

Mount Isa Central School

Location: Very Remote Queensland



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Auntie Joan Marshall

Tina Butcher and Auntie Joan Marshall believe that making a difference for Aboriginal students in the Mount Isa area has to start from the ground up. When we interviewed Auntie Joan and Tina in 2015, they had been viewing the Positive Learning Unit (PLU) at Mount Isa through a different lens – changing the conversation from deficit to a strength-based approach. The PLU had moved from a behavioural unit where kids go when they're suspended to a positive student engagement space that will put the kids back on track when they return to the classroom. Tina, a teacher in the PLU, says, "Stronger Smarter put us all on the same page. As Chris Sarra says, he has never met an Aboriginal family that doesn't want their child to read and write, but acknowledging culture is equally important."

Since Term 4 in 2015, Tina and Auntie Joan have been running a Stronger Smarter Program for disengaged kids across six schools in the Mount Isa region.

The idea behind the program is to be proactive and support the kids before they reach a point of suspension. Auntie Joan, a cultural teacher aide, says "because of the days when we shifted off stations, the kids today don't know our culture. So this is bringing their identity back and their tribes and where they fit in with people." Tina explains, "We've used the program to meet the children where they're at and lead them on."

In 2016, Auntie Joan and Tina were interviewed by Harriet Tatham for the



ABC¹. In the interview, Tian explained how the Stronger Smarter bush learning program had led to better results in the classroom. "Last year we did a comparison of how many behavioural incidents were reported with students, and during and after the Stronger Smarter program there was a marked decrease in poor behavioural choices," she said.

The successes of the program are across the classroom, the school and the community. Teachers report a positive effect on the students in the classroom with improved behaviour and engagement. Tina says feedback from families is, 'thank you so much, this is a

healing place and it is so needed.' The attendance at a playgroup has risen from 2 students to 14 regular attendees. The PLU has supported two Aboriginal women to enrol in a Cert IV in Education Support. One of these women has already completed and has a job at the school.

We want the kids to be strong and smart

They decided to call the program the Stronger Smarter Program. "That's our hope for all these children. We want them to be strong and smart. We couldn't think of better words to describe what we want for them." Tina say

Staff and student Outcomes

Student engagement	Marked decrease in poor behaviour choices. Across the 6 schools, 29% decrease in short suspensions and 75% decrease in long suspensions from 2014 to 2015.
Community relationships	Indigenous leadership and role models in the school. Supported two Aboriginal women to enrol in Cert IV education support.
Staffing	Playgroup in the native garden – attendance increased from 2 children to a regular 14 children
Student engagement	Students more confident, willing to talk, greater belief in a positive cultural identity

Auntie Joan, has been running cultural activities in the town for many years. "My

¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-24/aboriginal-bush-lessons-improve-education-for-outback-kids/7538224>

growing up was just as rich as today," she says. "I had everything our medicine, what we have today we had then but we had to walk for it and collect it. So to turn the table and take our children back and do those things, I think our kids really identify with who they are and value it more".

Tina and Auntie Joan visit the six schools, Mount Isa Central, Sunset, Townview, Healy, Barkly Highway, and Happy Valley State Schools each week to spend time with the kids. Auntie Joan says their visits provide a space for the students to talk about their problems. "The kids can't wait for us to be there."

Celebrating Indigenous culture

In addition to the weekly visits, twice a term they take the kids out bush. Tina says there has been good support from the schools who provide transport and food for the trips. When they are out on country, the students have made clapsticks and

boomerangs, and they sit around the campfire and cook traditional food.

They have also set up a bush garden at the Central State School. Local elders, along with PLU staff and students, collected seed from bush foods and medicinal plants for the kids to grow. Auntie Joan has made up medicine, such as medicine grass processed and mixed with kangaroo fat to make a liniment. Tina says, "The garden is so valuable because Auntie Joan has the artefacts that come from every tree we have. The children get to see so much history and develop understandings".

Tina says it is so important to remember and celebrate the Indigenous knowledge and skills. "One little boy, when he saw tomatoes, he said 'look, look real ones just like the shop' and I just looked at him and thought all that knowledge about food, we need to start learning this. Aboriginal people have so many amazing skills and knowledges that remained invisible within a dominant culture..... the chemists and the doctors and lawyers were all there 200



years ago.... and we want to celebrate and showcase this”.

Parents are also a part of the program. Auntie Joan says getting the parents involved was about making sure they feel comfortable with the school and the school leaders. “If there’s a person in the school the Murris feel comfortable with, they’ll always come. So with the Stronger Smarter program we really worked from the ground up. And we do our homework too, we go and visit the parents and let them know when we’re going and they’re all ready to come with us. ” As a result, Auntie Joan says the kids and parents really respect them.

Feeling yellow and sparkly inside

Tina and Auntie Joan say the program is proving very successful. “One little boy said he feels all yellow and bubbly and sparkly inside because he loves learning about culture,” Tina says. “It actually gave me goosebumps when he said that. And at the end of last year, a little boy who had been coming here and I said what did you learn, and he said ‘that Aboriginal people are clever’ – and I just went ‘wow’.”

Auntie Joan says, “And the girls too, when we go to Sunset the little girls – before they wouldn’t talk and now they’re sitting waiting for you and talking out loud. Before they were just little shut pocket knives. When you go out on country, now you can’t shut them up.”

Supporting Indigenous Leadership

Auntie Joan attended the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program in 2013, along with Auntie Di, an Indigenous Education Worker in the school. She says the program supported them both to become Indigenous leaders and mentors in the school. She says when they attended the program and discovered it was about “giving us power and to use our knowledge and our culture”, that has empowered them both. Tina says, “Stronger Smarter has provided us with a lens to look at things. We didn’t have any Aboriginal leaders in this school and this has provided a lens to look for opportunities to do it better, and now the cultural identity is definitely strong and we’re so lucky to have the mentor in Auntie Joan to work with the children”.

Auntie Joan says at one school when the kids were asked about who they thought of as their role model, they picked her. “They were



saying me ... because we're on their level, and they know me and we turn up for them. So you think they're going to look at the Johnathan Thurstons or the Scotty Princes, but they're looking at us as their role models, because they see us more and we are able to make connections. It shows you how important connections are."

Benefits in the classroom

They are also seeing differences in the classroom. Tina says some students are engaging better in class as a result of the program. When they did a comparison of behavioural incidences before and after the kids undertook their Stronger Smarter program there was a marked decrease in poor behaviour choices.

They recognise that it does take time. Some students are still struggling, and it won't be a quick fix. But Tina says, "If we keep with the positive attitudes and the building on strengths and the cultural awareness, we might see a change in five years' time."

They recognise that the focus for schools is often on NAPLAN and outcomes, and the cultural side can take second place, but Tina and Auntie Joan are reminded of one of the provocations from the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program: *We don't live in the past, but the past lives in us*, and how it is essential to recognise and celebrate diversity.

Tina tells a story of when a child was making a book and he drew pigs as illustration but ran out of time to finish. So

Tina asked one of the teacher aides to colour one pig and she would do the other. Tina says, "And we put them on the table together and my pig was pink and Nan's was black. I kept that as an example for the cultural awareness because unless you actually capture moments like that, you don't know that we all have our past in our minds and that informs us. It's such a powerful thing".

Tina and Joan say that their next step is to work with the Principals to expand the program to be proactive and engage with all students in schools before they are referred to the Positive Learning Unit. Tina says "I'd like to be able to work with Principals to get the children before they have problems".

Auntie Joan says the program is so important to providing a positive learning environment for the kids. "This is the only way our kids are going to get their culture - through the schools. Since we've done Stronger Smarter it's made a big difference in the school. We've got things that we didn't have before like things in the garden that will go on for history and show people how strong and smart Aboriginal people were back in the days."