

Embedding Indigenous perspectives at Mount Isa

Location: Very Remote Queensland



“It’s important we push the kids, we can give them high expectations, we can make those relationships with them. If you don’t build relationships with kids whether they are Indigenous or non-Indigenous you won’t get anywhere”

Claudine Dank, Principal

We’re looking at building the relationships - particularly around our school and in the classroom.

Helen Wade, Principal

This case study examines two remote schools, St Joseph’s Catholic School and St Kieran’s Catholic School, both located on the land of the Kalkadoon people in Mount Isa, Queensland. Both schools are part of the Townsville Catholic diocese which encompasses 29 schools from Proserpine in the south, Abergowrie in the north, and Mount Isa in the west.

St Joseph’s and St Kieran’s are both P-6 schools with diverse student populations. They have 8% and 16% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students respectively, and both have around 15% of students with a language background other than English¹. The case study follows how these two schools have introduced the concepts and strategies of the Stronger Smarter Approach across the school, as

an approach that is relevant to all students. In both schools, the key has been building relationships with students, their parents and the local community. This has ensured that their embedding of the local Kalkadoon culture covers all aspects of the school, classroom and curriculum, that they celebrate a positive cultural identity for all students, and that staff have a shared understanding of high expectations.

The study is based on interviews with Helen Wade, Principal of St Joseph’s Catholic School, Claudine Dank, Principal of St Kieran’s Catholic School, and Janelle Knack, Indigenous Education Adviser for the Catholic Education Office.

The Stronger Smarter Leadership Program

The Stronger Smarter Leadership Program (SSLP) is a 6-day program (run across two sessions) with components around personal leadership, understanding assumptions and building relationships, as well as introducing the ideas of the Stronger Smarter Approach (SSA)². The initial contact with the SSLP came from the Townsville Catholic Education Office. After two of the Indigenous Education Advisors, Tammi Webber and Janelle Knack, completed the SSLP, the Townsville diocese decided to support the roll-out of the SSLP across the diocese.

Claudine Dank and Helen Wade both undertook the SSLP in Mount Isa in 2018. Claudine explains how the Stronger Smarter Approach fits well with the focus at St Kieran's on embedding Indigenous culture and supports the young teachers who haven't taught in a remote area before. She echoes other SSLP alumni who describe Stronger Smarter as an underlying approach that brings other programs together. Claudine says, "Stronger Smarter is really the icing on top of the cake that cements everything else together".

A key approach for the SSLP is that participants can take components and activities from the program and implement in their schools, making their own decisions about what will work for their context. Both schools have used this strategy with their staff, and the Catholic Education Office have also used Stronger Smarter components to run PDs with

schools. Janelle from the Catholic Education Office says the Stronger Smarter Approach fits well with Catholic Education philosophies and the work they do with schools. She explains, "Every PD we do, whether it's curriculum-based PD, whether it's change management PD, or developing mentors for students, working in every area of the classroom, we are able to thread Stronger Smarter throughout everything that we do." As a result, Janelle says there are other schools in the diocese who are keen to undertake the SSLP, and it is expected that the diocese will continue to roll out the Stronger Smarter program in 2020.

Leadership style

School leaders describe how, after attending the SSLP, they recognise that in order to bring their staff along with them on a journey, they need to model the behaviours of high-expectations relationships³. A key strategy in the SSLP is the use of Indigenous Knowledges around reflection and the deep listening of Dadirri⁴. SSLP participants comment how this time to slow down from the pace of school helps to embed the learning. Janelle describes how this level of self-reflection can lead to a change in how school leaders build relationships. "In a lot of PD, you hit the road running for the whole PD and then you finish at the end of the day with your pile of papers and go back into school and life goes on. The papers get shelved down the bottom of the bookshelf. But the SSLP teaches us to reflect," she says.

⁵Claudine, the Principal at St Kieran's, says the SSLP made her think about her personal leadership style. "I don't like being the pointy end of the triangle," she says. "I am now more open to having lots of people on my leadership team and being more inclusive, rather than doing things on my own. I converse with a lot more with people regarding changes and have more

people I source information from. So, making decisions now can take a while. If there are major things happening, I will talk to all the staff, I will talk to the school office, I will talk to the board, so everybody has a say in what happens in the school."

Building a collegiate staff room

As well as modelling behaviours, school leaders describe how they need to bring staff along with them on the journey of change. The SSLP models the use of Yarning Circles, and this is a strategy that may participants take back to the staffroom, classroom, or for community meetings. Claudine describes how implementing Yarning Circles in the staff room and running Stronger Smarter activities with staff was successful. Claudine says, "It's empowering for all the staff to be able to have their say. I love the circle a lot and we use that a fair bit." She says that creating this space has allowed staff to have tough conversations and be more open with one another. "It's



important from a leadership perspective to understand how we can work together as a group. We are now understanding each other's identities and we know how our colleagues work. I think that's how it all comes together". Claudine says as a result, she has noticed staff being more aware of each other and recognising any deficit conversations.

At St Josephs, Helen implemented the strategies of check-ins in staff meetings and 'walk talk buddies' to share the processes across all staff. As with St Kieran's the school has several early years teachers, and it is important to model relationships around the school and in the classroom. Helen says, "Walk talk buddies gives staff a safe space to 'vent' if needed and keeps the staff room free of derogatory talk."

Janelle describes the importance of moving staff away from understanding high expectations only in terms of students and their behaviour and

understanding it in terms of high expectations of themselves as teachers. She explains, "It's a light bulb moment when people suddenly realise that it's about the baggage you bring and what you don't understand when you don't know your students."

Claudine's goal is to create an ongoing high expectations culture for the school community at St Kieran's. With staff turnover, it can be a slow process of starting each year with new teachers and building relationships. Every term, Claudine explains to her staff the need to have high expectations for the students, and match the teaching and learning to that expectation, so that the standards are set, the students know how to meet those standards and they are given quality feedback. "I talk about my expectations and this is what I expect for the kids and we just keep aiming for those high expectations," she says. "I don't want teachers to keep expecting mediocre stuff from students.... we can push the kids, we can give them high expectations, we can make those relationships with them." Claudine hopes that over time this will simply become a part of the culture of the school and that anyone new coming in will immediately see those high expectations.

Janelle agrees that the SSLP provides a better understanding of high expectations for staff. "The SSLP gives you a process of bringing a school community together," she says. "That process of developing these relationships so you can have robust conversations. And I think it just gives a better understanding about high-expectations relationships".

In the classroom

Claudine also talks to teachers about the importance of relationships with students. Both St Kieran's and St Joseph's started using daily check-ins with students after attending the SSLP which helps to build teacher-student relationships. "It's a great way for us to see where the kids are at and where they are up to and what's the plan for the day," Claudine says. "The kids love it, they love to check in, they love to check out and I think sometimes if some teachers forget to do that, the kids remind them".

Helen introduced the check-in initially by modelling the process in staff meetings. They hold a whole school check-in each morning which also helps to model the process for any new teachers, and then a check-in when they move into their classrooms. For the staff, they can better understand what is going on for the students. "As a whole school practice, I think it has been really important," Helen says. "The greatest success we see from that is really being able to key into our students right at the start of the day. Being able to pick up when an extra check-in or a different approach might be needed so that the day doesn't become derailed for not knowing how our kids are coming into us each morning." For the students, it sets them up for a better day. "I am really noticing the difference in our students – in their ability to engage with their day once they've had an opportunity to say or express how they're feeling," Helen says.

Many SSLP participants use check-ins or Yarning Circles, and Janelle explains how it

is important that if schools haven't undertaken the SSLP, they understand that it is more than simply sitting students in a circle. She describes one remote school that had bought a yarning mat but didn't have that understanding of the processes and rules of the Yarning Circle. Janelle describes how she was able to support the school. "And I said, well, let me tell you about what I can help you with. So, rather than just all the kids sit on a mat having a good old chinwag, a good old yarn up, let's have a process in place. So, we set the circle, the rules of the circle."



Both schools have also incorporated Stronger Smarter ideas into the goal setting and personal learning plans (PLPs). At St Kieran's, Claudine says in they ran Yarning Circles for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to work on their goals and PLPs. They found that learning sprints were very successful where students worked with a school

officer or teacher each week to ensure they met the learning goal for that week. When other students started asking to do Yarning Circles as well, Claudine decided to try this for all students, and now all classrooms are using Yarning Circles when they can.

Likewise, at St Joseph's, Helen says, "Our non-Indigenous students are really benefiting from that check in, not just our Indigenous kids. It's just as what I've found for a lot of [Stronger Smarter] things, it's just good practice. We have adopted them as whole school strategies because it has the potential to impact 300 kids not just 27."

Helen says the SSLP highlighted the importance of involving parents, children and teachers in the purposeful setting of high expectations. She explains, "We have a process in term one where we have student, teacher and parent team meetings where all are involved in setting goals for those students for the year". During the year the children present their goals to their parents and their teacher. "The students have reflected on their work from the year to date, what they want their goals to be, how the school can help them and how their parents can help them to achieve those goals. They really have ownership of those goals," Helen says.

Claudine has also used some of the other SSLP activities with students, working with Tammi Webber from the Catholic Education Office to redesign the adult-learning SSLP activities to the appropriate level for students. They set up a plan with a theme for each two-week period and teachers ran activities with their class, with

some teachers making up their own templates. Activities included inclusiveness and respect, cultural heritage, and personal strengths. Claudine says it worked well and the teachers loved it.

Community connections

Both St Kieran's and St Joseph's have worked on building community connections. Helen describes how the Catholic schools in Mount Isa are closely linked to the Good Shepherd parish which also helps with links across schools and to the wider community. "It's a very transient population in terms of mining," she says. "The schools are part of the heartbeat of the community because it's where people can come together – people can make friends, kids make friends, parents make friends. The parish is very much involved in outreach activities and that impacts what we see and do here at school as well."

The St Kieran's Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) describes the school's commitment to forging a meaningful and ongoing relationship with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders, ensuring that local elders feel safe and confident to share their historical and cultural knowledge with staff and students. The RAP has a commitment to welcoming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders and parents into the classroom, and for community members to be active members in decision making through committee membership. Claudine says, "The timing of the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program was good in terms of helping us move the school forward to

making sure the whole school community is happy with what we're doing".

St Kieran's acknowledges parents as first educators and encourages a partnership between the school and family. They have an Indigenous Parent Liaison Group, who come in and help with the RAP process, and the school aims to keep them involved as much as possible throughout the year. One thing that came out of the RAP process was to change the school's website so that the first slide in the photo roll on the home page incorporates an Acknowledgement to Country.

St Joseph's has also had a RAP in place for some time, which they develop together with the local community. They are now preparing it in Term four so that it can be lodged and approved and ready for the following year. "Having it ready the year before so that we can hit the ground running for the following year makes a huge difference," Helen says. "We have a RAP meeting to look at our goals and actions and deliverables for the next year where we invite people to come. This time we had our Indigenous education workers, our Assistant Principal Religious Education (APRE), and a couple of parents. And then also we had one of our cultural liaison officers, Uncle George Leon. He has a fair bit to do with our school, he comes in and plays soccer with the kids at lunchtime."

St Kieran's has established a reconciliation garden with an outdoor Yarning Circle which the school says provides a connection between Catholic and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spirituality where it can be used for both yarning and meditation. "Half of it is

beautiful green grass with gardens around it, and we can have assemblies or a mass in the grassed area," Claudine says. "Then there is a dry riverbed in the middle and you go across the river and into a big Indigenous Yarning Circle. So, when we invite elders and other people, we can go out to the Yarning Circle side."



Embedding Indigenous culture

St Kieran's describe how they have deliberately chosen to use meaningful, relevant and culturally appropriate art, artefacts and symbolisms to reinforce the work towards reconciliation in the school and make intentions clear to students, parents and the broader community. They fly the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

flags and engaged a local Indigenous artist to paint the handball courts in the stronger smarter identities.

St Joseph's have also used visual symbols to reinforce their aims towards embedding Indigenous culture in the school. Helen worked closely with a Kalkadoon woman to develop a new symbol for the school to be incorporated into the school logo. During the rebuilding of part of the school, they were able embed the symbol into the walkways as a constant reminder of community. This allowed the school to embed the significance that they wanted into the logo. "It wasn't just creating an image," Helen explains. "We created a story to go with our new logo to explain the elements. The symbol represents communities and the lines that link the concentric circles link the communities together. Yellow is the life force, red is the colour of ceremony and spirituality, and white is the bond of community." Helen says the large community space at the entrance to the school is a multipurpose sacred space with the ability to be a Yarning Circle.

At St Joseph's as part of their RAP discussions for 2020 they are discussing moving to a new day uniform that includes this symbol. This is involving a process of community consultation, first with the Indigenous families on the school board, and then with the wider school community. "We want to take it to the next step and just have that this is who we are, this is our school community, and this is our commitment to reconciliation," Helen says.

Both schools are clear that embedding the local culture is something that goes well beyond the visible symbols and celebrating days of significance. St Joseph's is working with the local Kalkadoon elders to bring the local culture into the classroom. Their two Indigenous education workers run a series of culturally based activities at lunchtime, where all students can participate to learn about local culture and history. "We've had one of the Torres Strait Islander elders come in and do weaving," Helen says. "The upper primary group have been working on a languages project, and the Kalkadoon elders have provided support for this as



well. The children have written their own Acknowledgement to Country and a version is read in assemblies each Friday. Helen explains, "So, it's not that standard script. It's something that's come from our children that they've written and then people in our school community are delivering that at assembly."

Likewise, at St Kieran's embedding Indigenous perspectives means embedding in the pedagogy and curriculum. They have been using the Pedagogy of Difference framework developed at James Cook University in Townsville. "Every year the teachers do the survey and they have a look at 'how can I change part of my teaching to fit with the kids', so that pedagogical framework fits in beautifully with Stronger Smarter", Claudine says. Every term the teachers have a day with the Indigenous education consultant and the Indigenous teacher to look at how to blend Indigenous content into the teaching across the whole curriculum rather than having specific units. Claudine explains, "A lot of units have some sort of Indigenous content. So, it's more blended in rather than separate."

At St Joseph's Helen also describes how the changes are becoming embedded within the school. "I think we're really getting down more into how we can have that everyday expression or connection of identity as a school community. We've come a long way now to be saying this is something that we celebrate and recognise every single day and it should be for every single student."

Summary

By incorporating Stronger Smarter across the whole school rather than as an intervention only aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, St Kieran's and St Joseph's have found that the approach benefits all students. In doing so, the embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives

becomes an integral part of how the school does business, which in turn promotes a positive sense of identity and belonging for their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Both St Kieran's and St Joseph's are working towards a school culture of high expectations across the whole school community. This begins with the school leadership modelling high expectations behaviours and processes from the Stronger Smarter Approach. Both Helen and Claudine worked with their staff through Yarning Circles and other activities to build a sense of collegiality amongst the staff and a shared understanding of high expectations *for* students, not *of* students. This is high expectations of self to ensure teaching styles recognise the diverse needs of students and challenge them to succeed. With the staff turnover that occurs in remote schools, this is an ongoing process with staff development required each year.

In the classroom both schools implemented classroom check-ins which help teachers to know what is happening

for students and sets the students up for a more successful day. Both principals have described how this is important for all students, not just for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Creating a school culture that celebrates the local Kalkadoon culture for all students has been extremely important for both schools. Both schools are achieving this through a variety of processes, ranging from visible symbols around the school to ensuring that all students have opportunities through the curriculum to learn about local culture and history.

This is an ongoing and consultative approach, and both schools have used their Reconciliation Action Plan process as a vehicle to ensure community collaboration.

The results are that both schools are seeing a more collegiate staff that hold high expectations and recognise what this means for their teaching, more engaged students, and greater community connections.



¹ Statistics from MySchool website.

² Stronger Smarter Institute. (2017). Implementing the Stronger Smarter Approach. Stronger Smarter Institute Position Paper. strongersmarter.com.au/resources/high-expectations-relationships/stronger-smarter-approach-position-paper/

³ Sarra, C., Spillman, D., Jackson, C., Davis, J., & Bray, J. (2018). High-Expectations Relationships: A Foundation for Enacting High Expectations in all Australian schools. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*. First View. doi 10.1017/jie.2018.10

⁴ Ungunmerr, M. R. (1988). Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness. Retrieved 11 Oct 2019 from <http://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/about-dadirri/dadirri-text>

⁵ All images used are from the public websites of the diocese and schools or from school Facebook pages