

Catherine OEHLMAN

HEAD OF PRIMARY
THE NATURE SCHOOL

What learning in nature looks like around the world can be interpreted in many forms. At the helm of a progressive school right here in our own backyard is Catherine Oehlman and, along with the pioneering work of the team around her, they have created a vibrant school environment. Catherine's love of education and dedication has not gone unnoticed; as a reward she has been named a finalist in the Australian Education Awards.



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Hi Catherine. Congratulations on being named as a finalist in the Australian Education Awards for 2021 for Primary School Principal of the Year. Tell us about the woman behind the name, and what it means to be named as a finalist.

I am a proud educator, writer, self-confessed bird nerd and mum of two. I have particular expertise in primary curriculum and children's literature, and have taught across all grades in independent schools in both Brisbane and Sydney. I moved to Port Macquarie in 2018 to take up the position leading The Nature School and absolutely adore living here.

It's such an honour to be a finalist for this award. I feel that this is an affirmation not just for me personally but for our whole school community. Awards like this put the hard work of small, regional progressive schools into the national spotlight.

You are a very passionate and dedicated

educator with an extensive background across education. Currently, you work within The Nature School at the helm of the Primary sector. Tell us about your role and the work you do?

At The Nature School children learn and shine through authentic experiences in nature to become engaged global citizens. Being the founding Head of a school is the single most challenging, and most rewarding, role of my career. We opened the Primary School in 2018 with 22 students and today have almost 80. Next year we add Year 6, taking us to a full Primary cohort of around 100 students. I'm very proud of the vibrant learning community we have created and the pioneering work of my staff in embedding nature pedagogy into the primary years of schooling. While we deliver the same curriculum as other schools in NSW, our teachers are challenged to transform their practice, often taking learning beyond their classrooms. We take advantage of our stunning location through immersive learning in the community and environment to create

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authentic, meaningful and engaging learning for our students. Often Port Macquarie IS our classroom, as all students head off in our minibuses on their fortnightly Adventure Days. Maths can be taught on the beach, Geography is best learned firsthand, and Science is all around us!

Nature-based education supports children's development in social and emotional intelligence, problem solving, environmental understanding and respectful custodianship. It offers children the chance to learn about themselves and the world around them, and builds emotional resilience they can use throughout life.

It is my responsibility to oversee everything that happens in our Primary School, onsite and off. Even in a small school it's a big job!

What do you enjoy most about working at this unique school?

This is literally my dream job. I have a deep love for the natural world and am passionate about connecting people with the environment for the benefit of both. At The Nature School I also have the privilege of educating children about Australia's unique flora and fauna. We cannot protect what we do not know, and we cannot know unless someone teaches us. Our students are already citizen scientists; collecting data and contributing field notes about koalas, frogs, birds and other animals for their future protection. Although I now spend a lot of my time in the office, my favourite moments are down at the yarning circle cooking damper over the fire, reading under the trees with students, or joining in on Adventure Days. It is such a relaxed and happy place to teach and learn.

What barriers have you faced in your career and how have you overcome them?

I think I am constantly challenging stereotypes. I'm not your stereotypical Head and this is not a stereotypical school! People are often surprised to find that I am academic, strategic, and have over twenty years experience in the education sector. Visitors to the School are also often surprised to discover

how passionate we are about learning outcomes and curriculum development. We are breaking new ground and defining new ways of doing school.

Can you tell us about a role model who has inspired you over the years both personally and professionally?

In the nature pedagogy space, I have always been inspired by the work of Dr Claire Warden. I met her when she first visited Australia over ten years ago and was challenged by her research with young children outdoors in Scotland. Last year I was delighted to have been able to invite Claire to The Nature School to work with both our Early Years and Primary staff for several days. It was wonderful to be able to take her into the bush with our young students, and discuss what learning in nature looks like around the world. I asked about how she handles snow, and she asked about what we do if we encounter snakes!

Outside of the professional realm, what do you enjoy most about living in our beautiful region?

Definitely bird watching! The Mid North Coast has such a rich diversity of habitats and species, including critically endangered species such as Swift Parrots and Regent Honeyeaters. I love adventuring on the weekends with my family, usually with cameras and binoculars in hand. If we see a new species, we finish the day with ice cream for everyone.

What's next for you?

There are a number of conferences I'll be speaking at this year, including the National Outdoor Education Conference, plus I'll be working on some syllabus development for NSW. I'm excited about the future direction the Board has for The Nature School. We are definitely an organisation to watch. We're a school for today that ensures we will all have a tomorrow.

Thanks Catherine.