Stronger Smarter:

A strength-based approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education

"*The challenge of doing things* **with** *people* **not to** *them means having to assume Indigenous people have a sense of agency and then actively embracing and engaging that capacity at a* **local** *level,*"

Chris Sarra, quoted in Karvelas, 2018.

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Preface

Over the last decade, the Stronger Smarter Institute, working with schools across the country, has developed the Stronger Smarter Approach[TM] (SSA) as a programmatic response to the complex challenge of Indigenous education.   The Institute's Stronger Smarter Leadership Program[TM] (SSLP) is where the first spark of transformation occurs, and the knowledge and teachings are then further deepened and gifted to a smaller group through the Stronger Smarter Specialists Program[TM] (SSSP). The Institute's ongoing research brings into the light the practices developed by SSLP alumni, our partners in change, that strengthen community relations and allow local cultural knowledge and strengths to be at the forefront of school planning. This research, based on the practice of educators in the workplace, has allowed the Institute to continue to develop and describe the elements of the SSA.

A strength-based approach is one of the four cornerstones of the SSA, and this paper forms one of the Institute's key position papers. In this paper, our lead writer is the Institute's Chief of Operations, Ms Michal Purcell, supported by Dr John Davis, Dr Rhonda Coopes and Ms Cathy Jackson.

In this paper, we look at how the SSA provides the underlying strength-based philosophy and approach that needs to be in place for any strategy for Australian Indigenous education to be successful. We start by describing what a strength-based approach looks like and why this is needed in Australia's education system.   We then move to the words of Michal Purcell who reflects on how a strength-based methodology is taught through the SSLP. Michal, who is a foundational Stronger Smarter Institute staff member and community link to the seminal works of 'Strong and Smart' in Cherbourg, now leads the delivery of the SSLP around the country. Michal describes how taking a strength-based approach creates shifts in thinking and promotes collaborative ways of working, resulting in an organisational culture where everyone has buy-in, and all voices are heard. Finally, we consider what we can all do to enact a strength-based approach in schools across the spheres of the Personal, School and Community.

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Introduction

We didn't go to Cherbourg and give the children a sense of being 'Strong and Smart'... That was inside them already.... That sense of being strong and smart resides in every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child

Dr Chris Sarra

The Stronger Smarter Approach™ (SSA) calls on every educator[1] to be a part of changing the way Australians think about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017). A small shift in thinking can make a huge difference. Instead of seeing the role of educators as supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums[2] to better 'fit in' to a western education system, an approach theorised within the framework of deficit discourse, educators become part of high-expectations relationships that value the strengths and understand the learning needs of all students.

The aim of the SSA is the rewriting of the narrative of our schools. When the thinking changes to recognising and valuing the strengths that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of Knowing, Being and Doing bring to our classrooms, the narrative changes to one where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and Jarjums feel a part of a schooling system that honours their cultural identity and provides culturally-appropriate pathways to success (Martin, 2008).

As educators, transformative change in our schools and classrooms starts with us. If we can engage in self-reflection and uncover our own out-of-awareness assumptions that might be getting in the way of a strength-based approach, we are better positioned to work with the whole school community to co-create shared high expectations. If we can

[1] Educator is a broad term covering all who have an input into the school experience of a student: from teacher aides to the principal with all being of equal importance.

[2] Jarjums is a Bundjalung/ Yugambeh word for children used on Australia's eastern coast.

build culturally inclusive classrooms, forefront Indigenous Knowledges into our curriculum and use culturally responsive pedagogies, this is not just about supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums but will benefit all Australian Jarjums. Taking this anti-racist, strength-based approach has the potential for societal change. If we point the compass in a slightly different direction, we could end up somewhere very different for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia.

The success of this approach is understood best in the words of our SSLP alumni. As one participant describes, when she changed her expectations of students in a remote Queensland school this resulted in a change to how she taught and increased success for these students.

> *'I tried to teach them about having high expectations: 'you can get to school today and do all this work with no complaining'. And they did! It's as if no one had ever thought they could do it before. They were so used to people just saying, 'oh you can't do that? All right, we'll just colour in or just watch a movie'. That group is now one of the most successful Cape York cohorts. 90% of my year 6 students were enrolled into secondary school while I was there, and the majority are still in high school. A group of about 20 kids are nearly all about to graduate grade 10 this year. It was believing that the kids could succeed... because they could, and they are.'* [Teacher 2019].

What is a strength-based approach?

If we take Aboriginal perspectives on 'being Aboriginal' and we really enforce that in a school setting, then my hypothesis was that things would change quite dramatically – and change they did

(Chris Sarra, 2018).

At the Stronger Smarter Institute, a strength-based approach is our way: that is, an Indigenous standpoint. A strength-based approach is a foundational cornerstone of the Stronger Smarter Approach™ (SSA) (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2018). This is a focused and forceful targeting of the development and delivery of all aspects of work and life from a positive paradigm. In all our processes, strategies, and actions, we seek and build upon strengths. Building on strengths and connections is key to both building a positive sense of student identity – Strong and Smart – as described by Dr Chris Sarra's work (Sarra, 2011) and to high-expectations relationships (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014; Sarra, Spillman, Jackson, Davis & Bray, 2018).

Strengths can be defined as '*a set of developed competencies and characteristics that are valued both by the individual and society and embedded in culture*' (Brownlee, Rawana & MacArthur, 2012). Australia is seeded in the oldest living surviving cultures. Our political identities, our construct as a polity, has been predicated on collective sense making. This occurred without mass wars or imprisonments or internments of people. We have built cultural strengths and kinnections (Davis, 2018) around the nation through valuing and highlighting connection – including connection to and custodianship of country.

And yet, these strengths have been continually denied. Pascoe (2014; 2018, p.229), in his deep Indigenous Knowledge (IK) text 'Dark Emu', describes this denial of the collective, systematic and deeply refined relationship with the land as "the single greatest impediment to intercultural understanding."   For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums, families and communities, Australia's history of oppressive settler colonialism continues to be part of their everyday experiences in a variety of ways. Matthews (2015) describes how Terra Nullius created a void in the psyche of the mainstream – creating a population of non-Indigenous people who know very little about Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander culture. In the absence of knowledge, this void has been filled by stereotypes that misrepresent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and cultures as having no relevance in a modern, advanced, technological, industrial society. Pascoe (2018, p.240) illuminates the sense of superiority held by 'the West' historically and still today, describing the 2017 United Nations General Assembly adoption of 'the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by a vote of a hundred and forty-three to four. Who were the four? The USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia: the colonial governments who have most to lose if rights are extended to the Indigenous Peoples.

Palawa researcher, Dr Maggie Walter (2016) explains how this deficit view is perpetuated through the collection of "Indigenous data"; the huge pool of official statistics and administrative data gathered and analysed by the power brokers in post-colonial societies that all tell a story of deficit. Walter (2016, p.86; 2018) describes this as 5D data – the data of disparity, deprivation, disadvantage, dysfunction and difference, which '*do not, and will never, meet the data requirements of negotiating a fair and truthful relationship or information an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice.*" To flip this around, research needs to highlight 'nayri kati' ('good numbers') (Walter & Anderson, 2013, p. 82) that provide a narrative of '*who we are as peoples'*, rejects the value systems of Euro-Australia as the unacknowledged norm, and privileges Indigenous voices, knowledges, and understandings. This is a paradigm shift in Indigenous statistics production that does not take a presumption of Indigenous deficit as its starting point (Walter & Anderson, 2013, p. 86), and instead is data *for* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that engages with our historical and cultural realities. The SSLP's focus on a strength-based approach is a conscious movement away from this deficit approach and towards positive language and identity formation.

Understanding a strength-based approach in education

Of course, all educators want the best for all their students, and, on the surface, 'high expectations for all' seems like the solution to rejecting this deficit narrative and taking a strength-based approach. The reality is, however, that striving for a culture of high expectations may do very little to create one (Quintero, 2014). A problem lies in misinterpreting the high expectations agenda as test scores (performance outcomes) or as grade levels (performance standards). The danger of standards is that when students don't reach the standard at that time, this can lead back to a deficit view where educators place the fault for low achievement externally with the students and their families. As Dr Chris Sarra (2005, p.4) reflects, when he asked staff at Cherbourg about reasons for the school's failure, the response was *"There's a lot of social complexities here. There are many cultural complexities, the parents don't value education, children don't value education, and the community is not supporting the school.*"

Education policy since the 1960s has typically framed 'Indigenous education' as a 'problem' that needs 'fixing' with the aim of encouraging Indigenous people to become 'better citizens', where the measure is a good white citizen (Fogerty & Wilson, 2016; Moreton-Robinson, 2009; Sarra, Spillman, Jackson, Davis & Bray, 2018; Vass, 2013). This view continues with the rhetoric of 'Closing the Gap'; a construct of a post-colonial society preoccupied with othering our Indigenous identities into binaries of deficiencies and continuing to reinforce the deficit model (Anderson, quoted in Henebery, 2017).

When no Indigenous voice is heard, non-Indigenous policy makers continue to frame Indigeneity as deficit. As Vass (2013) suggests, using 'Indigenous' as a category in itself is problematic, aggregating populations of students into a category that is a result of histories of exclusion, deprivation, stigma and racism and that positions the non-Indigenous community as the normative benchmark.

In schools, it is inevitable that the dominant cultural values that underpin our recognition of strengths are the result of the western education system based on colonial and postcolonial paradigms (Perso, 2012, p.33). In such a situation the strengths of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums will be so often undervalued. Various researchers have shown that this continues to be the case. Krakouer (2016, p.11) found in her review of the literature that there was an inherent assumption that *"school readiness includes the capacity or preparedness of Indigenous children to adapt to, and fit in with, the Western, non-Indigenous school system"*. In Luke et al.'s (2013 p. 398) research, comments from educators, families and students suggest that "*the school remains a non-Indigenous social institution with predominant views that Indigenous students, communities and families require fixing."* Similarly, Lewthwaite et al. (2015) noted there continues to be an assumption that Western ways are superior, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children may bring deficits to classrooms that will detract from their ability to develop a strong identity as an 'academic student'.

Policy 'problems' such as this are better understood as socially constructed. This then allows us to investigate the 'conditions, assumptions, forces' that are the basis from which the socially constructed 'problem' emerged (Vass, 2013, quoting Scheurich, 1997, p. 98). As Walter (2016, p.83) states, 'why is understanding Aboriginal peoples through anything but the lens of a social problem seemingly un-thought of and perhaps unthinkable within our major statistical institutions?'

We need to look deeper into what we mean by 'high expectations.' The view sometimes held of an 'equitable' education system is one where "*all students are given the same opportunities, exposed to the same school curriculum, taught by teachers with equivalent expertise, held to the same learning expectations and provided with equivalent levels of resourcing and support*," (Masters & Adams, 2018). However, as Masters and Adams

(2018) explain, an equitable system cannot be about basing expectations solely around holding all students to the same learning expectations and expecting that all students reach the same point in their learning at the same time.

When we are working in a western education system, where the expectation is that Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Jarjums 'fit in' without any consideration of the different strengths they bring to the classroom, then the 'equality' of high expectations for all, is not 'equitable. The experiences, opportunities and aspirations for students may not conform to a preferred linear avenue of educational attainment and may be different for each student (Nelson & Hay, 2010). Treating all students equitably means acknowledging different starting points, aspirations and experiences. This leads to a suggestion that the better 'high expectation' is that all students make excellent progress in their learning regardless of their starting point achieving at least one year's growth through each year of schooling (Masters & Adams, 2018; Gonski et al., 2018).

'What works' for Indigenous people is not about teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums differently. A strength-based approach is about ensuring that all students receive the same opportunities as everyone else. When students bring different strengths to the classroom, providing equal opportunity means treating all students as individual learners and taking the time to develop individual learning plans for every student.

Figure 1: Interaction Institute for Social Change (interactioninstitute.org)

Artist: Angus Maguire (madewithangus.com).

This turns the understanding of high expectations away from performance levels or standards, instead being around ensuring all students are provided with the opportunity to learn – equity rather than equality. This takes away the sense of failure being about the complexities of the situation and places us, as educators, in a position of agency where we can all make a difference. Every educator then has a role in developing expectations that embrace the strengths of each individual student.
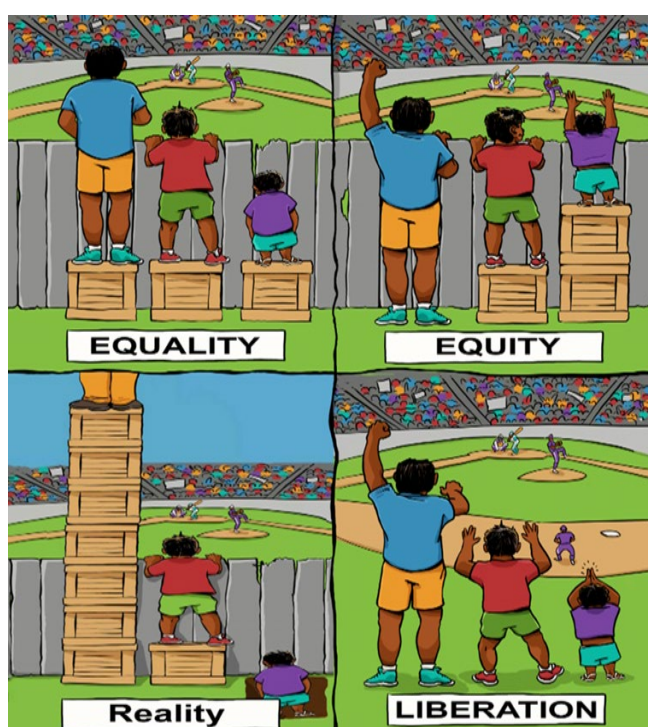
The cartoon from the Interaction Institute for Social Change (2018) (Figure 1) shows this difference between equality and equity where different starting points mean the support required to ensure equal outcomes for everyone looks different for each student. True 'liberation' comes from completely removing the fences or barriers that exist within society and the microcosm of the school.

A self-fulfilling prophecy

A strength-based approach is based on the philosophical stance that capitalizing on a person's best qualities is more likely to lead to success than investing in efforts to overcome personal weaknesses or deficiencies and will empower individuals to flourish rather than simply survive (Lopez & Louis, 2009). As we have described, in Australia, the history and the assumptions of a western schooling system will inevitably impact on the relationships between educators and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums and their families. In such a situation, cultural differences between the teacher and student can be taken as a deficit on the part of the student (Lewellyn et al., 2018). As an example, mainstream indicators measure the ability of a student on their ability to speak English, while ignoring the fact that they may speak several Aboriginal languages.

If we are missing the strengths our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, then a range of things may happen in the classroom that fail to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums with quality learning opportunities, leaving our Jarjums 'surviving' rather than 'thriving' – as evidenced in disengagement, absenteeism and disciplinary exclusions. Work in both the USA (Torff, 2014) and New Zealand (Rubie-Davies, 2008; Bishop & Berryman, 2006) shows how when educators are socialised into certain beliefs about teaching and learning or have low expectations, they teach different groups differently. Tacit assumptions about 'ability' and 'intelligence' can impact on classroom interactions (Wrigley, 2011). One result is a belief that students from less advantaged backgrounds are not ready for critical thinking skills with educators choosing instead to emphasise repetitively practicing basic skills. In Australia, there is evidence that this translates into default pedagogies with an emphasis on basic skills and vocational training as an 'unmarked norm' for Aboriginal and Torres

Figure 2, Sinicki (2013, p.1)

Strait Islander students (Luke et al, 2013, p.18). A self-fulfilling prophecy results (Figure 2) where a 'watered/dumbed down' or impoverished curriculum, which is further removed from students' personal experiences, background knowledge and culture, in turn limits students' academic growth (Luke et al, 2013; Papageorge & Gershenson, 2016; Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968; Torff, 2014).

In the classroom, participation equals learning. However, classrooms are not naturally equitable environments and students perceived as being of 'higher status' are more likely to receive opportunities to speak up or contribute to the group. Quintero (2014) suggests that as educators we can alter these dynamics and change classroom expectations by recognising strengths and assigning competence to students perceived to be of 'lower status'.   Researchers have shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities are calling for substantive engagement and dialogue with schools, asking educators to understand their children's need to code-switch, to affirm a positive cultural identity in the classroom, and to hold positive views of their children (Lewthwaite et al., 2015; Luke et al., 2013). Students focused on the need for caring and positive relationships and were more engaged when their teachers held high expectations and created opportunities for them to participate and contribute in the classroom (Lewthwaite et al., 2015; Nelson & Hay, 2010).   As one participant from the SSLP explains, students don't want the curriculum to be 'dumbed down' and need their teachers to believe in them to build their confidence and self-esteem.

> *'I totally believe that a big part of education is every child should be given the chance to succeed and we shouldn't be dumbing it down. I have seen it time and time again. If you have got that high expectation, they work towards it. I think it is having high expectations …. They don't want it to be dumbed down for them. But some teachers do it to make it easy and it doesn't help their self-esteem at all, it doesn't help their confidence. If you have got those high expectations and they achieve it, then you celebrate it. It's much more beneficial for them. I just love it when you see them succeed and that they knew they could do it and they could do it and just needed to prove it to themselves too.' (Teacher 2018)*

Success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums is an approach where educators assume that every student entering the classroom has the potential to use their strengths to achieve personal goals (Brownlee et al., 2012), and that acknowledges and values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life worlds and knowledges as equal to Western knowledge (Buxton, 2017; Bishop, O' Sullivan & Berryman, 2010, p.47). In the remainder of the paper, we look at how this strength-based approach can be enacted in schools and communities.

How do we teach a strength-based approach?

"The challenge of doing things with people not to them means having to assume Indigenous people have a sense of agency and then actively embracing and engaging that capacity at a local level ..."

(Sarra, quoted in Karvelas, 2018).

To start our discussion of what a strength-based approach looks like in action, we look at what graduates learn through processes and activities in the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program™ (SSLP). By purposeful program design, the ideas of a strength-based approach are signposted from the start, and then workshopped, reflected on and enacted throughout the program.

As we have described, when working in Indigenous education, educators are faced with a monolith of deficit discourse and definitions of outcomes tagged as 'Gap'. The SSLP seeks to turn this around through 'setting circles' which mean empowerment through the co-creation of power – the opposite of deficit thinking. A strength-based approach is the positive individual enactments that see projects completed through buy in rather than forcing individual responses.

In the section that follows, we step through the activities enacted in the SSLP that take participants through a series of activities to look at '*How am I with Self*? *How am I with Others*? and *How are we together*? These are the activities that create buy in and co-create power.

Phase 1: What drives you? What makes you strong?

Creating transformational change requires a mindset shift: new lenses and language that enable the new approach to seed. To create buy in and sustain a strength-based approach, there needs to be individual commitment and acceptance of what we call a '*Responsibility for Change'* (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2020).

The SSLP therefore starts with a focus on transformation in the Personal Sphere of Learning (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017). This is an inward self-reflection exercise, setting the scene for the program logic: that our focus is solely in the Learning Frame, possibly, but not intentionally in the Healing Frame, but not in the Performance Frame. 'Picture activities' involve participants engaging in a self-reflection and creating a design that shows their strengths, and defines and maps who they are.
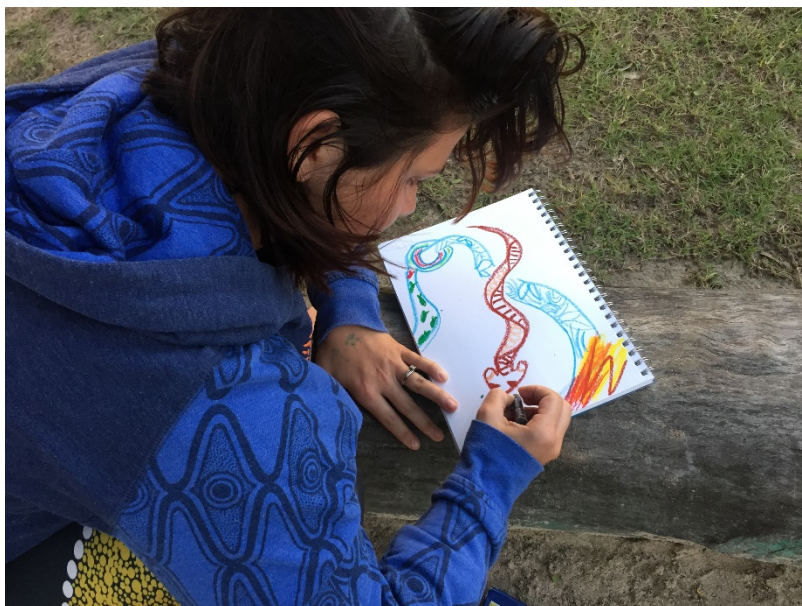
As SSLP facilitator, Michal Purcell, explains, everyone participates.

> To grow a strength-based approach, as an individual we must first take steps which enact strength-based views. If we are expecting to build a high-expectations relationship with others, we first need to have a high-expectations relationship with self. We set circle to explore what is a strength-based approach, using the vision of a Deadly School (based on the Pillars of a Deadly School, Bray, 2016). The powerful part of the blend of facilitation and adult-centered learnings is the way the activities make individuals respond. Within the circle everyone is encouraged to participate.

One participant in the SSLP explains how the processes in the program enable that deep self-reflection and ensure that everyone participates.

> At first, I was a little bit sceptical when I went. 'Look how these people are carrying on here.' They were getting really emotional. I think it was the second day. I was thinking 'what the hell am I going to talk about?' I kept on thinking, 'oh my God, what am I going to do?' The next day I was thinking 'look at all these women crying, they're carrying on here'. It got to me. And then something just clicked. Now I was one of those women that was sitting there crying, telling their story. I think it was really powerful and empowering afterwards when I thought about it. (Koori Education Support Officer, 2019)

Once the individual picture is completed, individuals share and listen to others in small groups. The final step is to co-create an image of strengths that is a collective representation of the whole group.

Michal explains

The process becomes multiple perspectives making a collective. The group pictures can be the images of common threads or symbols from each individual or a completely new picture with new symbols. Either way, each participant has buy-in and can see themselves represented in the group picture. Setting up processes of individual reflection and participation in the circle and creating this 'buy-in' individually means the next phases are enacted through prior learning and experiences.

Phase 2 – How am I with others?

Phase 2 transitions from the individual reflections to weaves with others in groups asking the question 'How are we with others?' This phase focuses on determining the values that individuals live by. Participants are reminded of the values they illustrated on their pictures in Phase 1 and asked to choose one value they feel they need to enact or live by (Gorringe & Spillman, 2008). Participants write this value on a page, and then, in an outward facing exercise, move between individuals within the circle and explain what the value means to them. A clumping activity continues until there are groups of individuals clumped with connected values. This process creates an experiential learning as to the challenge of 'How am I with others?'

Michal explains

Again, all members of the circle are invited to participate. The key point here is that individuals are sharing what their value means to them personally. This is about understanding that you have to rule out any assumptions you may hold about an individual or context. Two people could write 'LOVE' as a value, but their definitions of love may mean two very different things. So, what happens when you're unsure of something? Ask questions. To rule out any assumptions, a conversation needs to occur. This is about asking questions, sharing ideas, sorting responses, co-creating power and then collectively coming to agreement. Through their group dynamic, individuals must come up with agreements and processes on how they will live and enact the value they have chosen collectively. The notion of 'buy in' is reinforced, as individuals shouldn't partake in a particular value unless their commitment, understanding and enactment means something to them. It is up to the individual to yarn further if they need to or move to another value if it better reflects their position.

Phase 3 – How are we together?

This clumped and agreed position on 'values' signals the start of Phase 3. This final phase is the most challenging both individually and as groups, with the core focus of exploring 'How are we together?' This is the process of co-creating a Cultural Action Plan, which is used as a reflection on how organisations enact their espoused values (Gorringe & Spillman, 2008). This symbol of a Coconut Tree was created by great Torres Strait Islander leader and thinker Uncle Steve Mam (Mam, Elu, Trevallion & Reid,1993) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: The Coconut Tree – Uncle Steven Mam.

The coconut tree is important in Torres Strait Islander cultures as a tree of sustenance and sharing. Uncle Steve Mam explains the tree in three parts (Mam, Elu, Trevallion & Reid,1993). The roots are the grounding, the stability, the anchor in time and place which represent the basis of existence for Torres Strait Islanders through their traditions and customs. The trunk is the strengthening, the vital channel connecting the lower and upper parts of the tree, that represents traditions and rituals. The leaves represent the living or the culture. Each group works through the Cultural Action Plan process to create an organisational response or reflection of their value.

Michal explains

The challenge in the CAP process is for groups to define the trunk - what rituals or activities will create or enable the value to grow and become living in the organisation. Individuals gain buy-in through active participation in processes. When completing the process, all groups have a clear reflection and articulation on the types of rituals that are needed to sustain positive, strengths-based cultures in organisations.

The concepts of Perceptual Positioning (Hoag, 2018; Andreas & Andreas, 2009) help to explain how a strength-based approach is enacted. The Perceptual Positions (P1, P2, and P3) look at our personal assumptions, how we interact with others, and the culture of the whole group (Figure 4).
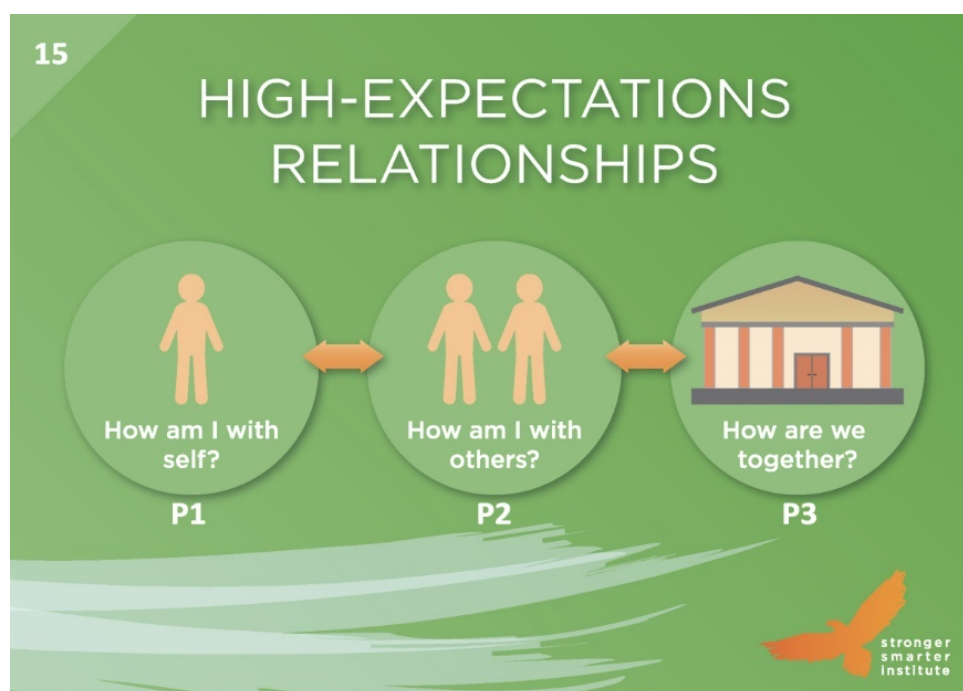

Figure 4: Perceptual positioning in High-Expectations Relationships

- ▶ **P1 –** *How are we with self?* Relationships begin with a level of self-reflection to interrogate our personal assumptions that we might be bringing to the relationship. Are we really building our relationships on a strength-based approach?

- ▶ **P2 –** *How are we with others?* Once we understand our personal assumptions, we can look at how we build relationships with others in a way that takes the time to listen and understand other points of view.

- ▶ **P3** – *How are we together***?** – Our understanding of others then also needs to extend to what is happening for the whole group – understanding how the staff work together and how families and Jarjums are interacting with the school. It also involves recognising that what is happening for the local community outside the school gates and bell times can have strong influences in the school.

This section has described the strategies we use in the SSLP to take participants on a learning journey where they can practice, reflect and enact processes which grow strength-based approaches.   The SSLP and SSA provide educators with the tools to return to their schools and communities and enact a strength-based approach. In the next section, we focus specifically on the enactment of the SSA, linking to the spheres of the Personal, School and Community (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017).

How do we enact a strength-based approach in schools?

In 2017, the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills produced a report on supporting Indigenous students across the world. Their formula for success has three key strategies:

▶ **Responsibility for change at all levels** – jurisdictions, principals, teachers, Indigenous education workers all need to make a commitment to developing their understanding of Indigenous students and seeking opportunities to integrate Indigenous cultures into their classrooms.

▶ **Recognition of complexity** – It is 'hard work' – Indigenous Education is always in a complex environment and there are no easy fixes. A range of strategies may work differently in varied local contexts. It requires persistent effort on many fronts by as many people as possible.

▶ **Building relationships** – It is work that requires strong relationships with students, parents and local communities and this is a responsibility of both school staff and leadership.

The four cornerstones of the SSA, a positive sense of student identity (Sarra, 2011), taking personal responsibility for change (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2020) building high-expectations relationships (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014) and taking a strength-based approach describe what these strategies mean for educators in Australia. Understanding what a strength-based approach means in the classroom and school community provides the underlying basis for enacting this formula for success.

Connecting the Spheres to enact a strength-based approach

A cross-over or flow space between separate moving parts is part of Indigenous Knowledge thought worlds (Stronger Smarter Approach, 2017, p.13). The SSA looks at these separate moving parts as the three spheres of the Personal, the School and the Community. A strength-based approach begins in the personal sphere with a critical reflective examination of personal beliefs, supported in the school and community spheres by local solutions based on high-expectations relationships across the school community. When the spheres of the Personal, School and Community come together as the Stronger Smarter Approach™, this is a connecting space of innovation and creation (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017, p.11).

Figure 5. Stronger Smarter exists where the three spheres of the Personal, School and Community intersect (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017)

The personal sphere

Bahr and Mellor's (2016) discussions about what makes a quality teacher concluded that the difference between a competent teacher and a quality teacher is relationships. This is the same conclusion from researchers across the USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand who describe the principles for a strength-based education as revolving around relationships (e.g. Armstrong et al., 2012; Brownlee et al., 2012; Llewellyn, Boon & Lewthwaite, 2018; Lopez & Louis, 2009; Rubie-Davies, 2008; Wrigley, 2011).

In Australia, educators work in a space that Professor Martin Nakata has described as the Cultural Interface: the space where the two world views of the western and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems come together (Nakata, 2002). This is a contested space, where we all bring assumptions by which we make sense and meaning. However, it is also a space for the co-creation of new ways of approaching relationships. Yunupingu (1994) describes a social theory, Ganma theory, based on the knowledges of the Yolgnu Aboriginal People in the Northern Territory, which explains the linkages of knowledges. For example, in the coastal mangrove channels, the tidal ebb and flow and the mixing of fresh and saltwater create areas of brackish water in complex and dynamic balance. Yunupingu (1994) explains that in the same way that the saltwater and freshwater mix, a balance of Yolgnu life is achieved through the ebb and flow of competing interests. He suggests that the same balance between black and white Australia can be achieved. As Price, Jackson-Barrett, Gower and Herrington (2017) explain, the Cultural Interface should not be thought of as a transitioning point for mainstreaming Aboriginal or Torres Strait students, but rather a space where Indigenous agency fosters change within the institution of education itself to centralise Indigenous Knowledge.

In this Cultural Interface, we need to understand how we, as educators, may represent the gulf between the world of schools and the lived realities of students in their families and communities. We need to actively seek information that reveals strength and resilience and debunks deficit thinking. One SSLP alumni describes how the program highlighted the impact of the Cultural Interface.

> *I'd come from pretty much a white middle class background and it [the SSLP] really opened my eyes into the hidden cultural perceptions that I have and the opinions I hold. (Principal, 2018)*

Resilience

Taking a strength-based approach places a specific lens on supporting student resiliency. The strength-based model flips the thinking from the deficit perspective which positions resilience as a personal trait to be developed, instead viewing resiliency as a fluid, dynamic process that encompasses a positive adaption within the context of significant adversity. In other words, the strength-based approach is not about building resilience in our Jarjums, but about recognising the complexities of the Cultural Interface and the continuities and discontinuities of Indigenous agency (Buxton, 2017 – quoting Nakata, 2002, p.215-216). Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums identify their Indigeneity as a source of strength and a positive aspect of their lives (Nelson & Hay, 2010, p.61). Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums may be resilient in their own communities, but if they are asked to move into a different culture within a school where the strengths that are recognised and valued are different to those developed and prized within their own culture, then their resilience may be lowered (Armstrong et al., 2012; Brownlee et al., 2012).

Research in Australia (Partington, Waugh & Forrest, 2001, p.53) and the USA (Salazar, 2013) has shown how disruptive practices in the classroom, which educators see as an unwillingness from students to engage in learning, can in fact be a result of students choosing to resist practices that they see as excluding their language and culture from their learning. As Salazar (2013) explains, these are boundary maintaining mechanisms to pressure their peers to resist the 'whitestream' because blurring the boundary signals to others a sense of shame in one's heritage, language and culture. Educators, accepting the premise that all behaviour serves a purpose, can alter the context and processes of the classroom to value the cultural perspectives and respond appropriately for the benefit of each Jarjum (Lewthwaite et al., 2015; Partington, Waugh & Forrest, 2001). As Salazar (2013) found, when students developed positive relationships with supportive adults and peers, and those strong relationships were grounded in students' 'cultural funds' of knowledge, this influenced students 'academic resiliency through the construction of a strong academic identity. Embracing and developing cultural

identities is part of the process of delivering quality literacy and numeracy outcomes, *not instead* of it (Sarra, 2012b p.4).

Deficit conversations

To be agents of change and ensure this construction of a positive academic identity that values the culture and knowledge of students, educators need to actively watch for 'deficit conversations' in the staff room. These are the conversations, firmly based in stereotypes and often 'out-of-awareness' that express negativity about or pass judgement on a group of students rather than understanding each student as an individual. This can cause educators to form opinions of a student before they have had a chance to get to know that student.

One SSLP alumni explains

> *People often have that fixed mindset of, "Oh. They can't do anything." Well, you know, they can - given the opportunities. Just got to have that—given the opportunities and support, I think kids can do—they can actually get through a whole lot of adversity that some adults can't get through. (Behaviour Engagement program coordinator, 2019)*

Deficit conversations may come from being frustrated about progress in the classroom, needing to debrief or release emotions after a difficult day, or just trying to understand a student's situation. They may simply provide a sense of safety for educators around their personal lack of knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums. However, externalizing the problem in this way disempowers educators by taking away the responsibility from themselves rather than looking at how they can

change and improve strategies to support students (Bishop, O'Sullivan & Berryman, 2010; McKinley, 2017). Essentially this justifies and reinforces any 'out of awareness' low expectations. This brings negativity to the staff room, impacts on the culture of the school and sends powerful messages to students when educators' low expectations clearly impact on students' own feelings of self-efficacy or their own judgments of their capabilities (Hanover Research, 2012).

One SSLP alumni reflects how this deficit thinking can impact on teaching.

> *I can remember we won a state showcase award and someone in there said 'It's not like kids in your school are ever going to turn up in BMWs' and my position was, well, they might not now mate, but they will one day, like not three generations away, it's possible right now. (Principal, 2018)*

As Salazar (2013) suggests, in the personal sphere, educators need to become 'humanizing pedagogical agents' by developing a critical self-consciousness of their deficit notions of their students. As educators develop consciousness of their own role in upholding inequitable structures, they come to act as *'oppositional intellectuals who engage critically with authority to develop pedagogical principles that link learning, social responsibility and political agency'*. This humanizing pedagogy results from an individual and collective process of critical consciousness provoked through dialogue (Salazar, 2013). One way to start this dialogue is for staff to work together to name and reject deficit conversations within the school.

A different lens

While we have described studies showing that deficit thinking is still occurring in Australian schools, this is changing. Luke et al.'s (2013) longitudinal study found that the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities had been successful in reorienting the climate and ethos of many schools to reflect the presences of Indigenous cultures, communities and identities, constituting progress on what they describe as the 'first wave of reform' (p. 400). The Stronger Smarter Institute's ongoing research (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2018) shows that participants in the SSLP are continuing to change to agentic thinking where they value the whole Jarjum, including family and community, and the skills and knowledge they bring to the learning environment.

The Indigenous Children Growing Up Strong report (Walter, Martin & Bodkin-Andrews, 2017), based on data from the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children and completed by a group of Aboriginal researchers, explores the cultural, social, educational and family dynamics of the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums. They describe the subtle differences to the normalized Euro-Australian parameters for family structures, arrangements and practices, and the different views on the values that students should

learn at home. A significant conclusion is the importance of relationships between teachers, students and parents, and the fact that this relationship must move beyond a homogeneous and Eurocentric understanding of what constitutes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and their families.

Priest et al. (2008, p. 126) help to explain these differences through four key principles identified by senior Anangu and Yapa women that underpin the 'growing up' of strong Jarjums in remote Central Australia (Figure 6). These principles give Jarjums a place in the world where they learn the importance of relationships and their responsibilities to everything in their environment. They are taught to help and encourage one another, to keep each other safe and to work together' (Priest, 2008, p.129). The knowledge is imparted through traditional practices including storytelling.

1) **Tjukurpa** (in Luritja and Pitjantjatjara) Jukurrpa (in Warlpiri): The Dreaming, the Law

2) **Waltja** (in Luritja) Walytja (in Pitjantjatjara) Walartja (in Warlpiri): Family, extended family, all family

3) **Ngura** (in Luritja and Pitjantjatjara) Ngurrara (in Warlpiri): The home, the land, the country, this place

4) **Kanyini** (in Luritja and Pitjantjatjara) Mardarni (in Warlpiri): Holding everything, keeping everything together, Jukurrpa, Ngurrara and Walartja.'

Figure 6. Four key principles to underpin growing up strong

Understanding students and their complex relationship to and responsibilities for the system that underpins their lives is a starting point for identifying their strengths and how the education system might change to acknowledge, celebrate and build on these strengths. For educators, adopting an approach that acknowledges and values the strengths students, their families and their communities can bring to the learning environment steers a new course for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums. As our young ones are saying:

'When you think of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander kid, or in fact, any kid, imagine what's possible. Don't define us through the lens of disadvantage or label us as limited. Test us. Expect the best of us. Expect the unexpected. Expect us to continue carrying the custodianship of imagination, entrepreneurial spirit and genius. Expect us to be complex. And then **let us spread our wings and soar higher than ever before***' (The Imagination Declaration of the Youth Forum read at Garma 2019). (NITV, 2019)*

The School sphere

Clearly then, in our role as educators, we need to understand the complexities of the Cultural Interface to help smooth the contradictions or tensions between the various aspects of 'self' and bridge the gulf between the world of schools and lived realities for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums. We can only do this if we know more about our Jarjums through building strong relationships.

Trusting and caring relationships

The Stronger Smarter Institute describes high-expectations relationships, whether with a student, a colleague or a parent, as beginning by recognising the strengths and beliefs of the other person in the relationship (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014; Sarra et al., 2018).   In a high-expectations relationship, the two critical elements provide a balance of 'firm and fair', or critically reflective relating and equitable power relating.   The key word here is relating. This is an ongoing process, which is achieved by first building a positive and supportive relationship (the 'fair' aspect). This is the equitable power relating aspects of trust, love, care, and feeling safe, 'emotional bank account' that need to be in place across the whole school before it is possible to have the robust conversations needed to build a challenging, high expectations environment.

Challenging – high-expectations relationships

Gonski et al. (2018) emphasise the need for an education system that sets higher expectations for students, educators and schools, and maintains a focus on innovation and improvement. In the school sphere, the SSA focuses on the P3 of perceptual positioning to support a whole of school approach of working together to create a new culture for the school where everyone can commit to the school's values and beliefs. This is co-operative developmental work that wholeheartedly welcomes community into the process, so that everyone has a shared understanding of high expectations.

This places educators in a position where they take responsibility for enacting those expectations and become 'high-expectations-teachers'. This involves person-centred relationships with differentiated teaching approaches that continually set and share appropriate personal goals, and monitor, assess and adjust the learning for all Jarjums (Hanover Research, 2012; Rubie-Davies, 2008). Such differentiated teaching places responsibility on educators to know where each student begins and where they are on their learning journey, and to use data to help students identify their strengths and discuss progress on goals (Armstrong et al., 2012; Rubie-Davies, 2008; Wrigley, 2011).

As Tomlinson (2016 p.7) explains, this means rejecting the subconscious beliefs from years of schooling "that teaching is about telling, learning is absorbing, management is about control, some kids are capable and some or not, fair is treating everyone alike, curriculum is largely about coverage of information, learning is repetition, assessment is for the purpose of judgement". Educators work from a different set of beliefs, that rethink the learning environment, teaching and learning practices, the curriculum, the assessment, classroom leadership and the management of routines. The guiding beacon should be 'what is best for each student?'

▶ Get to know students on a personal level and find ways to understand students home experiences. This might include understanding how students are taught at home, what language they speak at home, how questioning is used in the home and community.

▶ Understand how values may differ in terms of how much autonomy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums are given, how they choose to seek help, how time is perceived, how shared ownership is considered, what motivates Jarjums in their school work.

▶ Recognise the protective factors that contribute to resilience – shared activities, extended family support, strong cultural identity, positive self-identity.

▶ Listen to students interests, needs and concerns. Model kindness, patience and respect and create a support network for students.

▶ Recognise how students learn, how they approach new tasks and how they respond to questions.

▶ Recognise the skills and expertise that exist in the community. Build on the values and contributions of parents and look to the voices of the community as sources of expertise.

Figure 7. A strength-based approach towards knowing students and how they learn. Based on research in Australia (e.g. Lopez and Louis, 2009; Llewellyn, Boon & Lewthwaite, 2018; Armstrong et al., 2012) and across the world (Salazar, 2013; Brunson Day, 2013).

One SSLP alumni explains this as follows.

The big message for me is this notion that we all come with a story. Even though we're chucked together in the classroom, that story means that we're about to embark on a journey and write a different starting place to somebody else. But one of the things after Stronger Smarter - I actually I pictured it as all these people at a starting line, and some are even facing in the wrong direction and you're trying to get the whole group to go on this journey with you towards some sort of a target place. we're starting at different points, which means we're either going to have to make extra effort or be given extra support. (Curriculum advisor, 2019)

Classroom pedagogies

In the classroom, a different set of beliefs based on a strength-based approach will lead to a different pedagogical approach where activities are centred on students' interests and connected to the real lives and community-based knowledge of the learner (Wrigley, 2011; Rubie-Davies, 2008). This means "*Culturally Responsive Pedagogies*" (CRPs) which combine Indigenous cultural knowledges and engagement together with whole-school pedagogy programs (Armour, Warren & Miller, 2016; Lewthwaite et al., 2015; Luke et al., 2013). The underlying premise of a CRP is that the learning experiences provided for Jarjums should reflect, validate and promote their culture and language, and encourage student learning from their prior knowledge and Indigenous worldview and where one culture does not become subservient.

A study by a team of SciTech presenters (Hackling, Byrne, Gower & Anderson, 2015) to provide enriched activities for students in remote and rural schools found that CRPs that connected science activities to students' experiences and local context could improve engagement and learning. These pedagogical practices involved first building the relationship and ensuring student agency and ownership of the activities in the classroom. The pedagogical framework involved hands-on activities, concise and multimodal instructions, open questions and low-key responses for behaviour management.

In New Zealand, Glynn, Cowie, Otrel-Cass & Macfarlane (2010, p.119) describe two traditional Maori pedagogical principles, *ako* and *whakawhanaungatanga,* which illustrate recognition of the cultural strength of students and the importance of culturally-responsive pedagogies.

▶ **Ako** is characterized by collaboration for learning where the roles of teacher and learner can be fluid and interchangeable. This is an integrated process of teaching and learning, embedded in community life, that is based in 'culturally validated relationships' with clear two-way responsibilities of support and care.

▶ **Whakawhanaungatanga** is concerned with the construction of relationships: between the people in the classroom, and between the cultural knowledge the students bring and the domain knowledge of the curriculum. This has similarities with Nakata's (2002) work on the Cultural Interface in relation to the meeting of the bodies of knowledge.

The community sphere

The most effective CRPs will occur when there is a recognition of the value of 'two-way learning' and that Indigenous epistemologies must be included in education (Llewellyn, Boon & Lewthwaite, 2018; Armour, Warren & Miller, 2016). This, in turn, requires a school model that links with the local community, supporting parents to play an active role (OECD, 2017; Alton-Lee, 2003). Building the confidence of parents and community is a process of active listening to ensure that Elders and all community members have a voice in the curriculum and there is a process of dialogue and collaboration (Lewellyn et al., 2018; Tesoriero, Boyle, & Enright, 2010). As Professor Chris Sarra (2012a) has told Australia, we need a commitment of doing things 'with' Indigenous people, not 'to' them.

Describing the Stronger Smarter Metastrategy™ of 'Acknowledging and Embracing Aboriginal leadership in schools and communities, Sarra (2012b, p.10) explains how working with leadership in the local community created a series of school dynamics that could deliver exceptional returns. Lowe's (2017) research in four remote Australian communities shows that for genuine and authentic relationships between teachers and community it is essential for teachers to move beyond a tokenistic acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presences in the school. Teachers who were new to the area often had limited understanding of the unique standpoints of each community and the centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to community well-being, and the impact of these on the relationships of the community with the school. The result was a gulf between the beliefs

that teachers held about how the community viewed schooling, and the actual beliefs the community held about schooling.

Davis and Woods (2019) show how these gulfs in understanding can be removed, and how sustainable practices for long-term relationships between a school and the local community are possible when based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and the recognition that school leadership needed to be accountable. They describe how, in an urban school, this was achieved through foregrounding Indigenous perspectives and supported by the protocols and toolkit for brokering relationships based on respect and reciprocity.

Working in partnerships with Aboriginal teacher aides/co-teachers

In the classroom, part of two-way learning is an equal partnership between teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher aides. This is a partnership where teachers reconsider their role as the 'controller' of the classroom, involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher aides in the pedagogical sides of teaching, and work together on classroom planning and teaching and learning strategies (Armour, Warren & Miller, 2016; Sarra, 2012b). Even the choice of descriptors of roles can be important.

> *We don't have teachers' aides in our schools. We have co-teachers. (Remote Teacher Linguist, 2019)*

When a teacher embraces the knowledge and strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander co-teachers in a positive and respectful way and provides the space to allow the synergy between Indigenous and Western knowledge to occur, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students see the teacher differently. The students are more likely to work, and the teacher then starts to see the students more positively (Sarra, 2012b). This is particularly important in remote schools where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander co-teachers can provide continuity and sustainability in situations of high teacher turnover (Price et al., 2017). One Koori Education Support Officer and SSLP alumni describes how she works together with the teacher in the classroom. She has particular responsibility for an activity where students learn about the local culture.

> *The students do a 'dig', so they go down different layers and they find different things. The last layer is the Koori layer. That's when I go over. Any questions the children have I can answer, and I support her [the teacher] and she supports me too as well. We work well together. It's good to find those kinds of people that are happy doing that as well as sharing of information. I give her ideas too as well. It's that working together. (Koori Education Support Officer, 2019)*

While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander co-teachers play an important role as a bridge between the school and the community and helping the teacher understand the complexity of students in the classroom, Price et al. (2017) point out that this should not be the sole responsibility of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander co-teacher, and that Principals and teachers also need to take on this responsibility of engaging with the community.

One SSLP alumni describes how the school has embraced working together with everyone's strengths.

> *We were all a real team. And when I say all of us, I mean everyone, Indigenous staff as well, we all were as important as each other. We worked with each other's strengths and acknowledged that someone's strengths, doesn't matter what their job title might be, are just as valuable or more valuable than you who might be on a higher pay scale. (Teacher, 2019)*

Conclusion

The Stronger Smarter approach doesn't leave anybody at the margins,
it's about taking everybody with us on the journey."

(Chris Sarra in Duggan, 2018).

In this paper, we have shown why a strength-based approach in schools is a key underpinning of the Stronger Smarter Approach™, and how activities in the SSLP show participants how to build a strength-based culture in their schools and broader communities. Enacting a strength-based approach and doing things 'with people' not 'to people', begins by understanding the impact of our own out-of-awareness assumptions or lack of knowledge on our actions and behaviours. To truly recognise the strengths of others requires deep listening to learn more about all Jarjums and their families, their histories, and their desires for education. When we can tap into why others think the way they do, we begin to understand what the Cultural Interface means for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums and how we can work within it to provide better experiences for our Jarjums.

This then provides spaces for schools to have conversations about their underlying values using the strategies of high-expectations relationships to hold challenging conversations about high expectations.   When high expectations get confused with standards, it is easy to externalize the blame and allow deficit thinking to disempower us. Understanding high expectations as an expectation that everyone will learn something every day removes the deficit thinking and brings back the agency of the educator, putting us all in a place where we take responsibility for change.

Once we are in a position where we believe we can make a difference, CRPs which build on students' knowledge and skills and connect the curriculum to their daily lives, will build student engagement, and a positive sense of student identity. Using high-expectations relationships for purposeful engagement that focuses on building trust and building respectful and genuine partnerships with the local community can then ensure our CRPs are built on local knowledge and expertise. With this shift in thinking, pointing the compass in a different direction, and bringing these elements of the Stronger Smarter Approach™ together, schools are then in a position to build effective learning environments for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Jarjums

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Discussion questions

One purpose in releasing the paper is to promote discussion among the Stronger Smarter alumni.   Here are some suggested questions for discussion with your colleagues.

A strength-based approach with students

▶ What do our visible artefacts, our mottos say about our school's underlying values? Do we have deficit language in our school planning documents?

▶ Is there more you can do to learn more about your students and provide learning opportunities in the classroom that build on students' strengths and prior knowledge, and to connect the curriculum to their home lives?

▶ Ask yourself the questions that Sarra (2012b) poses

   o What am I doing that is contributing to underachievement or absenteeism?

   o Would I accept these outcomes for my own children?

   o What would I want done if this was my child?

A strength-based approach with families and the community

▶ Do you have High-Expectations Relationships with families and the local community? If not, what more can you do to help build these relationships?

▶ Do the school's expectations for students match those of the community?

Deficit conversations

▶ Have you heard deficit conversations? Are you involved? Do you stay silent or do you challenge the conversation?

▶ How do you react when you hear deficit conversations? How do they make you feel?

▶ What is the potential impact if you are going straight into a classroom with these students immediately after hearing deficit conversations in the classroom?

▶ Does your school need to start changing the patterns of conversations in the staff room? How can you go about this?