniela Kavoukas, was searching for the next step in her career, she was introduced to Honorary Professor at Macquarie School of Education, Manjula Waniganayake. Over 10 years, their relationship evolved from student and teacher to a deep friendship, despite never living in the same city. Here, they share some of the memories that forged their special bond.

### Daniela:

I was introduced to Manjula by my friend and colleague, Anthony Semann – Manjula visited my children’s centre to do some project work. Later, when it was getting to a stage where I needed something new to keep me excited about working in early childhood, Anthony said, ‘why don’t you do your masters?’. Manjula talked me through the differences between some of the education degrees at Macquarie University, and I enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership.

I studied online from Melbourne, but some subjects allowed us to travel to classes held at the campus in Sydney. This allowed Manjula and I to spend lots of hours together, talking about early childhood matters with everyone doing subjects that Manjula was teaching. Having lived in Melbourne

previously, Manjula was still interested in what the Victorian peak bodies were doing and what the trends were. It became a really nice conversation piece.

### What was Manjula like as a teacher?

She’s extremely compassionate, nurturing and generous with her time. She’s one of those people who listens intently and asks thought-provoking questions. She’s always real with people and always smiling.

She has the calmest, most soothing voice in the world. During my course, I was working full-time at Flemington Childcare Co-operative and also heavily pregnant. In the evening, I would hop in the bath and listen to lectures on my phone. Manjula’s voice would lull me to sleep. Not because she was boring! [Laughs]. I used to tell her, ‘my child will know your voice, she’s still listening after I’ve fallen asleep’.

Manjula encouraged me to document my daughter Harryo’s first days after being born – the changes, how she grows and evolves, things like that. I’d looked after children in a centre from six months of age but never a brand new baby. As a new mum, you’re nervous, tired, and learning how to do five hundred things at once. You forget the intricacies of those early moments.

Instead of documenting a formal learning story for Harryo, I wrote these lengthy emails to Manjula. To have those moments documented in such detail is so special. I’m very grateful.



Daniela and her daughter Harryo at Daniela’s graduation in Sydney.

### Have Harryo and Manjula ever met?

Yes. They get along beautifully. Harryo is great at picking up on people’s energy, so being around Manjula calms her. Manjula will forever be an educator and makes Harryo feel special, and Harryo recognises Manjula is important to me from the way I talk about her. So their connection isn’t based on lots of time spent together, but on the stories we tell.

### Storytelling can be a powerful way to build connections.

Exactly. In 2014, I had the opportunity to go to the NZ Educational Leadership Conference in Wellington and stay in a house with Manjula and some of the other presenters. It’s amazing to go to a conference and hear people speak about the work you do – it’s another thing to come home and cook a meal with

these people, and engage with them in a relaxed environment. Their stories were awe-inspiring.

Manjula has continued to support me to meet other brilliant early childhood colleagues by inviting us out for dinner and things. She’s like having another mum. Social advocacy runs so strong in her, she’s taught me to think more critically. Being with her opens up my thinking around how we can bring the amazing educators and leaders in our space from culturally diverse backgrounds to the front.

She was the first person to suggest I’d be great at policy. I couldn’t think of anything worse at the time! When I put my application in for CCC, two roles were going. I actually applied to be a consultant. Manjula gave my reference, and I’m sure it was her who convinced the person on the other end of the phone to offer me the policy role.

### **What does policy mean to you now?**

It's my driver. Working in a children's centre, I got to nurture the future on a small scale. In my current work, I get to help nurture the future of children and families right across Victoria and sometimes Australia. Policy is how we can make positive impacts in the lives of children, families and our workforce.

I look at Manjula's years of dedication and think, 'that's what I want to be'. I would be absolutely privileged to get to a point where I could say, 'I've given the sector a big chunk of me, and supported it to change and grow'.

### **You already have!**

“ Thank you. You know, what I love most about my friendship with Manjula is the mutual respect. I'm much younger but it never feels that way when I'm with her. She treats me as a colleague with important things to say. ”

I was one of the many people who looked up to Manjula as an author. Then I was her student. Now, I would consider her my mentor, as well as a close friend who I adore. We've known each other for almost 10 years and our relationship has evolved as I've grown up in the sector.

We have this connection that's surrounded by kindness. We're genuine with each other. When something is hard in my life, whether it's professional or personal, I can ring Manjula and she'll be there as a sounding

board. If I want to contact Manjula, the best time is 1 am – she'll be up working and respond straight away. Then we'll catch up in this back and forth email tag.

The other day I realised I had a message from Manjula from six months ago I hadn't responded to. But Manjula would never think 'Daniela didn't write back to me, that's rude'. We understand that we've both got stuff going on, and we pick up our friendship as if we saw each other yesterday. I feel very lucky to have Manjula as my friend, versus just the woman whose books I was reading all those years ago.

### **Manjula:**

I first met Daniela when I was visiting Melbourne working on a research project. Anthony Semann, who was leading that project, said to me, 'I want you to meet this dynamic, young, early childhood teacher who has just won an award and is thinking about further studies'. Right from the get-go, I could see she was going places. I really wanted to get to know her more.

Daniela is someone special. Even back then, it was easy to see she was eager to learn, full of energy, a committed professional, and was well on the way to establishing a distinguished record in the early childhood sector. It's a rarity these days – many young graduates sadly don't want to stay in our sector. Daniela has done the hard yards and still feels very passionately about the sector and the contributions she can make.

### **Can you tell me a little bit about your time together at Macquarie?**

At that time there was a pool of early childhood students studying who lived in Melbourne. They called themselves the 'Melbourne crew'. Whenever I was down there on a research trip, I caught up with the Melbourne crew for dinner. I felt enriched by these young teachers and leaders. The best outcome for a teacher is to have a group of motivated students in the class, and the Melbourne crew certainly were all simply wonderful.

### **What memories stand out most to you about Daniela?**

A memory I will carry forever is a personal one. I was in Melbourne doing an interview with Daniela and one of her colleagues for one of my projects at that time. In the middle of the interview, one of my brothers kept ringing me, so I knew I had to return the call. I received unexpected, devastating news. I was in pieces.

Daniela immediately took charge – she stopped the interview, arranged an early return flight and cared for me until I got on it. She didn't go back to work that day. If not for Daniela being there to comfort me, I don't think I would have been able to get on that plane and back to Sydney safely. It meant a great deal to me.

I also remember walking into Flemington Co-op one day and getting goose bumps. As we went around and Daniela showed me the changes she had made to the



centre, her interactions with the children and staff showed richness and diversity. It felt like home.

“ We're both people who believe very strongly in celebrating diversity, in all of its rainbow colours. I've observed Daniela's transformation as a centre director and how she has purposefully developed the centre's philosophy and staffing to reflect the local community. ”

Daniela actively fostered the leadership of her staff by giving them external opportunities to grow. Once, when I was giving a keynote presentation and a workshop in Melbourne, I wanted Daniela to come and join me. Instead, she pushed forward the new centre director of Co-op to talk about her cultural background and how she had grown to be in a leadership position. This to me is a hallmark of effective and authentic early childhood leadership – to step aside and let others in your team shine.

### **What have you learnt from her?**

When I have a crazy research idea, she's one of my go-to people I can trust to ground me. To me, research is nothing if it doesn't resonate with what's going on in the real world. So being able to pick up the phone and talk about ideas and possibilities with a trusted expert like Daniela is a real gift.

That smile of hers is so gorgeous that you can easily forget your worries. She's one of those people you want on your side when you're going through a bad patch or trying to work out what to do in a challenging situation.

“ She's calm, and she holds you steady so you can stay focused on what's important. She'll stay with you until whatever needs to be done is completed. That's a friend you can count on. ”

### **You've never lived in the same place – what's the secret to keeping your friendship strong?**

Trust and care. Daniela and I can talk freely and know that there's an understanding, which I can't

even put into words. There's a bond between us that's a bond between forever friends.

It's easy for us to talk because we have shared values about children, equity and social justice. We enjoy chatting late at night – and I mean late. I think it started when Harryo was a baby and it just continued. Because we know that we're both online late working, we'll send an email saying 'how's it going?' [laughs]. With other people, you'd say, 'sorry to bother you...', but with Daniela and me, we never have to say sorry.

I've never stopped to reflect on what's happened between us before. It may look strange to other people, but it's never felt that way to us. The respectful relationship between a teacher and student has evolved into a deep friendship between two women who care about each other. The warmth and love that we feel for each other continues to grow, and it doesn't matter that we don't see each other physically for years. We can pick up the conversation as if it was only yesterday.