



A mindset change:

How the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program supports educators to enact high expectations in Indigenous education.

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Changing mindsets: The Stronger Smarter Leadership Program

Introduction

In response to a need for a comprehensive template for Indigenous school reform (Luke et al., 2013), the Stronger Smarter Institute has developed a strength-based framework, philosophy and pedagogy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education known as the Stronger Smarter Approach™ (SSA) (Sarra, 2011; Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017). The premise of the SSA is that a quality learning environment and engaged classroom will allow educators to focus on learning rather than behaviour management and defensive teaching strategies. Students will be engaged in learning when the strengths they bring to the classroom are valued and the curriculum is connected to their lives (Burgess, Tennent, Vass, Guenther, Lowe, & Moodie, 2019). In other words, the strategies that will make a difference are quality teaching, responsiveness to the needs of local contexts and individual communities and culturally responsive pedagogies.

This approach places the educator in a position of agency, and the strategies

begin with teachers and school leaders who have true high expectations. These are educators who have examined their own assumptions and rejected the deficit theorising that is perpetuated by the Australian education system and are able to build High-Expectations Relationships with their students, their parents and local communities (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014; Sarra, Spillman, Jackson, Davis & Bray, 2018).

Recognising and rejecting deficit thinking is not an easy task when it is engrained in the underlying culture and may often be out-of-awareness. The Institute's Stronger Smarter Leadership Program™ (SSLP) provides this first step to implementing the SSA. This report focuses on the mechanisms that occur through this PD, which takes educators on a journey of self-reflection and examination of core beliefs, building agency and confidence in leadership skills, driving a facilitative leadership style, and taking a personal responsibility for change.

Previous evaluations of the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program

Two external evaluations of the SSLP have shown that the program has a positive effect on attitudes and beliefs and resulting activities in the classroom. An early evaluation in 2009, three years after the commencement of the SSLP, concluded that program had made a major contribution to improving a number of important aspects of the educational environment in participating schools, and to the overall Indigenous education agenda. This had included positive changes to the attitudes and beliefs of school leaders and teachers 'leading to a marked improvement in the working environment for Indigenous staff and for students' (Clear Horizon, 2009, p. 60).

A 2017 report by the University of Canberra, based on five SSLPs run in the Canberra area, described the high satisfaction ratings from participants (greater than 6.5 on a 7-point scale) as 'nothing short of exceptional' (University of Canberra, 2017). They noted that the learning within the program occurred in a learning network community that was developed in a highly supportive context during the program. The program itself epitomised quality teacher professional development that was highly relevant to participants and exemplified a quality learning environment. The report suggested that the positive changes and strategies would continue beyond the life of the project, and the outcomes would 'ripple outwards' as teachers and principals shared knowledge and

strategies to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students' (University of Canberra, 2017, p.3).

A 2013 evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities was a wider study of the Learning Communities project which provided recommendations for three waves of school reform involving a combination of emphasis on Indigenous cultural knowledges and engagement together with coherent whole-school pedagogy programs (Luke et al., 2013, p.16 Abridged version). This recommendation formed the basis for the development of the SSA framework.

The First Wave of reform sets the ground for an increased focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in the school. This involves challenging deficit thinking and directing teachers' attention towards expanding their knowledge of and engagement with Indigenous peoples and communities. At the school level this involves changing the climate and ethos of the school to reflect the presence of Indigenous cultures and identities, including the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

The Second Wave of reform, closing aligned to the Stronger Smarter Metastrategies, involves schools prioritising different agendas such as high expectations and greater community engagement including recognising and valuing Indigenous leadership (Sarra, 2012).

The Third Wave of reform is to translate high expectations promotion into systematic changes in classroom pedagogy that might 'close the gap' on Indigenous student achievement. This involves culturally-responsive pedagogies and curriculum connected to students' backgrounds and local culture, that consider the specific cultural, linguistic and educational needs of each community (Harrison, Tennent, Vass, Guenther, Lowe & Moodie, 2019; Burgess et al., 2019).

Luke et al. (2013, p.372) reported that the SSLP and the SSLC together were successful in terms of the first two waves of reform, and that the SSLP, with the emphasis on personal growth and transformation of beliefs around Indigeneity, difference and culture, resulted in an increase in everyday engagement with and knowledge of Indigenous communities and cultures.

There is clear evidence that together, the SSLP and the Stronger Smarter Approach (SSA) are addressing the first two waves of reform. The SSLP provides the tools to challenge deficit thinking and build strong relationships with students and communities and the SSA provides the strategies for a school culture that embraces Indigenous leadership and builds strong connections with the community. Together this provides the foundations for quality, culturally-responsive learning environments

This report builds on these previous evaluations to provide an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms occurring through the SSLP around transformation of beliefs and how this is impacting on school leadership and school climate.



Rationale

Research on the links between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' self-identity and academic outcomes have shown that there is no direct association between Indigenous status and academic achievement, but that this association operates via implicit beliefs (Tarbetsky, Collie & Martin, 2016). In other words, while these students may have a strong positive self-identity as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, they are not seeing themselves as learners in the classroom (Bodkin-Andrews, O'Rourke & Craven, 2010; Moodie, Maxwell & Rudolph, 2019; Purdie, 2003; Sarra, 2011). Internationally, researchers in Mexico and New Zealand have shown how this self-stereotyping is a way of preserving a positive sense of cultural identity, with students resisting the 'whitestream' when their education system excludes their native language and culture (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Salazar, 2013).

If this self-stereotyping as poor performing students is a mechanism contributing to the achievement gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, then it might be expected that interventions that aim to adjust students' implicit beliefs and enhance their self-concept as learners will ultimately enhance academic outcomes. Enhancing student self-concept begins by ensuring that the school and the classroom are places where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students want to be and recognise themselves as learners, and where their

families believe they will achieve a relevant and quality education. This is a learning environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and knowledges are recognised as strengths and a curriculum that places local culture, knowledge and languages at the forefront (Bodkin-Andrews, O'Rourke & Craven, 2010; Harrison et al., 2019; Purdie, 2003). Success in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education needs to be defined as more than NAPLAN or attendance and needs to include a deep sense of Indigenous identity and connectedness to each other, place, school and the broader community (Lowe, quoted in Smith, 2018).

Research in Australia has shown that there continues to be a prevalence of deficit thinking in Australian schools, and that teacher beliefs and racial discrimination are impacting on the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the classroom (Bodkin-Andrews, Seaton, Nelson, Craven, & Yeung, 2010; Luke et al., 2013; Lowe, quoted in Smith, 2018; Moodie, Maxwell & Rudolph, 2019). Even if this thinking is out-of-awareness, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading teachers to promote low expectations, reinforcing students' self-belief in their inability to achieve (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Tarbetsky et al., 2016; Torff, 2014).

The Stronger Smarter Leadership Program

Bahr's (2016) study of quality teaching concluded that the difference between a competent teacher and a quality teacher is relationships. This is particularly true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a strong oral tradition where learning is passed on to young people from their Elders, parents and the wider community (Krakouer, 2016). A classroom environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait students have a positive sense of identity as learners will only occur when all staff in the school are aligned in holding true high expectations, building strong relationships and taking personal responsibility for change (Lynch & Smith, 2016; Stronger Smarter Institute, 2019).

Any intervention for improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes therefore needs to start by bringing the internalised beliefs about students and out-of-awareness assumptions based on Australia's history of a Western education system into awareness to ensure strong relationships and high expectations (Lowe, 2017). Several researchers have commented that these tacit and out-of-awareness beliefs can be hard to change and that quality PD is needed to address core beliefs, self-awareness, anti-racism and deficit thinking (Gonski et al, 2018; Lowe, 2017; Torff, 2014; Vass, 2019).

Any PD aimed at understanding assumptions and changing beliefs requires a means by which teachers can critically reflect on their own standpoint and, if necessary, reposition themselves from the deficit discourses that limit change. It then needs to empower teachers to feel they have the efficacy to be a part of the

change (Buxton, 2017; Bishop, O'Sullivan & Berryman, 2010, p.68; Torff, 2014).

The Institute's Stronger Smarter Leadership Program (SSLP), use Indigenous ways of Knowing, Being and Doing (Martin, 2008) to provide educators with a safe space where they can reflect on their own assumptions and biases. Participants are taken through a range of activities to unpack personal assumptions, This is supplemented by the tools of facilitative leadership and High-Expectations Relationships to support educators in processes of deep listening to discover and value the strengths of their students and communities, building confidence to implement high expectations and create learning environments that focus on innovation and support differentiated learning. This is a program that participants have described the program as 'unique'.

Dr Chris Sarra (quoted in Duggan, 2018) describes how the SSLP allows educators to question their beliefs and out-of-awareness assumptions on a deeply personal level.

"...to understand their own kind of perspectives and their own kind of assumptions, and work out as educators if their own actions, beliefs and behaviours are colluding with that negative stereotype or stereotypical view (of Indigenous students). So it's about flushing out those teachers who are just kind of content with teaching to the middle and leaving too many kids at the margins; the Stronger Smarter approach doesn't leave anybody at the margins, it's about taking everybody with us on the journey."

The interviews

This report uses information from an analysis of interviews with 50 participants from the SSLP, together with information from SSLP program evaluations and a 2018 alumni surveys. The purpose of the interviews was to find out more about how participants implement the SSA in their schools. Participation in the project was therefore by invitation to SSLP alumni who had been implementing the SSA. In choosing participants, an emphasis was placed firstly on school leadership in order to gain an understanding of a whole school approach, and secondly on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals, teachers and support staff. Participants had undertaken the SSLP between 12 years and 6 months prior to the interview. A total of 30% of the interviewees were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and 36% of the interviewees were male. Both of these percentages are approximately representative of the make-up of SSLP participants. Interviewees included

- 29 Principals and Assistant Principals)
- 9 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders support staff (Aboriginal Education Workers, School Learning Support Officer, Teacher Aides, Community Education

Counsellors and 1 Community Elder)

- 10 teachers.
- 2 non-Indigenous school support staff

The interviews were conducted by four different interviewers. Interviews used a semi-structured format with questions based around what particularly resonated with participants from the SSLP and what they then took back to their schools and implemented. Questions were open and participants were able to take the interview in the direction they chose.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. The coding process was undertaken over two stages. Firstly, sections of the full interview were coded under pre-defined areas around the SSA, noting that input from earlier interviews and discussions with alumni had helped to define the SSA in the first place.

Following this initial coding, the sections of interviews relating to how participants had changed their thinking or their actions after the SSLP were imported into Airtable software which was set up to analyse themes. At this level, the analysis was not based on pre-defined themes and the themes were allowed to emerge as they came through from the interviews.

The results

The analysis below provides an in-depth understanding of what participants take away from the SSLP, and how they enact this in their classrooms and schools. A key finding from the interviews was the positivity of participants – that everyone interviewed held a positive view of the future. Participants talked about how they had examined and rejected previous deficit views and recognised their own role in enacting change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia, recognising what they could contribute within their own sphere of influence, whether a classroom, a school, or a region. Principals talked about the need to both change their own practice and ensure that their influence was school-wide. While there was a recognition that this type of school reform is hard work and takes time, and it is sometimes difficult to keep the momentum going, this was never used an excuse for not stepping up and making a difference.

Even though participants were not specifically asked about the quality of the SSLP, participants chose to comment on this, often in response to a final question of ‘is there anything else you’d like to add?’ Several participants commented that ‘every teacher should do it.’ One participant who had moved into a Director role, described how important she considered the program and was making sure the program was available to every

Principal within her area. Comments included

For me as a teacher it was one of the most amazing things I have ever done.

It's probably the best course I have ever done through the department of education. it was amazing. I can't rate it highly enough I wish every single teacher would do it

The only professional learning course I've been to, and that I still use in my everyday life, for my family, for my work.

Participants described the program as real and personal, thought-provoking and practical, providing an understanding of history and opening eyes, providing confidence and building strong connections with other people. Participants noted that everyone’s experience of the program is different, and this was also clear from the range of topics talked about in the interviews. This is to be expected in a program that is involved around deep self-reflection and finding solutions for local contexts.

From in-program evaluations

The SSLP involves a key activity, a role play shown as a video, aimed at opening eyes to deficit thinking. In order to establish the impact of this particular activity, we examined the evaluations that participants are asked to write on a daily basis, with

the option to comment on each activity if they wish to do so.

The role play activity is deliberately run late on the afternoon of Day 2 of the program with no check-out or debrief afterwards leaving participants to reflect on the activity overnight on their own. A full discussion and debrief is held the next morning. The role play shows a behavioural management situation in the classroom, having first shown the background situation for both the teacher and the student which might have impacted on how they reacted in a confronting situation.

This quote, which comes from a 2019 interview not included in this research, provides an explanation of how this process works to open up the thinking of participants.

“So, I think it was the second day and we were sent home—we didn’t have a checkout but they challenged our way of thinking on something and I really wanted to bring closure to what we had been discussing. We came back the next day and talked it through. It’s part of the way in which we were challenged to see what it would be like if we didn’t have this structure in place of the check out and what it would be like if you were left thinking like this and you’re left to stew on it on your own. The value of the relationships coming back and being able to speak openly and being able to just be clear and free from everything else that goes on in your day to day life and focus on not only myself, but the others who were there as well. It was so powerful in a way that it’s challenged the way that I would

run meetings, the way that I assist and listen to staff, the way I teach my students

We examined 2018 program evaluations to look at the comments made about the Day 2 role play and Day 3 debrief. This analysis is based on 276 participants who had made comments on this activity in their evaluations (approximately 86% of all participants in the programs considered). There were three main groups of themes from the comments.

- Firstly, the activities had made participants think, with 62% making some form of comment about the activities being thought-provoking, relevant, practical and useful.
- 46% of participants described what the activities had made them think about, commenting on understanding different contexts and perspectives, understanding assumptions, rejecting deficit discourses and taking strength-based approaches.
- The third main theme was around the importance of the long debrief the next morning, with 29% of participants commenting specifically on this process and its role in exploring deeper, bringing assumptions to the surface, and understanding how different people in the group were seeing things differently and holding different assumptions.

Thought-provoking

Participants described the activities as confronting or challenging. However, these participants also described that, as a result, they were reflecting on assumptions and different perspectives. Many participants found the whole process

powerful. For some, it had clearly triggered deep thinking. Several participants said the activity had ‘opened their eyes’ and in some cases their comments described immediate ‘light-bulb’ moments. In a few cases this was a very immediate reaction to recognising themselves as the teacher in the role play and realising they had acted in the past without understanding the full context, with one participant describing the difficulties of seeing this reflection of yourself.

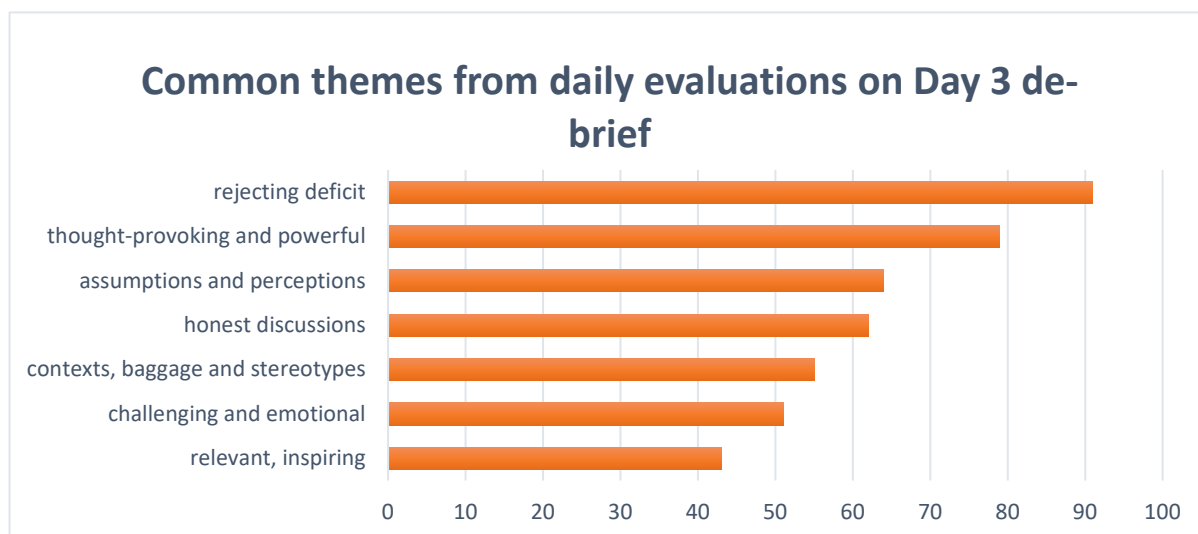
A few participants described that they had found the activities emotional, either personally or reacting to the emotions of others. One participant who described a roller-coaster of emotions during the session said this was based around a fear of realising what they hadn’t done in the past and what they now needed to do. Another described how the session was bringing threads together, shifting thinking and allowing them to ‘grow.’ For one or two participants, the emotion had come from recognising themselves in the role of the student in the past.

For others, their comments suggested that they were still processing and reflecting. For instance, a few participants described the activities as ‘interesting’ without giving any further detail, which might suggest that they were still unpacking and thinking about the ideas and the reactions of others.

Assumptions, deficit conversations and seeing strengths

The situation in the role play is extreme, and although one participant commented on being disappointed at teachers being perceived in this negative way, there was a general recognition from participants that the challenges facing the student in the role play were still very relevant, and that the type of situation depicted did still happen in schools. Participants generally appreciated the purpose of the activities, describing them as important, relevant, necessary, relatable, inspiring, thought-provoking, alarming, and shameful.

The role play had clearly highlighted for participants the different contexts and ‘baggage’ that both students and staff may bring to school, how inaccurate and



damaging assumptions can be, and the need to 'put yourself in other people's shoes'. Many described powerful learnings about assumptions and understanding different perspectives. A couple of participants noted how they had been shocked or challenged when they recognised that they had been making assumptions, and that changing this thinking and flipping assumptions into strengths was a big task.

Participants found the discussions around deficit conversations and the activities to draw on the strengths and the positives of the characters in the role play as useful activities. The whole activity had clearly made participants think about how they reacted in conversations and also how others reacted and their personal role in being more active in ensuring there wasn't negative talk in the school. One participant described how pulling apart the scenario in so much detail highlighted how much was often overlooked in understanding the context that students bring to the classroom.

Although some participants felt that, for them, this was not necessarily new learning, all described this as an important or 'stark' reminder. Even for these participants, this had led to reflecting on whether they were doing the best for their students and how they could better connect with students. A few talked about how the sessions provided practical ideas about how to handle future situations.

The debrief

The deliberate strategy of leaving participants to think overnight about the role play on their own was clearly effective. There was a strong theme in the comments about the difficulty of not being able to debrief immediately after the video and the importance of the debrief the next day. Everyone who described feeling uneasy or unsettled initially reported that they felt lighter or relieved after the debrief. A couple of participants recognised how this made them reflect deeply overnight with a deeper inner dialogue that allowed them to see both sides of the story and reflect on how to rephrase conversations and expectations for students.

The debrief itself and the associated activities clearly had a number of aspects that made them successful. Firstly, having a significant time to discuss and reflect was clearly important. Secondly the strength of the group in each program was clear, which allowed open and honest



discussions in a safe place. One participant described how they liked the fact that they had been challenged by the group to consider other possibilities after they had stereotyped the teacher in the role play. Several participants commented on the importance of walk talk activities where they could first unpack with one other person rather than having to talk in the whole group situation when they were uncertain about their reactions.

Finally, it was important that the debrief was a positive process that looked at the strengths that everyone brought to the situation. This was described as making the process powerful and effective and brought 'buy-in.' In particular a couple of participants noted that the time needed to unpack and discover the positives in the scenes highlighted the need to look beyond the surface, and how understanding the positives could make you see a situation in a different light.

There was some feeling that the lengthy debrief was itself 'eye-opening' to understand the different views that different educators were bringing to the discussion. Some participants, who either refrained from talking about their personal views or described the activities as affirming what they were already doing, commented that the discussions gave an

increased understanding that not everyone was in the same position and greater recognition of how and why other teachers might react differently. One person who said they hadn't really extended their own understanding said they saw 'many lights go on in the group.'

Summary

It was clear from the evaluations that the activities were extremely effective, but that different participants reacted in different ways. For some it was an immediate and personal learning and for others it may have involved later reflection and unpacking. The group discussions meant that those who felt they weren't learning anything new themselves from the role play activities, were still learning more about how others might perceive the situation

The connections and the feeling of a safe space in the group was essential for honest and challenging discussions, and the depth of learning would not have been achieved without this. Being able to have these conversations had allowed participants to gain a greater need to understand assumptions, reject deficit thinking and build relationships in the classroom and school community.

A journey of self-reflection

As described in the previous section, the content of the SSLP intentionally takes participants out of their comfort zones. Programs typically involve a group of participants who do not know each other when they start the course and are expected to interact with each to unpack personal reactions to this confronting material.

Any professional development program that aims to change the way educators think about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education will fail if it simply presents information. As Vass (2019) describes, this type of professional development 'typically entails processes that include discomfort, perhaps confronting what is unknown and/or provocative, followed by integrating and reconciling the newly encountered knowledges and skills through experience and action.'

The SSLP uses Indigenous ways of Knowing, Being and Doing to deliberately spend time setting up a space of safety where program participants can engage in a deep self-reflection and hold the challenging conversations that are necessary to confront the unknown. As the University of Canberra (2017) report described, this sets up a strong and collaborative learning community within each program. The strength of this learning environment is shown by the many groups reporting that they keep in touch with each other after the program has finished. As one participant described,

this creates a learning environment that is very different to most other PDs.

My initial impression when we walked into the venue ... having been to countless professional learning activities over the 30 years I've been in education where you sit at a table and there might be butcher's paper to write on or there's a screen in front of you for presentations and that sort of thing. Walking into that large hall with just a circle of 25 chairs and a whiteboard over in the corner, was really confronting. I guess I was pretty naïve about what the program was going to do for us and how we were going to interact with each other.

Several participants commented that this was a welcome contrast to turning up at a PD and being 'bombarded with information' which was then lost as soon as they returned to school. They suggested that the space and distance for self-reflection and the ability to step away from the negative discourse in the school and hear different perspectives made the SSLP powerful. One Principal described how the pace of the program and taking time for self-reflection and embedding was the biggest learning she took away, and she was trying to model this same approach for professional learning for staff in her school.

In order to build this safe environment, the initial pace of the program is deliberately slow. Daily evaluations in programs show that this sometimes surprises participants,

but by the end of the program, participants always understand why this is necessary. Several participants commented on how at the time they weren't always sure where the activities were leading, but by the end of the program they understood how all the activities fitted together. One participant who attended with a colleague, said it took them a couple of days into the program to work out what it was about 'and then on the third day they both realised that 'we know where this is going now. We get it.'

Several participants commented on it being unusual to have times of silence in the program, particularly from stepping out of the contrast of the fast pace of the school environment. One participant described how the thought processes in the program were different to those that normally happened in a business environment.

... those times of silence whether it's waiting for someone to answer or respond, or whether it's just the sitting and thinking time, that was noticeably difficult for everyone initially. The importance of it became absolutely outstandingly obvious really quickly – that think time and that not needing to necessarily go straight for the answer or the point. Needing to actually tease out and talk around the periphery of things and collect those little thoughts and ideas ...

A deeper learning journey

The pace of the program and time for self-reflection enables participants to 'feel' rather than just 'know.' One participant

said that the power of the program was that it immersed her in the 'ongoing struggle' for Aboriginal people in a way that made her feel connected to the situation. She described how she 'jumped in with two feet' into the idea of challenging her thinking as another step in her journey, describing it not so much as altering her thinking, but a much more in depth understanding of the perceptions 'that become so much a part of you when you listen to them for 20 years.'

Stronger Smarter took me on that deeper journey within to really make me, not so much of an empathy, but that real deep understanding and connection to that ongoing struggle. And for me in my life that would be the most important professional learning that I have ever undertaken. And I think Stronger Smarter really immersed you in it that you could feel what it would be like at the same time.

This reaching of the heart as well as the head may be a key reason for the program being successful in terms of social change.

One participant saw the power of the program as being in the listening and sharing stories that allowed the learning to go to a deeper level, helping people re-visualise their own future stories.

The SSLP was a highly relational process that made you self-reflect on ourselves - how do we respond - with defensiveness or possibility? and how am I with self and with others?

Most participants spoke about a personal journey of self-reflection, recognising that this is a key characteristic of an effective



leader and an essential component of understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. One Principal, who had undertaken the SSLP three years previously, said

I said at the time that it was the most challenging, but the most valuable professional learning I'd done in 30 years, and I stick by that. I haven't seen anything that comes close to Stronger Smarter in making you, forcing you to reflect on your beliefs and what underpins what you do. It's really made me reflect on my own beliefs and understandings and the assumptions that I was drawing on.

One teacher, who described himself as being already within a high expectations mindset and building strong relationships with students, still found the process of self-reflection to be transforming, bringing greater confidence and an opportunity to look at how to do things better.

I've done a lot of deep professional learning, as you do as a teacher, and Stronger Smarter was the first time when I actually looked at myself and how am I the person, how am I professionally? So that was the first thing I did, I looked at myself and said, what are my

beliefs? What are my behaviours? What are my practices? And gave myself a bit of a checklist, and said, what am I doing wrong and how can I do it better?

One Principal described it as bringing an Aboriginal lens to the work.

Stronger Smarter brings an Aboriginal lens to how we do our work rather than always viewing our work through the dominant cultural lens of mainstream society.

Many participants talked about the personal journey being a deeper look at personal assumptions, understanding positive discourse, having open, honest and transparent conversations, and not accepting mediocrity. This was about understanding 'how you are with education' and how you react to things.

Changing how you do business

The process of 'looking deep within yourself' was clearly something that had stayed with participants, and they described how they were still 'unpacking' ideas long after the program. Several participants described the SSLP as being deeper than just a program with one participant suggesting it changed 'your whole way of being and how you do business'.

One participant described Stronger Smarter as a methodology that empowers daily thinking.

Stronger Smarter is a methodology in me – it's not a bolt on it's a part of what I do every day. And it's deeper than just a program, it's a process I went through and coming back to this notion of challenging

yourself and really unpacking who I was as a leader and who I wanted to be and in saying that it's about those meaningful connections that we make with people.

The changes participants recognised in themselves were about the little things that made a big difference in their interactions with students, parents and the community. Participants talked about taking the ideas they already had and stretching them or looking at things in a different way. Some participants did describe immediate changes in how they operated, however many described it not necessarily as a deliberate change, but more that they found themselves thinking about things differently, acting differently in certain situations, and recognising what they had control over to change. Several participants noted that they saw the difference in other staff after they returned from the SSLP, particularly in terms of their leadership. One participant said about other staff who had undertaken the SSLP

.... I could see the change in them. They couldn't put their finger on it and I couldn't either but it was absolutely tangible when people had come back from the Stronger Smarter training.

Although many participants described the 'little things', the idea of coming away from the program as a 'different person' was a common theme. There was a sense that while not all participants were making ground-breaking changes, they were all coming away from the program making at least small, attitudinal changes. One participant described how he saw

'personalities change' for other participants in his course as they realised that had been holding the wrong ideas or had not been open-minded enough in their career to date.

Seeing things through a different lens

When participants are willing to take this deeper look, they described this as 'seeing things through a different pair of glasses or a different lens'. This was described as having their eyes opened to a recognition of their own ignorance about Australia's history and an understanding of how Aboriginal history had been ignored or misrepresented in their own schooling.

One Aboriginal support staff participant suggested schools could better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students if Principals had a better understanding of Indigenous Knowledges to show people 'how strong and smart Aboriginal people were back in the days'.

We want Principals to do this [SSLP] so they know where we're coming from. They need to know us and know what Stronger Smarter is all about. We have a knowledge of our own. Black people – we're a product of ourselves, and then Australians came and so we had to do Australian things, so if Principals do this [SSLP] they'll know we have to go back to be a product of Aboriginal people and lets all do it together and start off together where we've all got a good understanding of it.

In responses to the Stronger Smarter Institute's 2018 'Census' of SSLP alumni, 90% of respondents said their Stronger Smarter training continues to have at least some level of impact across all aspects of their relationships and leadership.



Participants' comments suggest that while the SSLP presents confronting information, the safe and self-reflective environment sets up a learning space where participants don't feel 'challenged' or 'forced' into changing their views or thinking differently. The challenge for participants is in being honest and open in undertaking an authentic self-reflection, being willing to take a deeper look at both personal and school-based practices and recognising the impact of the misrepresentation of history that has so often occurred through their own schooling.

Facilitators in the SSLP leave participants with the suggestion that now that they see things through a different lens, it is up to them what they choose to do with that information. The comments from participants suggest that everyone we interviewed had felt compelled in some way to refine their practice as a result of the SSLP, or that in some cases they found that just thinking differently made them act differently in certain situations. Rather than the SSLP challenging participants to do things differently, the SSLP 'opens eyes' and provides a different lens. The result is that participants choose to challenge themselves to have higher expectations of their personal practice.

Challenging deficit conversations

Most participants talked in one way or another about being more aware of the importance of taking a strength-based approach to their school leadership or classroom practice, and a common theme from the interviews was about ensuring that conversations within the staff room were positive. While 'deficit' or negative conversations may come from teachers needing to 'let off steam' and release emotions after a difficult day, they bring a negativity that impacts on the culture of the school. One participant described deficit conversations as follows

... whenever you'd walk into the staff common room, it would be that game of who had the worst class or who had the worst child. I hated it. I just went to subtly try to change that by walking in and saying, 'I have the best class, and the best kids, and we did the greatest activities today and they were all so engaged'. Just to change the tone of the conversation.

The SSLP and SSA ask participants to bring deficit conversations into their awareness. One participant described how, in the past, deficit conversations had 'washed over her', and she was now much more aware of the damage of these conversations. Participants recognised that there would still be times when they would make assumptions, but that after attending the SSLP, this was no longer out of awareness. One Principal, who had spent 20 years working in schools with

high Aboriginal populations and considered that she was doing a good job, was very honest in talking about unpacking her own collusion with low expectations.

It wasn't ever intentional lowering of expectations, but when I really critiqued some of my practice, that's actually what the end result was and I wasn't even aware that it was happening, but it was these little nuances that when you look at it and you go, oh, why did I do that.

Several Principals talked about the importance of keeping the conversation around rejecting deficit discourse to the forefront. One Principal described how they had made the staff room a safe space, recognising that deficit conversations will still happen at times and making sure there is the opportunity to talk things through. As a result, she said she could hear the tone of the staffroom changing. Another participant described their school as having a 'no deficit conversations' policy. One Principal had extended this, asking parents to promote positive messages and to ask their kids 'what was the best thing that happened at school today?' Another participant described how celebrating successes helped to remove the deficit model.

I've realised with Stronger Smarter that we should be spinning that conversation into something positive and celebrate successes.

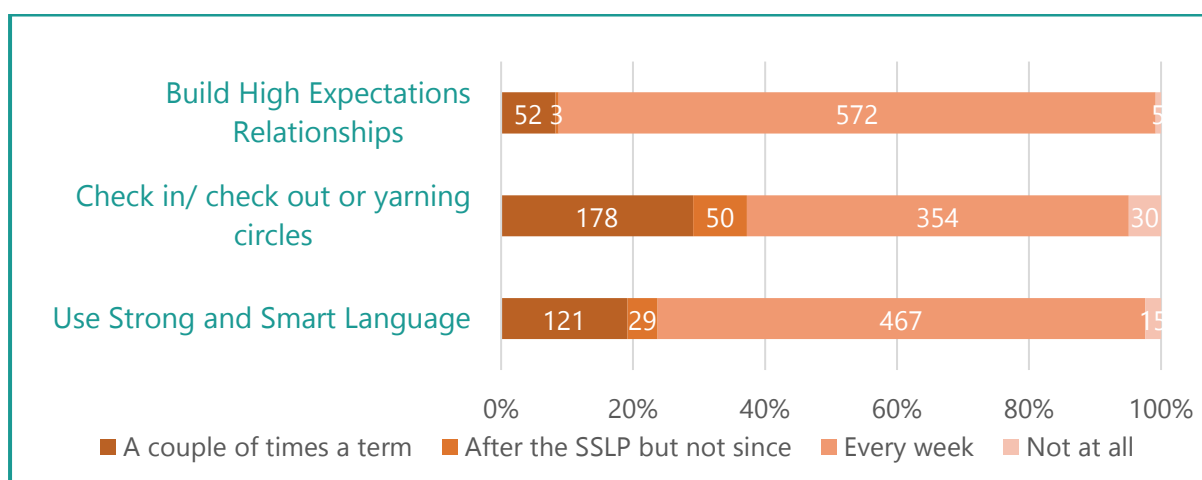
No more always talking about the deficit model which drags us down, gets us sad, angry, depressed.

Aboriginal Principals and support staff talked about how the SSLP had provided them with the tools or frameworks to work with staff to challenge deficit language in their schools. Several Aboriginal support staff described how, in the past, they had encountered racist or narrowminded staff and talked about how the SSLP had provided them with more confidence to challenge such staff in a respectful way. One Aboriginal Principal explained how the SSA framework gave him 'permission' to challenge deficit thinking in the school, describing this as an essential cultural change before looking at quality teaching and learning in the classroom.

If we want this to be high standards, it's got to be quality teaching – all that Hattie research

that's out there ... even Ken Robinson – it's all the same conversation – good teachers make big differences to kids' lives. If we support that through targeted intervention and we can buy into their belief systems and their values, we're going to get change, but unless we buy into what they believe and what they think of themselves, support and nurture that around that relationships framework we can then move forward.

The results of rejecting deficit thinking, as one Principal described, was 'flipping the coin' so that high expectations became not about expecting students to achieve, but about what educators can do to support students to achieve. This was the change from externalising the situation where educators felt they had no control, to a situation where they had agency.



The Institute's 2018 census of SSLP alumni showed that participants were using the Stronger Smarter strategies with students, in particular using the high expectations language of Strong and Smart and using Yarning Circles with students to build relationships in their classrooms.

High expectations for all students

The SSA recognises that the implementation of the approach will be different depending on the school context, and this was recognised by participants. Participants were clear, however, that regardless of how the SSA was implemented in their schools, it was always linked to the Stronger Smarter philosophy of high expectations of everyone.

All participants saw the SSA and SSLP as being relevant to their schools, with several specifically commenting that they saw Stronger Smarter as being relevant for all students, not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

Several participants noted how the SSA fitted well with existing high expectations philosophies in the school, or with other frameworks such as the Melbourne Declaration and the NSW wellbeing framework. Even when participants felt that high expectations were part of their existing philosophy in the school, they still found the tools and language of the SSA useful as an additional or underlying structure and as a framework to talk to staff.

I've always had high expectations and built relationships with kids and families but having the Stronger Smarter terminology has put on a label on it which has been really useful when you're trying to impart some of that information onto schools.

One Principal noted that initially he hadn't taken up the opportunity to attend the SSLP because he thought it wouldn't be

relevant to a school with no Aboriginal students. After eventually attending the SSLP, he was clear that the Stronger Smarter Approach was relevant for everyone.

"[Originally] I didn't make the connection that it wasn't just about Aboriginal education, and it had the ability to underpin all the cultural diversity that we have in our schools and the different people that we work with in our community. I had no idea how relevant it would be. It just blew me away. The whole philosophy and the approach that underpins what we do for our kids in our school, whether they're Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, just through that understanding of the cultural identity of the kids we're working with."

Another Principal described how Stronger Smarter provides an ethos and positive processes for all students.

... for all students, whatever their background I think the ethos of Stronger Smarter and the positive processes that it gives as people involved in leading schools. And that's heartening for me to know that if I'm true to those concepts and values, I know that I'm standing on solid ground in trying to take the school forward.

Several Principals described how the SSLP and SSA were driving their leadership values through a process of 'opening eyes' and then challenging mindsets to ensure high expectations. One Principal said

It was a really important and valuable program for me back in my early commencement of leadership. I'd come from pretty

much a white middle-class background, and it really opened my eyes into the hidden cultural perceptions that I have. From that perspective about high expectations for kids, that really started me on the road of that big piece that drives my leadership values now. So, I've got expectations for kids and really not accepting for Indigenous kids what's not good enough for all kids.

One Aboriginal Principal described the culture shift in her team to ensure her staff understood the importance of role modelling high expectations so that anyone new coming into the school quickly understands this expectation.

We used Stronger Smarter to really shape our thinking and our conversations, to really highlight the importance of positive, self-affirming conversations that aren't deficit. It's not acceptable for any staff member to have a low expectation here. The staff understand the importance of role modelling high expectations and

the people that come to work here quickly see that.

This is particularly an issue for inexperienced teachers being appointed to remote locations in schools with large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations (Lowe, 2017). New teachers may leave university with a true belief in high expectations but will quickly conform to a norm of low expectations if the school culture is not truly recognising the strengths of the local community.

There was a strong sense that the strength-based approach and rejection of deficit discourses needed to be school-wide and that the Stronger Smarter language and even the naming of 'deficit conversations' and the ensuing discussions provided a framework to ensure staff were all on the same page with high expectations. As one Aboriginal support staff member described, the change needs to be from the ground up so that everyone is walking the same path.



Leadership – taking responsibility for change

Deficit thinking can be a mechanism by which out-of-awareness low expectations beliefs become a self-fulfilling prophecy. A belief that the fault for low outcomes lies externally with the student or their families and communities disempowers educators where the externalising of blame exonerates them from responsibility rather than looking at what is within their power to change (Bishop, O'Sullivan & Berryman, 2010).

A 2017 study of teacher motivation profiles found a significant proportion of teachers studied were falling into failure-related profiles where workplace morale might still be high based on an acceptance of failure and belief that they were doing the best that they can (Collie & Martin, 2017). It may be that for educators working in schools with high Indigenous student populations, the deficit paradigm makes it essentially acceptable to be in a failure-accepting motivation profile where the locus of control doesn't lie with the educator.

This leaves educators believing it is beyond their control to engage students and they then deal with the situation by lowering expectations and using defensive teaching strategies (Lowe, quoted in Smith, 2018; Burgess et al., 2019). The resulting pedagogies and a watered-down curriculum contribute both to students' lack of engagement in school and the

students' own views of their ability to achieve.

In most cases, SSLP participants self-select to attend the program. It is likely, therefore, that participants who choose to attend the SSLP are already in motivated profiles and believe they have a responsibility for change. The SSLP is usually promoted by word of mouth, and participants attend because their colleagues have suggested they will find it



relevant. It was clear from participant interviews, however, that the result of seeing things through a 'different lens' was more than just greater motivation. The process of rejecting deficit thinking was putting participants into a position where they could understand better what they had control over and what they could change. Participants were choosing to make high expectations more explicit and ensure that this became a shared

understanding with all staff. A Principal talked about this as linking actions with words

Some of the change we need to have to link up the actions with the words is on a deeper personal level. Any sustainable change from a holistic view needs to come from within the individual themselves and that's what the Stronger Smarter program does to a greater degree than any program or process offered.

Another Principal described the responsibility of everyone to take a role in making a difference.

It [Stronger Smarter] does make you think about responsibility for change – if you don't have a solution, you forfeit the right to complain about it – you need to come to table with a solution.

This sense of being responsible for change is a strong theme in the interviews. The SSLP uses a number of provocations, one of which is 'Be the change you want to be.' This was mentioned as resonating with several interview participants, with evidence that even for participants who were already taking responsibility for change, the SSLP had consolidated this position. Clearly, once the need to take a strength-based approach is within awareness, it is much harder to put up the blindfold and ignore it. One Principal said that what had resonated with her was that she had the power to make a difference and that as a Principal this influence could go beyond just the classroom. Another Principal also described the need to step up

It [Stronger Smarter] gives you a resolve and strength, and you realise that you have to do it, because someone has to do it.

Participants described 'Be the change' as doing their part to have the courage to have high expectations, changing their resolve to do things differently, keeping going when things are difficult, focusing on the positive, taking a strength-based approach with self, and understanding the responsibility of an educator to 'unlock the desire to learn in every child'.

Agency and confidence

This sense of agency was described by several school leaders as greater confidence and participants described how the changes they were trying to make had more weight behind them when they could confidently point to the backing of a 'recognised and respected organisation.' One teacher mentioned that this helped with buy in from school leadership that the cultural aspects of programs they were implementing were important and 'not just an excuse to avoid school-work.' Two Principals described how they already had a vision for Aboriginal Education in their schools, and the SSLP provided the confidence that they were approaching things the right way. One of the Principals said the SSLP was the catalyst she needed for everything to fall into place.

While it might be considered that the focus of the SSLP is on changing the mindsets of non-Indigenous educators, the Institute strongly encourages Principals to bring Aboriginal support staff or community members with them to the program. The success of this approach is shown in the interviews with the

Aboriginal support staff who found that both the leadership skills from the program and the emphasis on positive discourse and strength-based approaches supported them in their work. They described how the SSLP confirmed their belief in themselves and helped them to 'stand on their own two feet', gave them courage to make decisions and ask tough questions, provided strategies to work better with racist teachers, and generally encouraged them to step up and 'do more.' Bodkin-Andrews, Seaton, Nelson, Craven, & Yeung (2010) have suggested that we should understand racism in terms of unequal power relating. The evidence from the Aboriginal support staff suggests that attendance at the SSLP, where everyone is equal in the circle and where they could see the support and respect from their school leadership, was actively addressing this unequal power relating.

One member of the Aboriginal support staff said that before attending the SSLP she didn't have the courage to speak up about things in the school, but after attending the SSLP she challenged herself to go out of her comfort zone and have difficult conversations with others in a respectful way.

For me personally it [the SSLP] was life changing. I always tell people that's where I found my courage and my voice that I still use to this day. I've found my courage and I've found my voice, but to do it in a right way as well. So, I make sure that I have high expectations of myself.

Three non-Indigenous participants confirmed the observations their support staff were making of

themselves, noting that their Aboriginal support staff had more self-confidence, were more ready to take a leadership role, and had stepped up to do things in the school such as running the sports program that was previously run by teachers. One participant commented that he saw the 'confidence and passion exploding out' of an Aboriginal support staff member after she attended the SSLP, and she was 'continually cracking the whip and pushing for excellence.' Another Principal said about an Aboriginal support staff member

It is the best investment in professional learning I have ever seen in someone. She's just run with it. When she went to the program she was 'just an SLSO', and I haven't heard her say that since she's done the program, that mindset has gone which I think is pretty positive.

Clearly for all Aboriginal support staff, an essential component to building confidence was the belief that the SSLP was resulting in greater value placed on the strengths and knowledges they were bringing to the classroom. For non-Indigenous educators, the SSLP was both

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When dealing with complex challenges, the question of truth is irrelevant... multiple perspectives are all we have to work with.

supporting a mindset change that valued their Aboriginal support staff differently, and also provided them with greater confidence that they were going about changes in their school in the right way.

Driving personal leadership style

Several Principals commented that the SSLP was about working out personal leadership style and personal context. There was a recognition that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work in complex schools, that something that worked in one school would not necessarily work in another, and that there was more to creating change than simply implementing a program because it is 'best practice'.

One Principal said

I think best practice really goes back to really looking at yourself and understanding yourself as a person and as a professional and as a member of a professional body, and I think that's very useful. It [SSLP] concentrated on your thoughts as an individual within that relational mix of you as a professional, in a school, in a context, in a community. We as individuals are made up our belief systems or are influenced by or draw upon and I found that really powerful to look at those aspects and that approach.

Principals understood that they had a responsibility to ensure their influence was school-wide and 'spread the word' and ensure the whole school was behind them. They recognised that they couldn't implement change on their own, and the change process required a school culture

that enabled open and honest discussions. One Principal said

The big thing is for my mind, that I can't do everything myself. I really need to have a group of strong supportive individuals that are first and foremost passionate about Aboriginal Education in a school and try and expand that wave of exuberance.

Participants commented that while the SSLP has a strong focus on personal leadership, it is also about school leadership, and Principals recognised the need to bring staff along with them on the reform journey. There was a recognition, however, that before they could change things at a school level they first needed to unpack and challenge their own practices. As one Principal explained, he needed to bring the whole staff along with him and he could only do that if he modelled high expectations.

[I have to] 'Be the change you want to see in the world' because I feel that I'm not going to get that critical mass, and I'm not going to bring the rest of my circle with me – I'm going to end up being the pointy end again – if they don't see me being that change myself.

Another Principal described how he and his colleague made the choice that the best way to share the learnings from the SSLP with staff was to model them.

We had people coming to us and saying, "Aren't you going to tell us what the course is about?" We were saying, "Well, we can't really". We couldn't really explain that. But after a while they were noticing a difference and people were saying, "Is that Stronger Smarter? Is that

Stronger Smarter?" And we'd go, "Yep", cause it was! It was more, I suppose, just the commitment that went into things with Stronger Smarter. One of the sayings that stuck with me – the Ghandi quote, 'Be the change you want to see in the world' – and we decided we were going to not past anything, just take on a more pronounced leadership role, a more involved role, not step back, and try and step forward. And if we do step back, keep going. And I think it's fair to say that both of us from that point had a profound change.

Different participants found that they took on things differently. One Principal described the implementation as contextual to both personal leadership style and to the local school and community. One Principal noted how he and another Principal from the same town attended the SSLP but approached it very differently when they returned to their schools.

was really interesting to look at the way the other Principal in town had gone about thinking about Stronger Smarter in his school, because it was very different to what I did. It's probably a reflection of our different leadership styles. But I guess he took a more considered approach, whereas I just went 'Nope, we've got to start some infiltration here. We've got to get little bits of things going and get people wanting to taste more of it.

A sense of the SSLP shaping leadership styles was a strong theme. Several participants who are now in Principal roles spoke about how the SSLP had shaped how they took on the leadership of a school, reflecting back over their careers and seeing the SSLP as an influential start to their leadership or a pivotal point in their leadership that helped to craft the skills and knowledge to be a better leader. One participant commented on seeing the change in leadership style from a Principal, describing how her leadership style changed from directing from the top to stepping back, looking at people's strengths and being more open to listening to others. This was a theme that emerged from a number of Principals around making changes in how they approached relationships with staff, moving from the triangle, top-down approach to leadership, towards a more open, facilitative leadership style.



Going back to the follow up couple of months after the initial training

Building relationships

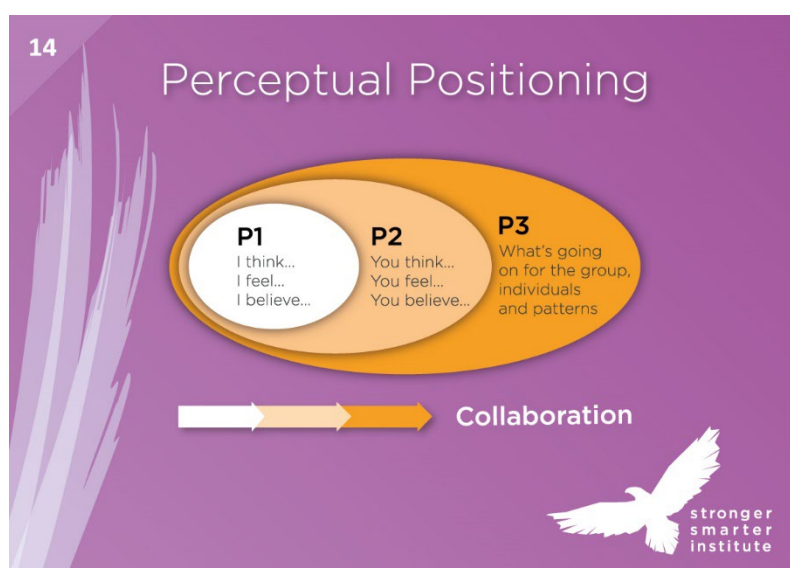
One clear component of the change in leadership style was to keep to the forefront a focus on relationships, understanding the backgrounds and strengths of others or seeing things from the perspective of others, and promoting the wellbeing of staff and students. The SSLP and SSA describe this as High-Expectations Relationships (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014, 2017), and many participants used this term and described the characteristics of such a relationship. One Principal described how the leadership skills in the SSLP focused on building relationships.

Stronger Smarter was the first training that was really focused on developing leadership skills and developing ways of managing and dealing with people in a supportive way to be able to do that in a way that makes an impact for kids.

One participant described High-Expectations Relationships as providing a framework around accountability, where teachers are responsible for ensuring quality teaching and personalised learning, and that the students are confident, creative and active in their learning. Another Principal described the ethos of Stronger Smarter as making sure that educators don't lose sight of the human element and the fact that 'we're in the business of people'. Another participant explained

It's such a personal reflection journey and I don't think you're the same person after you do that. It changes your ideas and thinking about things which then influences how you will teach kids, because you learn the relationships are the key to everything ... because if they don't trust you and know that you believe in them then it's not going to work.

Participants described how the SSLP provided the tools to understand others and develop relationships that provided the emotional credit to hold frank and honest conversations. Several participants talked about an open, facilitative leadership style which encouraged deep listening and letting go of power which are not necessarily natural things to do as a school leader but become essential when working with school communities. One participant explained how the relationship changes when it is framed in



the positive and is about listening and supporting.

A small change can have the greatest impact – it was a mindset that was affirmed and made me more aware of the importance of it, and following through – of listening, understanding, and framing everything in the positive – ‘not why haven’t you done that, but ‘what can we do to help.’

This deep listening and not making assumptions about the other person was a consistent theme. This was linked to understanding students better, which was considered to be essential before a school could understand how to shift the students in their learning. Participants linked this back to needing to first understand personal beliefs and unpack ‘how do you react when challenged’ before they could make observations and listen to others. One Principal explained how by learning to listen to others, he had learnt more about himself, and was also seen in the community as someone that people could talk to.

I’ve always been somebody who loves culture, making sure every culture sat right. But maybe I hadn’t really thought as in depth as I needed to around some of the potential issues facing, particularly Indigenous people, and I think by interacting with a variety of different people from all around the country was also a big, big impact also. So, there’s a lot of those type of learnings. I took away. But big one, if you had to name one thing, I learnt how to listen a lot deeper.

A collegiate staff

A strong theme from both the interviews and other evaluations is that implementing the SSA is about creating a new culture in the school, and that this can only happen if the whole school is on board. Several Principals talked about how they had worked with staff to open up minds and get people thinking differently. This was about a shared understanding of what they wanted the school to look like, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. One Principal said

The other one that is really driving me at the moment is that it’s easier to create a new culture than change an existing one. Because that’s what I think we have to do here. We have to build a new culture. I don’t want to throw out the old culture – there are parts of it that are in isolation but are good programs and good aspects of our school, but to bring those in and make them a foundation of the new culture that we build.

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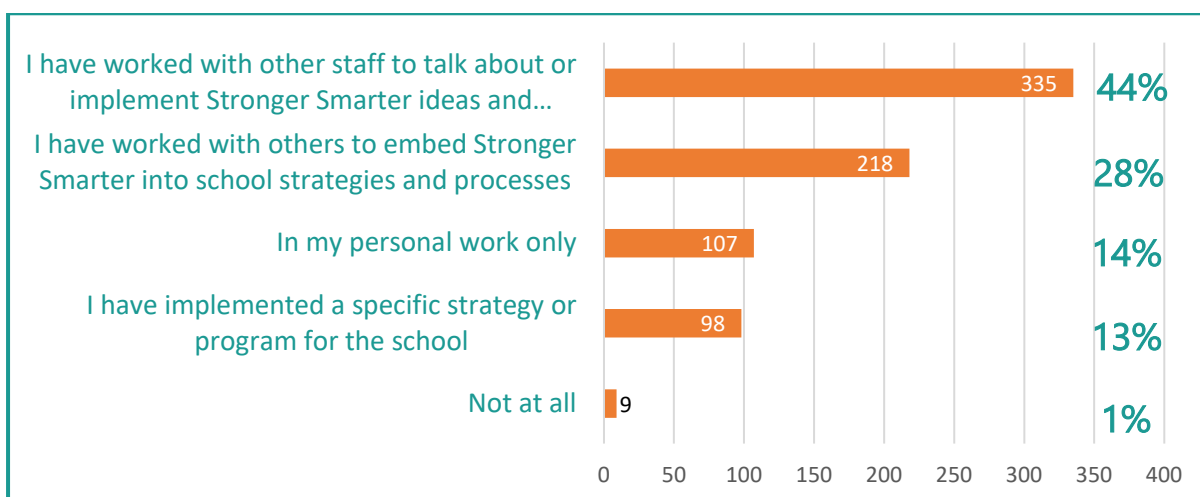
Culture...

The conscious and subconscious patterns of:

- perceiving
- thinking
- judging
- responding
- behaving

that characterise any group of people.

The Institute's 2018 Census of SSLP alumni showed the level of staff collaboration in relation to implementing the Stronger Smarter Approach. 99% of respondents said they had implemented the Stronger Smarter Metastrategies and Approach in some way, with 85% of respondents saying they had worked with others in the school to do this.



Another Principal also talked about how they had created a new culture in the school, describing the school as now feeling different, and with feedback from families that your staff 'go above and beyond'. Part of that was building the relationships with staff where they could hold open discussions and understand that in a complex school, teachers need to take responsibility for supporting students.

I think first and foremost what has changed is our relationships with one another as colleagues. Being able to have open and honest discussions. Challenging things like deficit, it's important work but it is hard and at times sometimes when you're challenged with lots of things, whether the social and emotional wellbeing of children sometimes you can find yourself in a space that maybe is not that positive. We used Stronger Smarter to really shape our thinking and our conversations, to really, highlight the importance of positive, self-affirming

conversations that aren't deficit. That has been a big way for us.

One Principal said she was quite explicit in the changes she made to ensure that all staff felt comfortable to contribute.

I decided to step back and make sure that you're being the listener as well as the participator and looking for something to bond over, looking for where people are coming from in the conversation and then make sure that people are feeling heard

Several participants described how using Stronger Smarter as a lens for being explicit about high expectations and getting everyone in the school 'one the same page' made people more accountable. One participant said

It takes out all those assumptions. And all those questions that people don't feel brave enough to ask, or things that they think is correct. Like they've made up a memory. So, for me the high expectations is really explicit.

A number of Principals returned to their schools and changed their staff meeting formats to a Yarning Circle (see Yarning Circle report for more details). One participant described how she noticed the difference in meeting environments, with the importance of listening and waiting, and everyone being equal in the conversation. Her observations of meetings in a school where a number of staff had undertaken the SSLP was that meetings were more productive when there was a space for authentic dialogue with less reactive and more inquiry-based conversations.

The productivity is measurable in terms of how quickly you get things done and how quickly you cross things off. The true gold is in me when things start to come to the surface with a bit of extra opportunity for people to think things through and contribute when they're ready.

There were clearly differences in the ways that participants chose to work with staff, with some deciding specifically to model Stronger Smarter processes first, and others choosing to work first with other staff who had undertaken the program, and others running their own professional developments to introduce all staff to the Stronger Smarter Approach (see Yarning Circle report for further details). These choices related both to personal leadership style as well as the size of the school and the number of staff who had undertaken the SSLP. Participants reported that the results of working with their staff were that they became more aware of others, less likely to jump to

assumptions and more accepting of different views.

Relationships with community

Community engagement needs to be understood as much more than simply ensuring parents send their children to school. Community engagement is a starting point to developing culturally-responsive pedagogies and curriculum that embeds local Indigenous Knowledges. It is an authentic engagement around understanding parents' aspirations for their children's learning and involving the community in the conceptualisation, planning enactment and evaluation of the curriculum (Harrison et al., 2019; Lowe et al., 2019). As Harrison et al. (2019) says, 'learning can be rich and purposeful when it is situated within that which already exists, namely the culture, community and home language of the group'. This is recognised by the SSA and the Stronger Smarter Metastrategy of valuing Indigenous leadership. As one Aboriginal Education Worker explained, when the community feel comfortable with the school or a person in the school, then they will become involved in school activities.

Many of the Principals interviewed talked about the importance of involving the community in the school, with several participants suggesting they were more aware of this after attending the SSLP. Participants recognised that the disconnect between families and schools was based on intergenerational complexities where often the past experience that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with schooling had not been positive. Teachers and

Aboriginal teaching assistants recognised their personal role in taking the time to talk to parents, and Principals recognised the need for the whole school to be proactive in 'having a yarn'. Principals working in the more remote schools recognised that the first point was to understand what was happening in the community, historically, socially, culturally, and emotionally, and that this involved listening. As one Principal from a remote school in a small community explained, while it might not be possible to immediately change the impact of history of the community it was possible to make small changes in relationships.

I think we've got to do all we can to just fix little things at a time. It's very hard to do everything but if you can make little changes that are positive then you do change everything.

A number of participants talked about NAIDOC week and other community events as an opportunity to bring community and sometimes groups of schools together. Several participants reported that they had changed the way they ran community or parent meetings, using a Yarning Circle to ensure deep listening. Several participants talked about how they had set up Aboriginal Education Committees in the school either with Aboriginal staff only or with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff. The focus of these committees was community engagement and a greater understanding of local culture. One participant described how a parent group that started as an afternoon tea turned into a more formal group which started looking at all the school documents, and the school

development plan. One Principal described how she used community events as an equal power sharing so that the students and parents could see teachers in a different light, not just a teacher talking about their child, but as a person who really cares about the child.

You can't do anything without parents, parents are the first carers, they are the first teachers, so I'm honouring that. As a teacher, you're looking after someone else's child and when you talk to a parent, they want to know that you like their children, that you care about what their children can and can't do.

One Principal described how 'yarn ups' helped to get the community involved.

Now we have a big group of people from across the school – teachers, facilitators, who circle up and make directions. We have yarn ups. We engage our Aboriginal community. Everyone was very shy at first, and then someone cracked the ice and then it flowed. We wanted the good and the bad, and we got it. And it was just great to see people realise that that's what it's all about – it's about them having a voice, and it really changed what we wrote in the school plan.

Participants reported successes from these community events of greater collaboration and participation and more equal power sharing. Participants were clear however, that these events would only be successful if they were built on authentic relationships with parents and communities. Several participants talked about 'doing the little things right' in a relationship and approaching the

relationship from the point of view of understanding different points of view and recognising what might be going on behind the conversation. Several participants talked about how this involved listening, honouring peoples' histories, and valuing every story regardless of the behaviour you might be seeing. One Aboriginal Principal, working off-Country in a remote school, described how there was no set formula for community engagement, but that it was a process of questioning and listening, and working with local staff to help build connections.

Over here, I've had to learn some of the things that I just took for granted at home on country. I guess there's no sort of formal process to develop those things. There are sensitivities I'm aware of, so I'm a bit in front there. There's things I know as an Aboriginal person that I bring to the context, but until you go through a process of questioning, you don't know what you know until you bring it to the forefront, or you don't know what you don't know.

Several participants talked about starting a conversation. One Principal described how she talked to staff about how they approached conversations with parents, recognising that if the conversation starts in the wrong way, it can be the end of that parent's engagement with the school. One Principal described how the first thing he did after attending the SSLP was to start a conversation with the local community. After making a decision that Stronger Smarter needed to be for the whole

school, not just the Aboriginal students, and that this meant embedding local culture into the curriculum for everyone, he recognised this could only be done by starting conversation with the local Elders. Another Principal described how the SSLP gave him greater confidence about the approach of taking conversations to the community.

We'd often have the Elders come in at lunch time and have a cup of tea which was fantastic for me. I think the first couple of weeks I was there, I thought maybe I was spending too much time drinking tea with the older people in the community. It was only when I went along to Stronger Smarter and they said, 'that's what you should be doing' and I thought ahh, because it's working. Letting people know who you are and why you're there are how can they help, and how can I help.

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“The way we co-create power has a huge impact on the degree of trust and quality of our relationships.”

- Meg Wheatley



Another Principal described how he started conversations with the community at the school gate as the students left every afternoon. This was a deliberate strategy to be visible in the community

and change the conversation about how the school and the community could work together.

We had an older Uncle – he was the Grandad of one of the little boys in the school. He stood outside the gate just watching. I'd invite him every day – do you want to come in and have a cuppa. He'd just put his hand up and say 'Na, Na' and three months later I walked past and said 'G'day' and he said, 'have you got that cup of tea' and he just came in and had a chat. If you're listening, you're building that High-Expectations Relationship. They get to see what you're about, and it's not fake, it's not a band aid, its deep relationships and deep understanding of what you're about, and once I did that, he came up and he actively helped out in the school.

Several Aboriginal teaching support staff talked about how they had proactively worked on ensuring that they built relationships with parents, took on board the Stronger Smarter strategies of listening and making sure people could have their say. One participant described

after the SSLP she deliberately made sure she took the time to stop and have a conversation with parents. Another said

My first thing was building those relationships really strong and being patient and getting to know the families and now slowly building those relationships I get them involved.

One Principal said that the SSLP gave him confidence about the way he was approaching conversations with parents and better tools for conversations, recognising the importance of spending time with families to explain what the school wanted to do and genuinely involve everyone.

The learning heightened the importance of genuinely engaging with people and just some ways of processing, making sure the meetings you wanted to have were set up in a way that's going to lead to honesty and therefore more genuine outcomes for the school and community so, putting a lot of time into those conversations, welcoming difficult conversations and setting up processes so that people do feel genuinely valued and heard.



One Principal talked about the sense of a partnership with parents, and that if they were going to focus on ensuring parents sent their children to school, there equally needed to be an obligation from the school to provide a quality learning environment. Another participant noted how changing things in the classroom could

help with parental engagement – where the students were going home and talking about Stronger Smarter and yarning circles, and seeing the school implement a language program – this was reducing the past barriers to parental engagement and making parents feel the school was a more welcoming place.

The results of focussed efforts to improve community engagement were described as both increases in the numbers of parents involved in schools and increased Aboriginal student enrolments in schools as parents saw the school as the ‘school of choice’ for Aboriginal students. As one participant described, this was a process of ‘rewriting the narrative’ of the school.

One Principal said that

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 they feel

welcome. We have a much greater community engagement than we used to have. The effort's gone in and the heart is there now.

Participants described their role in starting conversations with families, taking time for conversations, and the power of a cup of tea. They were clear about how these conversations needed to look, incorporating the High-Expectations Relationships concepts of equal power sharing. They described the role of deep listening to what the community has to say as the starting point of building an authentic deep relationship. For educators, used to a role as the person who solves everything, letting go of power and letting go of being the knowledge holder is not always easy. However, there was a recognition that this is what was needed, and an understanding that knowledge can be held in the community and doesn't always need to be within the formal structures of the western education system.



Conclusion

This report has considered one aspect of implementing the SSA in schools: the mechanisms operating through the SSLP that ensure educators commence this implementation with a strength-based philosophy and approach. These are the mechanisms that constitute the first two waves of reform as described by Luke et al. (2013) and produce the learning environment and the school culture that will be conducive to change.

The first aspect is that of self-reflection and unpacking personal assumptions. The SSLP achieves this by using the concepts of High-Expectations Relationships, Indigenous Yarning Circles and deep listening to set up a safe space during the program itself where participants have equal power relating. The 'challenge' in the SSLP is for participants to be honest with themselves and dig deep into their beliefs. The space and time for self-reflection then means that the material, while confronting and deliberately taking participants out of their comfort zone, can speak to the heart and participants can 'feel' the information they are being presented with, not just have content thrown at them.

Participants reported that the safe environment, with the pace slowed down, away from the pressures of school and providing time for silence was achieving this level of self-reflection. The result is that participants leave feeling that they have 'opened their eyes' or are seeing

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education through a different lens. Participants are left with a choice as to what they do next, but it is clear that once participants feel their eyes have been opened, they all feel a sense of being accountable to enact change. Participants reported a better understanding of their personal sphere of influence, and that excuses for not stepping up and enacting change were no longer accepted, either from themselves or from others. The process of confronting and bringing into awareness personal deficit thinking became a high expectation of self, suggesting that all participants interviewed would sit within the success-oriented motivation profiles described by Collie & Martin (2017).

Participants described how Stronger Smarter had become embedded in their daily practice. This was sometimes as deliberate changes to the way they built relationships or to leadership style and at other times not necessarily as something that was immediately obvious. Participants described this as understanding 'how you are with education' and how you react to things and described how they sometimes found themselves reacting differently to a situation as a result of the SSLP. Participants returned to their schools with a greater awareness of deficit discourses and greater willingness to listen to others and to see different perspectives. The processes of self-reflection were ongoing,

and participants continued to unpack information from the program long afterwards.

Participants described how the Stronger Smarter Approach worked for all schools but needed to be contextualised, and there was no one-size-fits all strategy. Participants had taken the SSA from one school to another but found that they implemented the approach differently depending on context. It wasn't possible to say to another Principal 'this is what you need to do', and implementing the SSA required understanding personal leadership styles, knowing your students and community and being able to build relationships. Principals were clear that it required a whole-of-school approach and they needed to bring their staff along with them on the reform journey. In turn, this was only possible if they stepped up, took responsibility for change, and modelled High-Expectations Relationships.

The tools of Stronger Smarter enabled an explicit and shared understanding of high expectations, and the strategies of High-Expectations Relationships were described by many participants as a way to build this shared understanding both with school staff and within the community. Principals talked about an open leadership style

where there was space for listening: a process that involved letting go of power. This deep listening needed to extend beyond the school into the community, as a process to understand both the history and context of the local area, and the community's desires for the education of their children.

The use of shared language was allowing schools to make high expectations explicit and hold conversations around the role that everyone has in enacting those high expectations. The results were more collaborative staff environments, removal of assumptions and shared understanding of explicit high expectations. This was leading to building relationships with parents and communities with greater collaboration between the community and the school. Essentially this became a process of 'rewriting the narrative of the school' to one that clearly values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and prioritises high expectations, community engagement and Indigenous leadership. This was providing the learning environment where culturally-responsive pedagogies and curriculum can be co-developed with the local community.

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