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6 November 2015

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students.

At the Stronger Smarter Institute, our mission is to directly improve the educational outcomes for Indigenous Australian schoolchildren. The Stronger Smarter Institute works in partnership with schools across Australia to support leadership capacity for educational leaders who are seeking to improve the educational outcomes for Indigenous students in their schools. The Stronger Smarter Approach focuses on building strong relationships between teachers and students, their parents, and the local community. We use the concept of High-Expectations Relationships which involves working for collective cultural and transformative change in schools, where everyone has a role in enacting change.

The Institute has been delivering leadership courses to schools for 10 years. We now have over 2000 graduates of our flagship Stronger Smarter Leadership Program. On any school day, these Stronger Smarter alumni are supporting over 40,000 Indigenous students in over 550 schools across the country. The Stronger Smarter Approach has been developed and refined in partnership with these schools, and we can see considerable evidence that this approach is having a positive effect for Indigenous students.

The attached submission addresses, in particular, the following terms of reference:

- *access to, participant in, and benefits of different school models for Indigenous students in different parts of Australia, and*
- *the engagement and achievement of students in remote areas.*

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input, and the Institute would be happy to participate in any further discussions.

Yours sincerely

Darren Godwell
CEO, Stronger Smarter Institute



Stronger Smarter Institute Limited

Submission to Inquiry into educational opportunities for
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

November 2015

Introduction

The Stronger Smarter Approach is founded on core beliefs. These beliefs guide our work and expectations.

The Stronger Smarter Institute believes every child deserves a great education in the community where they live. We believe in the power of the education profession, and we know there are many great teachers and school leaders. However, we also recognise that we can't keep using the same strategies and expect something to change. In schools with diverse student populations, this may mean a transformative cultural change for the school.

Our experience is that any group of people already holds the collective knowledge and wisdom to successfully meet the complex challenges they face. In other words, the ingredients for transformative change already exist in every community. The Stronger Smarter Approach looks at existing strengths and empowers communities to work together to pursue innovative strategies that will work in their local contexts.

We believe that co-creating a way forward together with local Indigenous communities is essential for success, and that imposing external solutions will not work. We recognise that the areas where this approach is most needed is in low socio-economic areas, culturally diverse student populations, remote areas, and for students where English is not their first language.

Our experience working with over 2000 educators across the country is that transformative cultural change in schools and school communities is possible when it begins with a shift in thinking. We ask educators to have high expectations of all students through the concept of 'Strong and Smart' where for an Indigenous student, being smart at school doesn't have to mean being 'mainstream', it can be a part of their Indigenous cultural identity. We also ask educators to not only raise their expectations of their students, but to raise their expectations of themselves. Our approach is to work for collective personal and organisational change, where everyone recognises their own role in enacting that change.

This submission describes the Stronger Smarter Approach through a summary of two areas of research work undertaken by the Stronger Smarter Institute:

- *High-Expectations Relationships. A Foundation for Quality Learning Environments in all Australian Schools.* Stronger Smarter Institute Limited Position Paper (2014).
- *AITSL Pilot Project Final Report. Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parents and Communities in Education.* A joint project by the Stronger Smarter Institute (QUT) and the SiMERR National Research Centre (UNE). Anderson, D, & Thomas, S. (2011). Funded by AITSL. Unpublished report.

We believe that a solid understanding of these two key aspects of our approach offers insight into how educators are achieving great turnarounds and outcomes supported by the Stronger Smarter Approach. A few of these achievements are illustrated in Attachments A and B.

There has been considerable research undertaken in Australia on what needs to be happening in schools to support Indigenous students. The recently released 2015 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy recognises the importance of three priority areas:

- Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development
- Culture and Identity
- Partnerships.



Fig 1: Priority areas. 2015 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy

Through the Stronger Smarter Approach and High-Expectations Relationships, the Institute is showing schools *how* they can address these three priority areas through high-expectations classrooms with strong teacher-student relationships, and welcoming school environments with strong connections to the local community. The Institute believes that these strong relationships and collaborative approaches are foundational to ensuring the success of other programs and strategies within the school.



As a Stronger Smarter school, we promote the ability for our community to be 'Strong in the heart' and 'Smart in the head'.

Mildura Primary School, Victoria website
Dennis Mitchell, Former Principal*

No difference between Koorie and non-Koorie data at the school.	Closed the gap
High academic results – e.g. 2014 NAPLAN for Year 3 shows 89% above NMS for reading, and 96% above NMS for numeracy.	96% above National Minimum Standards in numeracy
Focus on early years and improving early language skills, particularly for students where English is a second language.	All children at Grade 2 ready for the next level

If I could get as many good people as possible around me embracing the Stronger Smarter Philosophy, you can take the principal out, and it doesn't change.

*Dennis Mitchell is now Principal of [Ranfurlly Primary School](#) in [Mildura](#)

The Institute's flagship initiative, the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program, is designed to train people in the 'how' of this process. We provide professional development that offers participants the practices, behaviours and processes of applying High-Expectations Relationships in a demanding, professional context. Graduates from the Program tell us that they return to their schools with a much greater level of confidence in their ability to develop relationships with the local community, to develop a collegiate working environment within the school, and to build strength, resilience and high expectations in students in their classrooms.



'[I wanted] to support the kids, who need high quality teachers who really cared about their education...[the children] could learn. They just hadn't been taught.'

Louise Jappe,
Porpuraaw State School, North Queensland

Year 5 students have the highest reading results within their group of similar schools – 2013 and 2014	Highest of all like schools
NAPLAN spelling results for same cohort from 2009 to 2013 show a marked increase in the number of students at or above national minimum standards	From 33% to 83%
Staff engaged with community in setting school goals and standards	Collaborative community relationships

*My whole heart is in this school...
It's now the best school I've ever taught at in Queensland.*

1: High-Expectations Relationships

Stronger Smarter Institute (2014). High-Expectations Relationships: A Foundation for Quality Learning Environments in all Australian Schools. Stronger Smarter Institute Limited Position Paper.

This section provides a summary of the Institute's High-Expectations Relationships position paper. The full paper is available at: <http://strongersmarter.com.au/resources/high-expectations-relationships/>

High-expectations for all students has been discussed in educational theory for some years. While much has been written about the importance of *believing* in high-expectations, less has been written about what teachers need to do to *enact* high-expectations in the classroom and the school community.

Through the work of the Stronger Smarter Institute with over 2000 school and community leaders across Australia, the term High-Expectations Relationships has emerged as a broad concept central to the Stronger Smarter Approach. The elements of High-Expectations Relationships have been embedded in the Institute's work since the foundational work of Dr Chris Sarra and the staff and students of Cherbourg School, but it is only in recent years that the Institute has begun to detail this concept.

A High-Expectations Relationships is an authentic two-way relationship that is both supportive and challenging. The Stronger Smarter Institute research into High-Expectations Relationships draws on both our work with school and community leaders, and the critically reflective conversations held as part of the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program, as well as drawing on the work of other researchers. By describing High-Expectations Relationships, we are able to show the types of behaviours, dispositions and capabilities required by teachers to enact high-expectations for all students in the classroom, and to build strong connections with parents and the school community.

Sarra (2014a) explains that the difference between high-expectations rhetoric and High-Expectations Relationships is crucial. High-expectations rhetoric will see a child suspended from school for swearing at the teacher. A High-Expectations Relationships will try to understand the circumstances that caused the incident, and look at a range of constructive solutions.

A framework for High-Expectations Relationships

The Stronger Smarter Institute has developed a framework set on High-Expectations Relationships. This framework covers the domains of self, student, peer, parents/ carers and community and describes High-Expectations Relationships through the elements of

understanding personal assumptions, creating spaces for dialogue, and engaging in challenging conversations.

The Institute uses a High-Expectations Relationships Behavioural Index (HERBI) instrument with participants in the Institute’s leadership programs as a self-reflective instrument to show if and how High-Expectations Relationships can be sustained and strengthened over time.

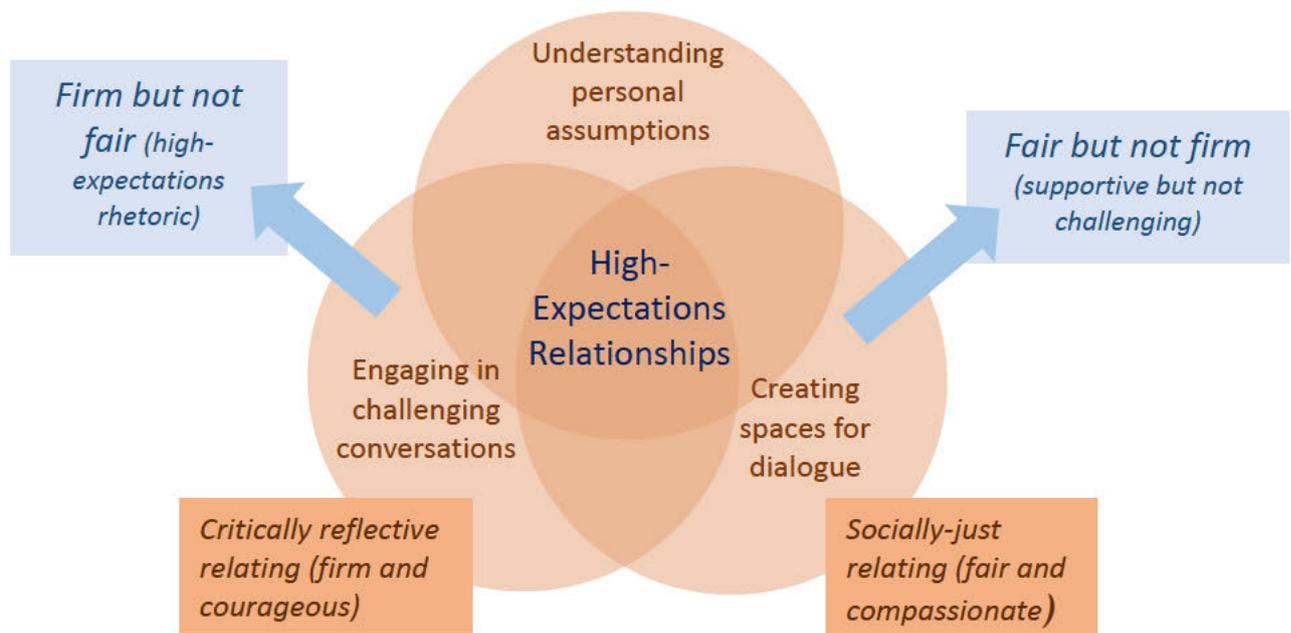


Fig 2: Priority areas. 2015 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy

Understanding personal assumptions

Australian society has conditioned us to have low expectations of Indigenous students and students from low SES backgrounds. While most Australian educators genuinely believe in high expectations for all, there is a danger that out-of-awareness values and beliefs laid down through these socialisation processes can influence how these beliefs are enacted. Public discourse around educational underachievement and failure frequently relies on deficit accounts that attribute ‘blame’ to disadvantaged groups. Indigenous communities and the children themselves are seen as the cause of the failure.

A teacher with true high-expectations will expose students to rich and varied tasks, and push students with complex language and complex tasks, clarify expectations and direct awareness to the requirements of the activities (Sarra, G. *et al*, 2011). However, a teacher who hasn’t recognised their ‘out-of-awareness’ beliefs may not be aware how this is

impacting on their actions in the classroom. A teacher who believes children's achievement is limited by their social groups reduces their belief in their own capacity as a teacher to teach these children. This can impact on teacher-student relationships (Marzano, 2010; Bishop & Berryman, 2006, 2009), or cause teachers to adopt 'defensive' teaching strategies where they simplify content and reduce demands on students (Griffiths, et al, 2007; Torff, 2011). This can all potentially contribute to poor student achievement and disengagement. In addition, we may be dealing with students who have a negative sense of their own cultural identity and parents and community who have a negative sense of the value of schooling based on past experiences.

The redress is complex. Stronger Smarter supports educators to enhance their personal leadership skills to fully understand how their beliefs might impact their teaching. The Stronger Smarter approach asks teachers to take responsibility and '*put a mirror on ourselves as educators*' Within a High-Expectations Relationship, the teacher has to contemplate and understand not only the 'baggage' of the child, but also the baggage they carry themselves. It can be too easy to blame the community and the social and cultural issues of the children. The Stronger Smarter approach challenges teachers to ask themselves the confronting questions: *What is happening in my classroom that is valuable to Indigenous students? What am I doing that contributes to failure, to absenteeism or disengagement?* (Sarra, 2011b).

"The Stronger Smarter approach asks teachers to take responsibility and 'put a mirror on ourselves as educators.'"

The High-Expectations Relationships framework has a key element of critical self-reflection and seeking personal feedback to acknowledge the specific dispositions, strengths, weaknesses and cultural assumptions that shape 'self'. Teachers are asked to reflect on their day to day 'transactions' with students and to contemplate whether or not they are colluding with a negative stereotype. Against the backgrounds of such reflection, an educator can make up their own mind about whether their personal and professional rhetoric matches the day to day realities of their exchanges with children and colleagues. Teachers need to recognise the dynamic that underpins failure for many Aboriginal students, and start to confront problems of low attendance and low achievement, rather than laying the blame on the children and the complexities of their communities (Sarra quoted in Perso, 2012). High-Expectations Relationships need to be initiated by focusing on gaining a deeper understanding of both oneself and others as unique cultural beings.

Creating spaces for dialogue

A High-Expectations Relationship requires high levels of trust and safety where challenging conversations can be held. In this way, people can liberate themselves from negative or disabling assumptions and create the space for growth and positive transformation. High-

Expectations Relationships need the 'fair' aspects of equitable power relationships in place before the 'firm' aspects of challenging conversations can take place.

High-Expectations Relationships require a range of personal relational capabilities that are essentially conversational in nature. In building the relationship, we need to tune into the feelings, experiences, perceptions, strengths, needs and desires of others. We let others speak for themselves and are genuinely and compassionately interested in what they communicate. As we build up trust and make people feel welcome, they become comfortable to discuss issues and believe that you care about what they are saying (Spillman, 2013).

Positive cultural identity

A key aspect of the Stronger Smarter philosophy is the importance of maintaining a positive sense of cultural identity. Education systems tend to favour students who have the same cultural background as the teachers, writers and policy makers responsible for creating the course. A culturally responsive pedagogy where students are taught both their own voice as well as structures that will enable that voice to be heard in the wider world, can enhance the quality of teaching in the classroom (Delpit, 2008). Promoting a positive self-identity for students in the classroom, and recognising students as self-determining, culturally located individuals who are part of the learning conversation, is more likely to result in successful school performance than when there are excessive contradictions or tensions between the various aspects of self (Purdie *et al*, 2000). Positive classrooms relationships are built when teachers understand how they can respond to who the students are and to the prior knowledge they bring with them into the classroom (Bishop & Berryman, 2009).

In the classroom, this means understanding the unique talents, interests, knowledge, and circumstances of each student. Sarra (2014) suggests that teachers first need to '*look past the black faces in the classrooms*', see students, curious to learn, and make honourable choices about what education outcomes are good enough. Teachers can build positive relationships with students by being genuinely interested in students as individuals, making time for students out of class, watching them play sport or asking about what they did on the weekend (Sarra, 2011b). Through positive interactions with a student, teachers can build an emotional bank account with students (Covey, 1990). Building this emotional credit means a teacher can still have the challenging conversations with students when needed, but without students feeling that the only exchanges they have with a teacher are negative.

Indigenous perspectives

Teachers need to expose themselves to histories documented by Indigenous peoples from Indigenous perspectives in order to challenge the dominant constructions of history and understand how 'low expectations' have developed as a result of what has happened in the past. Rose (2012) describes the danger that in the absence of teacher knowledge, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are trivialised and mis-represented in the classroom ('*half truths that distort our national identity*' and '*promulgate a value system*

that places Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on society's fringe'). Buckskin (2012) says that 'we as Indigenous people' ask teachers to honour our cultures, languages and world views, but also acknowledge that they have limited knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and develop partnerships with those who know more.

Building relationships with community

Within the school community, teachers can build positive relationships with parents and community by making them feel welcomed at the school, providing regular, positive feedback about their children, and making time to understand the unique circumstances of families that might affect students' wellbeing and learning.

Sarra (2011c,) says:

"As a school principal I always set out to connect with the humanity of Aboriginal children and parents, regardless of the complexities they were located in, and even if they were coming to the relationship in a somewhat hostile manner. Clearly I was paid to be in the relationship and it was incumbent upon me to reach out positively. As we keep reaching out in an effort to connect with the other's humanity, eventually they reach out to us and the potential for a positive partnership emerges."

The Stronger Smarter Approach provides educators with the confidence and skills to build strong relationships with the local community. Educators are encouraged to embrace Indigenous leadership in the school community in a way that goes beyond 'consultation' and involves working with community to co-create pathways for the school.

Spillman's (2013) research in facilitating and evaluating collaborative conversational processes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators describes how cultural assumptions can stifle the rigour and possibility of conversations. Spillman explains that if the thinking is only about bridging a cultural gap, particularly where we have made assumptions about what is on the other side of that gap, then we can deny ourselves the possibility of fully recognising and knowing the person as a unique human being with a complex and layered identity. By assuming that what we 'know' about a culture automatically applies to a person, we are in danger of limiting the conversation and can deny ourselves the possibility of a High-Expectations Relationship.

Engaging in challenging conversations

Once the spaces of equal power dynamics, with trust and safety have been created, it becomes possible for the teacher and student or teacher and parent to agree on what the expectations should be. This becomes a respectful relationship where the dialogue is open,

and a way forward can be created in a genuinely collaborative manner. As an example, high-expectations rhetoric might be a zero-tolerance approach that sees a child sent home when he does not have full school uniform on. In a High-Expectations Relationship, the educator will sit with the parent or community, discuss the expectation, find out if the family can afford to buy uniforms and co-create a solution, for example, providing a uniform in exchange for the parent doing one-on-one reading in the classroom (Sarra, 2014 a,b).

High-Expectations Learning Environments

When a significant number of adults within a school community enact quality relating, the culture of the school begins to shift positively, creating a high-expectations culture or environment where children can learn (Spillman 2013). The Stronger Smarter Approach with its focus on High-Expectations Relationships can provide a lens or framework and a shared language to work with staff across the school to develop a high-expectations learning environment. This is needed for the cultural transformation that is critical to student wellbeing and educational success within a school.

In a High-Expectations learning environment young people are proud of their culture and their unique attributes; being different is not only accepted, but valued and actively sought. Here students care for and learn with each other. Teachers set high standards for students within a culturally appropriate and responsive learning context where students can bring their prior cultural knowledge and experiences to classroom interactions (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). Students have a sense of belonging in a supportive, positive environment (Purdie et al, 2000). For all students, the strong and smart message is enforced so that students become engaged with their work and believe that being 'young black and deadly' means coming to school every day.

Teaching is more than just standing at the front of the room transmitting new knowledge. In a high-expectations learning environment, teachers will adopt high-order, high-expectations teaching and learning strategies which involve working from what children already know, making content relevant while also explaining why it is important, and using practical, hands-on examples (Sarra, 2011b). Classroom pedagogies allow students to make a connection between school knowledge and the personal world they experience and understand, but without compromising the intellectual quality of their school experience (Griffiths *et al*, 2007). High-expectations learning environments are also places for fun, where laughter is a regular phenomenon.

"The Stronger Smarter Approach is not about 'catching up the student' but about setting the high standards for Aboriginal education and teaching across Australia that should always have existed."

A high-expectations learning environment has a vision that an Aboriginal child can be as smart as any other child in every other school, and that the level of education they receive

should be as good as anywhere else in the country. The Stronger Smarter Approach is not about 'catching up the student' but about setting the high standards for Aboriginal education and teaching across Australia that should always have existed.'

What we call great teaching strategies for all children are what we call great quality teaching strategies for Indigenous children. With a deeper knowledge of the context of Indigenous children, the strategies might be applied differently (Sarra, 2011b).

Conclusion – High-Expectations Relationships

A belief in high-expectations for all students becomes complex when it is enacted in the classroom and school community. Underlying assumptions and out of awareness beliefs based on our social conditioning can get in the way and actions, behaviour or pedagogic choices may not support our high-expectations beliefs. This is particularly relevant in Indigenous education where public discourses revolve around deficit positioning and students may have a negative sense of their own cultural identity.

High-Expectations Relationships provide a framework to describe the behaviours, dispositions and conversational processes needed to develop quality relationships within the classroom, staffroom and school community to create a high-expectations learning environment where students can thrive and succeed. This framework incorporates both fair and firm. Fair, socially-just relating builds a space of trust where firm, critically reflective relating and challenging conversations can be achieved. High-Expectations Relationships understand historical backgrounds but then move beyond cultural assumptions to understand the context of the individual student or family. Cultural differences are celebrated, and strength-based conversations and a relational view of culture provide a basis for group members to work together to co-create solutions. Conversational circles and dialogue enable spaces where ideas can be challenged and multiple perspectives enact collective sense-making and consensual decision making.

As High-Expectations Relationships are developed across a school, students feel supported, cared for and engaged with their learning, and teachers understand their students and use the high quality teaching strategies that best support student needs. Families and the community feel welcomed within the school and support the school in promoting good student behaviour and school attendance. The Stronger Smarter Institute believes that developing High-Expectations Relationships and cultures within school environments is not only key to improving Indigenous education in Australia, but provides a foundation for quality learning environments across all Australian schools.

2: Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parents and Communities in Education

AITSL Pilot Project Final Report. Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parents and Communities in Education. A joint project by the Stronger Smarter Institute (QUT) and the SiMERR National Research Centre (UNE). Anderson, D, & Thomas, S. (2011). Funded by AITSL. Unpublished report

Summary of the report. Full report available from the Stronger Smarter Institute.

In 2011, the Stronger Smarter Institute undertook a pilot case study, funded by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), in relation to the National Professional Standards for Teachers for engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parents and Communities in Education. The project aimed to answer the question ‘*what are the most effective ways of engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities to improve student learning outcomes*’, and involved schools across a diverse group of communities in metropolitan, provincial and very remote schools.

The Stronger Smarter Institute team facilitated workshops which drew on the community, student and teacher voice and perspectives and involved rigorous debate. These events explored what constitutes community engagement, and how to establish and sustain genuine engagement between the school and community. Investigations then went on to explore participants’ beliefs, experiences and assumptions around attributes of an effective *deadly* teacher.

Workshops took a strength-based approach to shift the conversation from blame and disabling negative patterns, and focus on positive narratives illustrating experiences of engagement between schools and community.

“It was clear that community engagement is not a list of tasks we tick off, but what is important is how we interact with students and community.”

The workshops showed there is not always a clear or shared understanding of what is meant by community engagement, whose responsibility it is to engage or what are the most effective ways to go about building genuine relationships based on respect. It was clear that community engagement is not a list of tasks we tick off, but what is important is how we interact with students and community. A respectful relationship is essential to ensuring the students and community have a sense of connectedness with the school. Whether working with a school with one or two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students or with 100% Aboriginal students, the message from this research was the same: build positive strong relationships and ensure clear understandings form the basis of plans that are inclusive of the community not imposed on community.

For the schools involved, the workshop process allowed teachers to understand from community and student perspectives what they can do to build effective relationships and

helped teachers reflect on their own beliefs and deepen understanding of the significant impact of the teacher-student and teacher-community relationships. As well as supporting the schools involved, the project also provided information that is relevant to all schools.

Teacher-student relationships

Research Question 1: What are the attributes of teachers and school leaders who effectively facilitate and support engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and Communities in education?

“A Community member from WA said, “A deadly teacher is someone who respects you and pays attention to you and looks you in the eye and tells you that you can do it! My teacher said that I could be a role model and I thank that teacher for believing in me.”

This research question focussed on describing the attributes of an effective (*deadly*) teacher and how these attributes can facilitate and support community engagement from community, student and school perspectives. This recognises the symbiotic relationships established by effective teachers with key community personnel and also highlights the strategies they put in place for building a school environment conducive to an ongoing process of genuine community engagement.

The processes were centred on a strength-based approach and gathering positive stories about positive influences of *deadly* teachers. However, at one high school the conversation with students did cover negative experiences in schools prior to coming to the school. One secondary student described being ridiculed by her maths teacher and after being strong at maths previously, had lost interest in maths and had dropped it as a senior subject. Her statement was that that teacher “*made me feel like nothing*”. These descriptions showed the dramatic and lasting impact that negative interactions can have for a student.

Students were asked to visualise a *deadly* teacher, and these descriptions revealed that it is not about what is taught, but is about the interactions with students, and the impact these have on how students feel. Students talked about feeling welcome in a school, a sense of belonging and being treated with respect, and how these feelings made them stronger.

Figure 3 shows some of the characteristics of ‘Stronger Smarter Teachers’ based on this research on what makes a *deadly* teacher. This project demonstrated the importance of getting the relationship right with students in the first instance and then extending the focus on positive ways to engage with parents, carers and the wider community.

“The power in the teacher student relationship is such that it is very possible, in fact even usual, that the teacher can send a message to their students, without even knowing they are sending one. Conjointly it is possible that students can receive a message without even knowing they are receiving one. The message can say something positive, or something negative....

The learning environment and the teacher student relationship must be relentless around a message that says consistently to learners: ‘Hey, I believe in you!’

Sarra (2011)

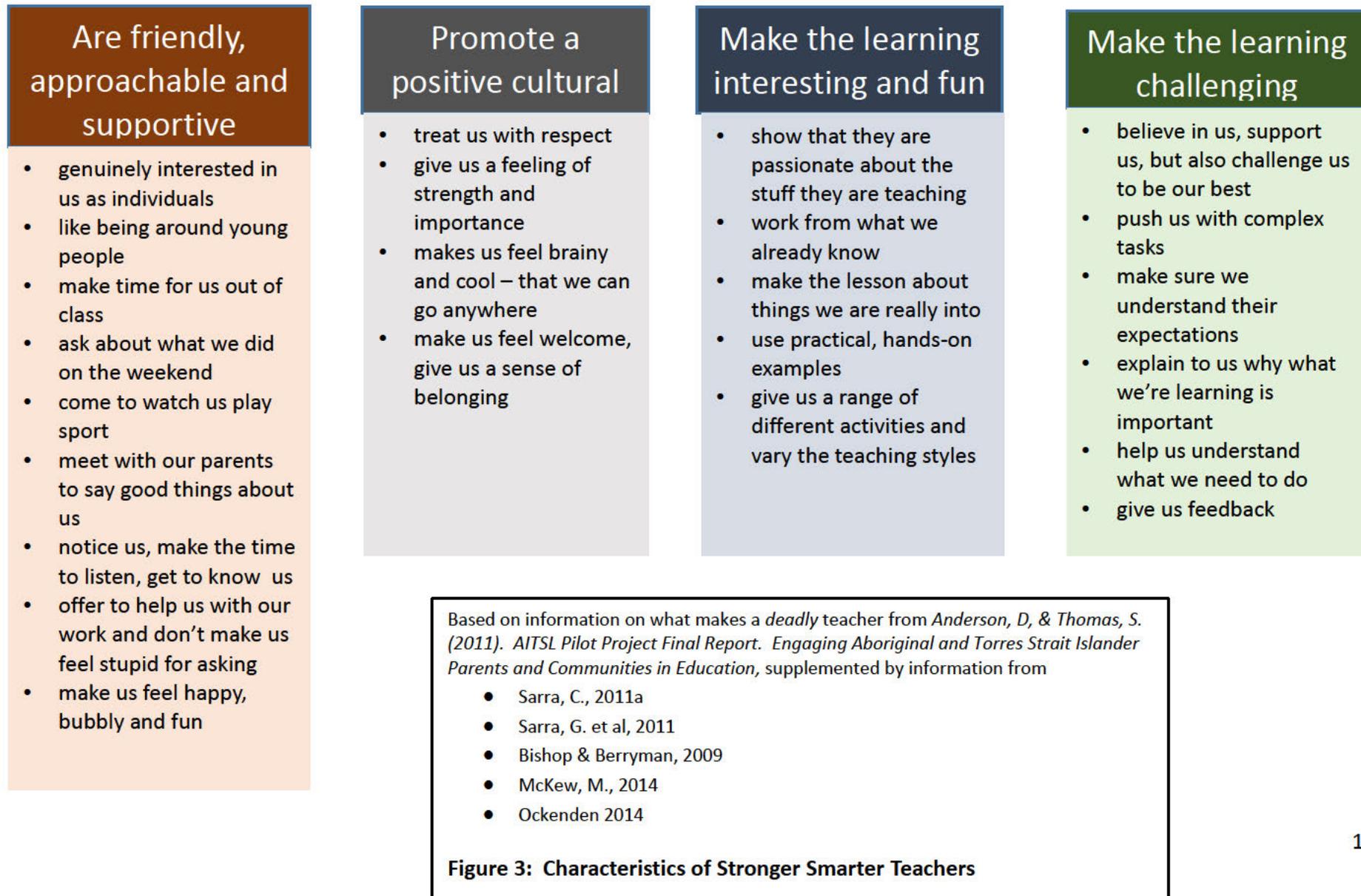
The Stronger Smarter Approach advocates high-expectations learning environments and the importance of embracing a positive sense of cultural identity for students and communities within schools.

It is important to note these two ‘metastrategies’ are complimentary: that you can have a high-expectations learning environment and embrace a positive sense of cultural identity.

In a High-Expectations Relationships learning environment, teachers do not lower expectations when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities and they focus on building relationships to ensure their teaching strategies are informed by the community context and shaped by community input.

“It is important to note these two ‘metastrategies’ are complimentary: that you can have a high-expectations learning environment and embrace a positive sense of cultural identity. “

Stronger Smarter Teachers



Teacher-community relationships

Research Question 2: What strategies and processes are required for successful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and Communities?

This research questions sought to answer several sub questions:

- What constitutes 'community' and is it the same for everyone?
- Are there shared understandings of what community engagement looks like?
- Why is community engagement important?
- What does positive community engagement look like?

What constitutes 'Community'?

A Workshop participant said, "It is recognising the complex challenges we do face when it is not just one community but made up of six. You can't just work with one you have to work with all groups. It is also about knowing who the decision makers are and being responsive to them but also being aware of those community members who don't talk up."

The terms *engagement* and *community* are commonly used in education discourse by schools and policy makers. State and Territory Smarter Schools National Partnership agreements and most school plans incorporate a focus on engaging communities. In many cases, these terms are assumed to have a singular meaning that is understood by all. However, this research found that, while for many school personnel, *community* means parents and carers, the term often has a much broader meaning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community members.

Community may incorporate grandparents, elders, foster families and extended families where older children may themselves be playing a significant role in the 'growing up' of younger children. The sense of belonging to a family may vary for different students – while most students in our surveys agreed with the statement '*I feel I belong to my family*' some noted that they avoided family members who exhibited negative behaviour, or that they live with their grandparents and that the immediate family 'don't want to know me'. This highlighted a need for schools and communities to work together to establish shared definitions that are clearly articulated and understood by all, as an essential process to achieving genuine engagement.

Community engagement

A Workshop participant said, *“Community engagement shouldn’t be defined by how many times the parents come to the schools and perform tasks required of them by schools. It should be about a shared partnership between schools and communities which looks different in different contexts and changes within a school community over time”*.

The workshops also showed a range of definitions of understanding of community engagement. Some participants described ‘community engagement’ as a community member coming to the classroom, while others described special events – activities which involve the community coming into the school.

While most schools have established practices that are intended to engage community, the emphasis is often on getting the community into the school as opposed to what teachers can do themselves to ensure genuine engagement becomes a reality.

“A Queensland teacher said “the school fence is a boundary not barrier”, a statement that echoes a core idea that is reflected in the work of the Stronger Smarter Institute”.

Our research found that the events which transformed community engagement involved teachers going out into the community and actively seeking opportunities to meet with parents outside the school environment. These activities formed the basis for establishing respectful relationships and provided opportunities to share information and positive stories of children’s progress. These informal approaches were raised across sites as being something that teachers, can do beyond the school gate. *“A Queensland teacher said “the school fence is a boundary not barrier”, a statement that echoes a core idea that is reflected in the work of the Stronger Smarter Institute”*.

When we asked **community members** what they thought was meant by community engagement, they said

- it was about feeling welcomed in the school
- it didn’t always mean parents being involved in the school – for some it may just mean discussions at home, helping with homework, making sure the kids get to school
- community engagement shouldn’t be an imposition on the parents – but they also noted that parents may lack confidence and think they’re not worthy of taking on roles and responsibilities that schools expect of them
- cultural activities throughout the year should involve the whole school – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students

- invitations to the school shouldn't have an 'agenda' attached.

Everyone agreed that all parents want to support their students to learn. The study recognised that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had had negative experiences of interacting with school personnel during their own school experiences, and these past experiences may impact on how they might engage with the school now. A community member from Northern NSW said *"I haven't seen a good report for any Aboriginal student in my time"*. Such a comment is worth remembering in the context of parents who may appear reluctant to engage with the school. Some parents and community members may have had negative experiences as a result of being approached only when the school raises issues or concerns about their children. This highlights the importance of teachers establishing positive relationships and friendly approaches as an essential starting point.

A community member from Northern NSW said "I haven't seen a good report for any Aboriginal student in my time". Such a comment is worth remembering in the context of parents who may appear reluctant to engage with the school.

The study raised the question of who is responsible for community engagement and highlighted that the responsibility lies with teachers to take the initiative to engage with community. School-based community engagement initiatives often referred to whole

Schools have a responsibility to support teachers to build their capacity and confidence to engage with parents and carers.

school approaches and did not clearly set out a role for all teachers. The research particularly emphasized the important role individual teachers could make through building caring relationships with students and developing connections with carers.

In some conversations and survey responses, teachers highlighted concerns about going out into the community. Schools have a responsibility to support teachers to build their capacity and confidence to engage with parents and carers. Pairing new graduates with a community member can provide mentoring support and become the basis of developing relationships. Teachers can also start by building the relationships with their students in the classrooms and this becomes an important starting point for then building relationships with families.

A Workshop participant from WA said

"Community engagement for me is very real and immediate. I had to work hard going beyond just the families in town and going to homes to meet families just to be introduced and saying nothing necessarily about the child so that we know each other's faces and we know each other in town to say hello-that was the first step"

The second step was inviting parents in for morning tea on a one or two people basis not a big group, sharing biscuits and tea with children coming over so we could have a conversation and being very real. If that is too hard and distressing due to past experiences I would take children's work to their home and share that with parents, grandparents and aunties and anyone else who gathered around and was interested in looking. It is also getting involved in events that are happening in their lives. If a baby was born sending a card or if someone passes away sending a letter to say we are really sorry about their loss and that we won't be coming around for a while, building relationships on a personal level on a real level. Taking the kids out on Country with relatives and giving them the chance to shine."

Why is Community engagement important?

A Deputy Principal said, "Community engagement happens on a number of different levels from the big picture with parents and interagency around town to community engagement at the classroom level.

The relationships between the parents and teachers have developed so strongly that we have seen definite outcomes for children involved."

The project highlighted that positive community engagement had benefits for everyone and involved with *"everybody working together to achieve the best for our students"*. Where there is positive community engagement:

- Children feel that their community is behind them in everything they do.
- There is a shared responsibility for achieving positive outcomes for the entire community.
- For teachers, building relationships with the community can increase knowledge and improved capacity to teach.

What does positive community engagement look like?

Our discussions with community, students and teachers gave an insight into what positive community engagement looks like. Where there is positive community engagement and positive relationships and partnerships with community members:

- the community feels like they are part of the school and people in the community are actively involved
- community are teaching their knowledge and sharing their skills in school
- there is an open door policy - parents feel safe to come to the school to speak about children and feel they can ask for help.
- community understands the expectations of the school and upholds those expectations

- functions and events involve the whole community.

A Graduate teacher said, *“In small and remote places it is not always easy to engage with community out of school. There are not always lots of opportunities so using football, church and youth group to meet families helps build and develop positive relationships. It is really important that teachers are out and about and that they make the effort to talk to people at the shops. When you develop trust and respect and become a familiar face parents feel that they can come up to you to talk because it’s a neutral place.”*

Conclusion – Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

The information collected from the project provides useful insights from the viewpoints of educators, students and parents and community. Successful community engagement is the result of building strong positive relationships and the school and the community working together in a variety of ways. For educators, this means understanding and incorporating local contexts, respecting different perspectives, and having genuine authentic conversations.

The schools in the project showed that it can take time to develop strong community engagement. Educators interviewed in the project could list a range of initiatives within their schools. However, schools are often busy attempting to engage community and ‘foster a school spirit’, and often with the best intentions, schools implement programs without explaining the purpose or seeking advice from community in the first instance.

*The Stronger Smarter Approach emphasises **working with** communities **not doing** things to community, and this distinction can inform the ways schools approach community engagement.*

We found that it is important to make the distinction between fostering a school spirit, which can be seen as school-centred and looking at ‘connectedness’ which is child and community centred, (Mackie, 2011, p 10). Focusing on a ‘school-centred’ approach can fail to capitalise on the connectedness and ensuring shared understandings have been co-created to leverage community ideas. The Stronger Smarter Approach emphasises **working with** communities **not doing** things to community, and this distinction can inform the ways schools approach community engagement. Real engagement occurs when equal partners in

a reciprocal relationship work together and all fully understand the purpose, processes and intended outcome.

The responses from participants overwhelmingly demonstrated that the characteristics of a *deadly* teacher were also about the teacher-student relationships where teachers made time to understand students, and made it clear to students that they cared. Other characteristics involved being clear about high expectations for students, and making the learning interesting, challenging and fun, so that the students had the opportunity to meet those high expectations.

We also found that the processes used to gather information during the project were valuable to schools and their communities, and seeded new ideas in schools about how to continue these collaborative discussions. The project modelled a process of co-creating ideas together with community, and community members at all sites were appreciative of their involvement and valued the opportunity to contribute. The schools involved were in the position to build on this and use these processes as the foundation of building stronger community partnerships.

Students also commented about the process of being consulted and having their views respected and valued. Primary students at one school commented in their *Check Out* that they were proud to be part of this group (a small group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students chosen to participate) and their involvement in the project may instigate an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their school to participate in a leadership group. A secondary student in said in his *Check Out* “This is really worthwhile and I felt valued because it was the first time the school wanted to know what I thought”. This powerful response impacted on adults in the room who started the conversation around ‘where to from here’ – how can we conduct these types of workshops in other remote schools and build on what was started in this school?

3: The work of the Stronger Smarter Institute

The Stronger Smarter Institute is a not-for-profit, Indigenous-led organisation which has been working in partnership with schools across Australia for the past 10 years. The work of the Institute is on the ground, working directly to support school and community leaders through the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program and other Institute programs.

To date, the Institute has worked with over 2,000 participants (educators, community members, and education support) in the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program, and over 500 participants who have completed the Introduction to Stronger Smarter online module. On any school day, Stronger Smarter alumni are supporting over 40,000 Indigenous students in over 550 schools across the country.

Elements of the Stronger Smarter Approach are universal in culturally diverse schools, communities and work environments. Through our first decade of operations, the Institute has always been open to collaborating with community interests, corporations, public sector agencies and community organisations. In 2015, our newest partnership was launched with Aboriginal Hostels Limited (AHL).

The Institute will partner with AHL to launch the Stronger Smarter Workplaces Program (SSW) across all 50 AHL locations nationwide. Stronger Smarter Workplaces is specifically designed for culturally diverse organisations that have a priority to unlock the value of diversity in the workplace and to support a work culture of high performance. The Institute is particularly proud to partner with another national indigenous organisation. And the values of AHL and the Institute are very strong. In particular the Institute is looking forward to working with the AHL staff that run the thirteen (13) student focussed hostels in AHL's network. There is a direct relationship between those clients and our approach.

"The whole philosophy and approach underpins what we do for our kids in our school, whether they're Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal."

Steve McAlister, Forbes North Public School, Provincial NSW

Participants in the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program overwhelmingly state that the program increases their confidence and leadership abilities in terms of building positive relationships with their staff, students and school community.

Participants take the Stronger Smarter Approach back to their schools and use it as a framework for their school change agendas. They use the concepts of High-Expectations Relationships to build a collegiate school environment, build positive learning environments in the classroom, and work with parents and community to co-create the way forward for the school.

Our experience is that the concepts of 'Stronger Smarter' and 'High-Expectations Relationships' and doing things *with* community, not *to* community, are relevant across all schools.

The Stronger Smarter Approach provides schools with a set of processes, strategies and tools that they can use to co-create the school change agenda and school priorities that are relevant in their local context.

"It's been a really empowering and groundbreaking process for our school. It's built integrity, it's built spirit and it's built a belief within teachers that working together and having high expectations... well I know it has lifted the performance across the school. Aitkenvale is Strong and Smart"

**Judd Burgess, Aitkenvale State School,
Townsville, Queensland**

The benefits of the Stronger Smarter Approach are evident in the feedback we get from school leaders. The Institute is seeing positive changes in many schools who are using the Stronger Smarter Approach and High-Expectations Relationships as a school-wide approach.

"I do believe we've come together a lot more since we started training at Stronger Smarter, and we get a lot of parents' feedback saying that we are a school that really does understand community, and that they feel comfortable and welcome."

**Michael Taylor, Principal, Casino West
Public School, Provincial NSW**

A component of the Institute's work involves capturing results, narratives and accounts from schools to build a picture of how educators are strengthening their high-expectations learning environments, and their relationships with parents and the local community.

Attachments A and B provide data from selected schools. Full practitioner interviews are available on our website at <http://strongersmarter.com.au/news/stronger-smarter-stories/>

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Attachment A: Data slides from selected schools undertaking a Stronger Smarter approach.

Attachment B: Field notes from selected practitioner interviews.