

National Professional Standards for Teachers

PILOT CASE STUDY

Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parents and Communities in Education

Stronger Smarter Institute

What did we want to find out?

The Stronger Smarter Institute undertook a pilot case study to provide support for teachers in addressing the new National Professional Standards for Teachers relating to community engagement. The National Standards address community engagement through the following:

Standard 3: Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning

- Standard 3.7 – Engage parents/ carers in the educative process

Standard 7: Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community:

- Standard 7.3 – Engage with parents/ carers.

Our aim was to provide teachers with support and guidance for these two professional standards in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by answering the question:

What are the most effective ways of engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities to improve student learning outcomes?

What did we do?

To answer these questions, we listened to what school students, teachers, principals and parents had to say. We selected a diverse group of communities covering metropolitan, provincial and remote schools, and ran a series of workshops and surveys.

The schools

The schools we talked to are all part of the Stronger Smarter Institute hub and affiliate network that forms the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities.

Remote schools:

The schools in the 'remote' group cater mainly for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

Derby District High School, Derby WA. Derby is situated in the Kimberley region of WA. The school has an enrolment of over 500 students, providing education from K-12. With the school motto and shared values 'Diligence, Courage and Strength' and the Stronger Smarter philosophy' students work towards high standards of academic and social achievement through engagement in the school's inclusive, safe and stimulating learning environments.

Fitzroy Valley District High School, Fitzroy Crossing, WA: Fitzroy Crossing is located 400 km east of Broome. The school has 270 students across K-12. Around 95% of the students are Aboriginal, and many have English as their second language. Three of the four traditional languages of the area are taught in the school, forming the Traditional Aboriginal Language (LOTE) program.

Provincial schools

The schools in the 'provincial' group cater for a significant numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Casino High School, Casino Public School, and Casino West Public School, Casino, NSW:

Casino is a rural town located on the north coast of New South Wales. The Public School has 550 students across P – Year 6. The High School has 700 enrolments across years 7 – 12. The schools have around 20% Aboriginal students.

Metropolitan schools

The schools in the 'metropolitan' group have a minority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Wavell Heights State School, Brisbane, Qld:

At Wavell Heights, in metropolitan Brisbane, 25% of current enrolments have an ESL background and upwards of 35 cultural groups are represented. The school offers a supportive environment that caters for the needs of the individual student.

Tullawong State High School, Caboolture, Qld, Tullawong has 1100 enrolments across years 8 – 12, and is a multicultural school with a vibrant Indigenous culture. The school statement of purpose is *'to engage all members of the community in a common vision, in an environment that is dynamic,*

supportive, positive, collaborative, embracing the principles of REACH'.

Other groups

In addition to the work with schools we talked to two other groups about what community engagement means to them:

- teachers and community leaders at a regional Stronger Smarter Leadership Program in the Kimberley
- undergraduate education students from the Queensland University of Technology (QUT).

The workshops

We ran a series of workshops with our target schools to understand what constitutes good community engagement and explore the attributes of a teacher who engages with community. We structured the workshops for the individual sites to take into account the needs of each participating school. The dialogues stimulated through the workshops both informed our understandings, but also gave the schools an insight that they could use to improve their community engagement. Our choice of schools across a wide range of contexts allowed us to gain insights into the experiences and understanding of students, teachers and community members living and working in vastly different contexts.

We designed the workshops using *Engoori* which is an Aboriginal framework developed by Scott Gorringer, a Mithaka man, drawing on his years of experience as a leadership consultant combined with the wisdom and teaching of his old people. The framework is based on honouring strengths, visioning the future and actioning the present and focuses on reconnecting people and reigniting authentic dynamic conversations of strength to create strong foundations from which to build positive school cultures (Gorringer & Spillman, 2008).

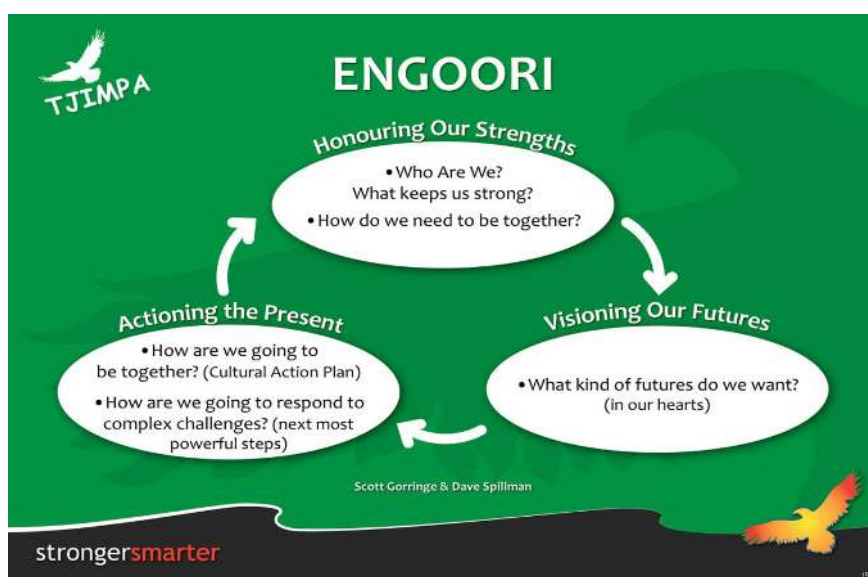


Figure 1 An Overview of the Engoori Framework

In designing and running the workshops we

- took a strength-based approach to elicit positive stories
- started from a basis that honours all contributions from community, students and school personnel and regards all contributions as being of equal value and importance, and
- used processes designed to stimulate debate, which required participants to reflect on their own experiences, beliefs and assumptions and listen to the perspectives of others.

The processes we used in workshops included:

- **Continuum:** In the Continuum process, we present statements and ask participants to physically situate themselves along a continuum from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The conversations that occur around these statements show individual beliefs and assumptions and promote rigorous debate. Participants are free to adjust their position in response to alternative views that may influence their thinking.

- **Visualizing the attributes of effective teachers :** Drawing on their own experiences participants consider the attributes of a *deadly* teacher, recalling what it felt like, then describing how the teacher made them feel.
- **Never ending conversation (Northern NSW workshops only):** We start a conversation where each participant adds to the previous person’s comment creating an ongoing dialogue around what is community engagement and why it is important.
- **Surveys:** At two sites, we asked staff to complete surveys to gain a snapshot of their teaching experience in relation to their self-assessment of their ability to engage with community.

The data

The data we collected captured the voices of community, students and teachers through written responses (surveys), though our staff capturing verbal conversations (workshops),

and through pictures representing a ‘deadly’ teacher (drawn by students). We analysed the data to draw out consistent themes and key messages. The full report provides the data and discussion of the analysis. In this summary report we’ve provided the key themes and used pictures and quotes to illustrate these themes.

What did we find out?

To look more deeply into the question of what are the effective ways to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander students and communities, we explored

- what constitutes ‘community’ and ‘community engagement’ and how we can develop shared understandings of what this means
- what makes community engagement important,
- how community engagement contributes to improved outcomes for students, and
- how a deadly teacher engages effectively with students and community.

What is ‘community’?

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

The study highlighted the need for everyone in the school to have a shared understanding about what is community and what is community engagement.

Within a school, the term ‘community’ is often limited to mean ‘parents and careers’. But to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders,

‘community’ may have a broader meaning to incorporate grandparents, elders, foster families and extended families where older children may themselves be playing a significant role in the ‘growing up’ of younger children.

The sense of belonging to a family may vary for different students – while most students in our surveys agreed with the statement ‘I feel I belong to my family’ some noted that they avoided family members who exhibited negative behaviour, or that they live with their grandparents and that the immediate family ‘don’t want to know me’.

What is ‘community engagement’?

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

Community engagement may mean different things to different people. In our study, some participants described ‘community engagement’ as a community member coming to the classroom, while others described special events – in other words, activities which involve the community coming into the school. But the events which transformed community engagement as described in this study involve teachers going out into the community and actively seeking opportunities to meet with parents outside the school environment.

The school fence is a boundary, not a barrier.

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

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

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had very different experiences of schools than children experience today. Many parents may also have had negative experiences of interacting with school personnel, and these past experiences may all impact on how they might engage with the school now. Developing strong, respectful relationships can help overcome this.

One thing that everyone agreed on is that all parents want to support their students to learn.

The study also raised the question of who is responsible for community engagement, and highlighted the responsibilities for teachers to take the initiative to engage with community.

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

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

Anne - Derby DHS

Why is community engagement important?

Sarra (2011)

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

The Study highlighted that positive community engagement had benefits for everyone: students, parents and teachers.

- The children feel that their community is behind them in everything they do.
- Everybody is working together to achieve the best for our students.
- If the community has an interest in the school, there is a shared responsibility for achieving positive outcomes for the entire community.
- A teacher from Western Australia talked about how building relationships with the community increased his knowledge and improved his capacity to teach.

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

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

How does community engagement support student learning?

Sarra (2011):

.. schools and teacher student relationships today and into the future must be resolutely positive. The learning environment and the teacher student relationship must be relentless around a message that says consistency to learners: “Hey, I believe in you!”

What makes a ‘deadly’ teacher?

We wanted to look at the attributes of effective teachers, to understand the elements of genuine community engagement.

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

Community member from Fitzroy Crossing and AIEO.



(Above) A Wordle from an activity undertaken by year 4, 5 and 6 students describing how a *deadly* teacher made them feel. Their descriptions convey the positives and the impact teachers have had on them, using words such as *Skudda* to mean really good, or impressive, and happy, calm and relaxed to describe their influence.

In some workshops, we asked students to draw pictures to show how they visualised a 'deadly' teacher.



A deadly teacher

- is friendly and approachable
- believes in you, supports you but also challenges you to be your best
- notices you, makes the time to listen, gets to know you
- makes learning fun and relevant
- offers to help you with your work and doesn't make you feel stupid for asking
- likes being around young people

A deadly teacher makes you feel:

- brainy and cool
- on top of the world
- that you can go anywhere, even to the city and graduate
- happy, bubbly and fun



- when you're treated with respect, you have a feeling of strength and importance
- when you are welcomed there is a sense of belonging, you feel stronger



While the workshops focussed around positive stories, they occasionally highlighted the negative impact of poor relationships. A secondary student described how at a previous school where she was strong in maths, after being ridiculed by her maths teacher who *'made me feel like nothing'*, she lost interest in maths and dropped it as a senior subject.

The Stronger Smarter philosophy advocates an approach where you can have a high-expectations learning environment and still embrace a positive sense of cultural identity.

How did the workshops help the schools?

We ran the workshops in a way that enabled teachers to reflect on their own beliefs and deepen their understanding of the significant impact of the teacher-student and teacher-community relationships. The workshops provided a new way of engaging with community and helping schools to gain a shared understanding of what community engagement is, whose responsibility it is and the most effective ways to build genuine relationships based on respect.

The processes we used facilitated rigorous debate and the insights gained will provide valuable information for the individual schools to build on in their specific contexts. The process was also valuable for the students with students saying they were proud to be involved and it was the first time the school had asked them what they thought.

What resources did we develop?

- A video
- The final report for the AITSL Pilot Project – Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parents and Communities in Education includes the full details of the methodology and results.
- Our workshops provided processes to help schools better understand how teachers perceive community engagement.

What can I do?

Just because I am a teacher it doesn't give me any special rights to go into an Aboriginal community and expect Aboriginal parents to trust and respect me. I have to earn that trust and respect and that can't be determined by years.

I try to make use of our student services and IEOs to help break down those barriers that I sometimes perceive but to also build on relationships so that I can be a more effective teacher. For example by going out to the river with kids and inviting family and community so that I am on their ground and in their environment and I am the guest...because that is what I am. It is really nice to build those relationships without forcing myself on them and once you do build those relationships I have found with the families they are just so warm and giving and very welcoming and it is a privilege.

Mandy Teacher (2nd Yr at Fitzroy Crossing)

All teachers

Positive relationships and friendly approached need to be a starting point. Our study showed

that a few simple things can improve your relationships with students and community

- make everyone feel welcomed in the school, say 'hello' to parents, build 'credit' in your emotional bank account with your students
- listen – build relationships with a family by sitting and listening to them, have open and honest conversations.
- use opportunities outside school such as sporting events to talk to parents – or even if you just see them at the shops.
- go outside the school gates and knock on doors to talk to families – but not just when things go wrong – bring good news too.
- set up spaces where people can get together and sit and yarn
- take the time to understand the *community*.

Chris Sarra (2011)

With an emotional bank account a teacher builds credit by making their interactions with students positive. This can mean some really simple things that cost hardly any *money*... *things like ..*

- *saying "Good morning.. It's really great to see you here!";*
- *asking how many fish they caught at the weekend;*
- *asking how many tries they scored at footy or how many goals in netball;*
- *saying things like.. 'I know this seems really hard but I reckon you can do this!'*
- *writing a special note on their book to highlight the things they did well;*
- *finding them at lunchtime and shouting them lunch because they worked hard all morning.*

School leaders

At the school leadership level, these are some things to think about:

- think of ways to develop a shared understanding of *community* and *engagement* in your school
- provide opportunities for authentic conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community members
- honour the knowledge and expertise that community brings
- change the conversation into strength based conversations
- listen to students and community to develop new ways of working together
- set up opportunities for home visits with Aboriginal support staff to introduce new teachers to the community.
- pair a new graduate with a community member as a mentor
- set up events or morning teas where parents can get to know each other, or
- provide opportunities for community to play a part in delivering the curriculum.

You could also consider using some of the processes we used in our workshops, which helped the individual schools to better understand the perspectives, beliefs and assumptions of their staff, students and community.

Community engagement is not something that you do today and tick the box and it's done. Once you start it is ongoing, it's every day and it's everything you do. To me it's about your ability to talk to community and have open and honest conversations...things they may not want to hear but also be open to hearing what they have to say and decide whether you

respond defensively or with possibility. It is also recognising the complex challenges we do face when it is not just one community but made up of six. You can't just work with one you have to work with all groups. It is also about knowing who the decision makers and being responsive to them but also be aware of those community members who don't talk up. How do you respond to the needs of the school if you continue to work in the way the school always has without engaging the whole of community?

Donna Bridge, Principal

What does positive community engagement look like?

Community engagement is everybody working together to achieve the best for our students.

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

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

- community understands the expectations of the school and upholds those expectations
- functions and events involve the whole community.

Successful community engagement is the result of:

- building strong positive relationships
- understanding and incorporating local contexts
- having genuine authentic conversations
- respecting and including different perspectives on community engagement
- working together, in a range of different ways

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

Graduate Teacher

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Find out more

Stronger Smarter Institute

If you want to know more about the work the Stronger Smarter Institute is undertaking with schools across the country, visit our website at <http://www.strongersmarter.com.au>

AITSL National Professional Standards for Teachers

The National Professional Standards for Teachers are available at:

<http://www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au/>

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- Mark Newman - film maker

Glossary

Deadly – an Aboriginal English word for impressive. Throughout this report *deadly* is used to mean, a valued, effective and impressive teacher

Skudda – a Kimberley Kriol word for impressive/deadly

Growing up – is an Aboriginal English phrase term for raising children.

community refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have a direct relationship with the schools and form part of the school community , in addition to being Community members

Community refers to the Aboriginal Communities that the schools operate within. This definition includes the Traditional Owners of the area, several language groups and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the region. This definition is broader than those community members directly engaging with the school at any one time.