A First Nations Community Empowerment Framework

This Framework has been designed by the Stronger Smarter Institute. It is based on principles and ways of working from the Stronger Smarter Approach.

Acknowledgement for images: Loganlea State High School Knowledge House, Gunya Meta, Evans Head - Woodburn Preschool, Evans River High School and Ballina Coast High School.

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Introduction

When First Nations communities are empowered to take charge of their own decision making, this benefits the health and wellbeing of the whole community.

Schools, particularly in remote areas, play an essential role as a community hub. Working together with an empowered community can build a positive school environment that will improve student engagement and outcomes by responding to local needs and contexts.

The Stronger Smarter First Nations Community Empowerment Framework supports the shifting of power towards community decision making and community ownership of strategies and outcomes for student engagement, attendance and educational outcomes. The Framework is designed for whole school communities, meaning school leadership, educators, other school staff, parents and carers, local organisations, and local Elders. This is a rethinking and reframing to take a strength-based approach, seeking to move away from deficit thinking, and aiming to empower whole school communities to work together to improve outcomes for students.

The benefits of Community Empowerment are for the whole school community. For the school, it brings new ideas and strategies to support school attendance and engagement, and the commitment from the community to support these strategies.

For the community, it brings a voice in the educational agenda and opportunities to preserve and strengthen First Nations cultures, language and traditions.

In remote schools with high staff turnover, strategies can easily be forgotten or discontinued. Shifting the locus of control towards local school staff and community leadership can bring continuity and sustainability of school values, strategies and processes for school

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WORKING TOGETHER WITH AN EMPOWERED COMMUNITY CAN BUILD A POSITIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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improvement. Community Empowerment ensures structures are in place that describe the expectations of the whole school community for student outcomes and embed the community view in the ongoing decision-making and governance for the school. In this way, when staffing changes, the new school leadership and educators continue to be accountable for achieving the strategies and outcomes that have been designed together with the community and embedded in school planning.

About the Framework

The Community Empowerment Framework provides a set of processes to shift the power towards community decision making with the school.

While the Framework focuses on schools in remote communities, the principles and processes of the Framework are equally relevant to regional and metropolitan school communities.

The Framework uses Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, and is underlain by the Stronger Smarter Approach (SSA) (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017). The SSA considers the three spheres of the Personal, Community, and School. When these spheres can be brought together, this is a connecting space of innovation and creation (Figure 1).

The Framework takes a strength-based approach that recognises, nurtures and builds on existing strengths, skills and resources within the whole school community and focuses on what the community and the school can achieve together.

When schools can change from the traditional view of 'moving the community into the school space' and instead shift the school to meet the Community Sphere, this can achieve a true partnership of shared aspirations and achievements.

Figure 1: The Stronger Smarter Spheres
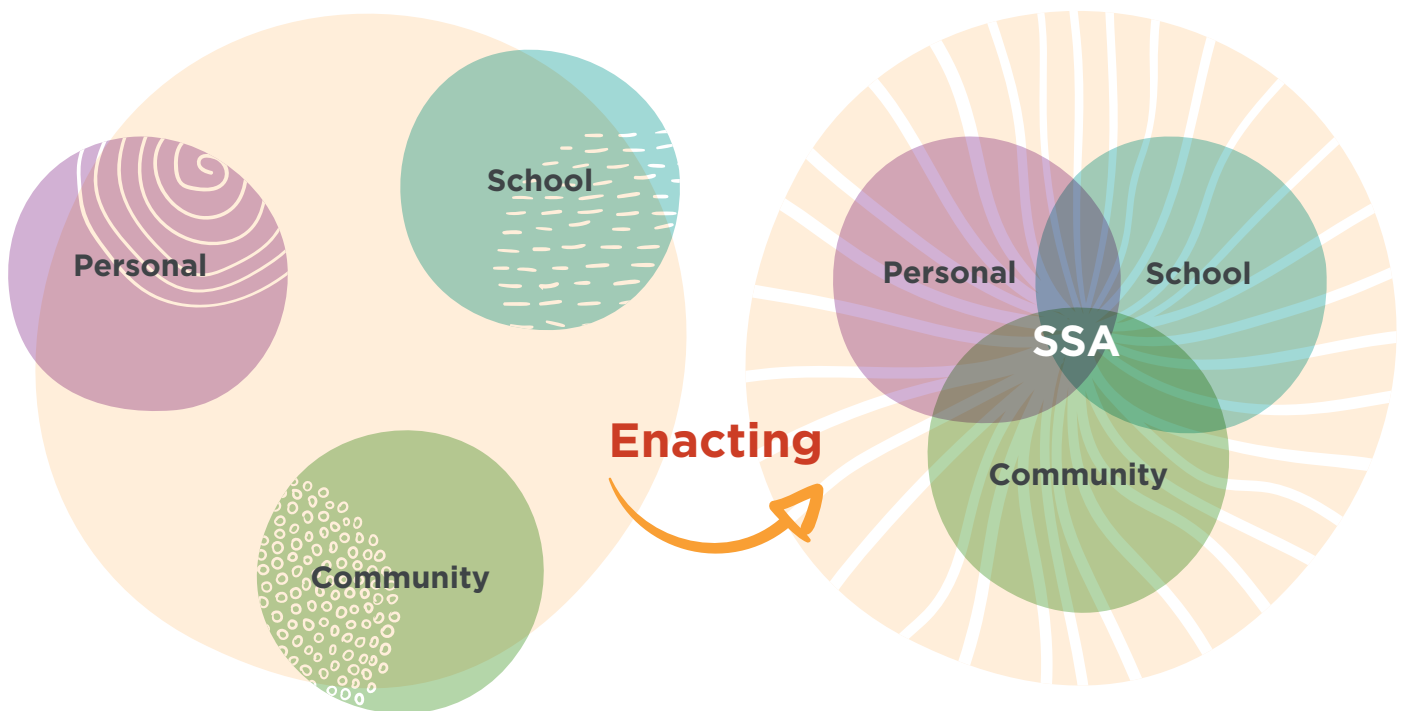
With High-Expectations Relationships, the spheres of the personal, school and community come together as the Stronger Smarter Approach in a connecting space of innovation and creation.

Figure 2 shows how the Framework starts in the Personal Sphere with the enablers or conditions needed for community empowerment. This is the Mindset and Ways of Working required to rethink and reframe current thinking, to let go of inhibiting assumptions associated with social conditioning, and to move into a more innovative space for solving complex problems.
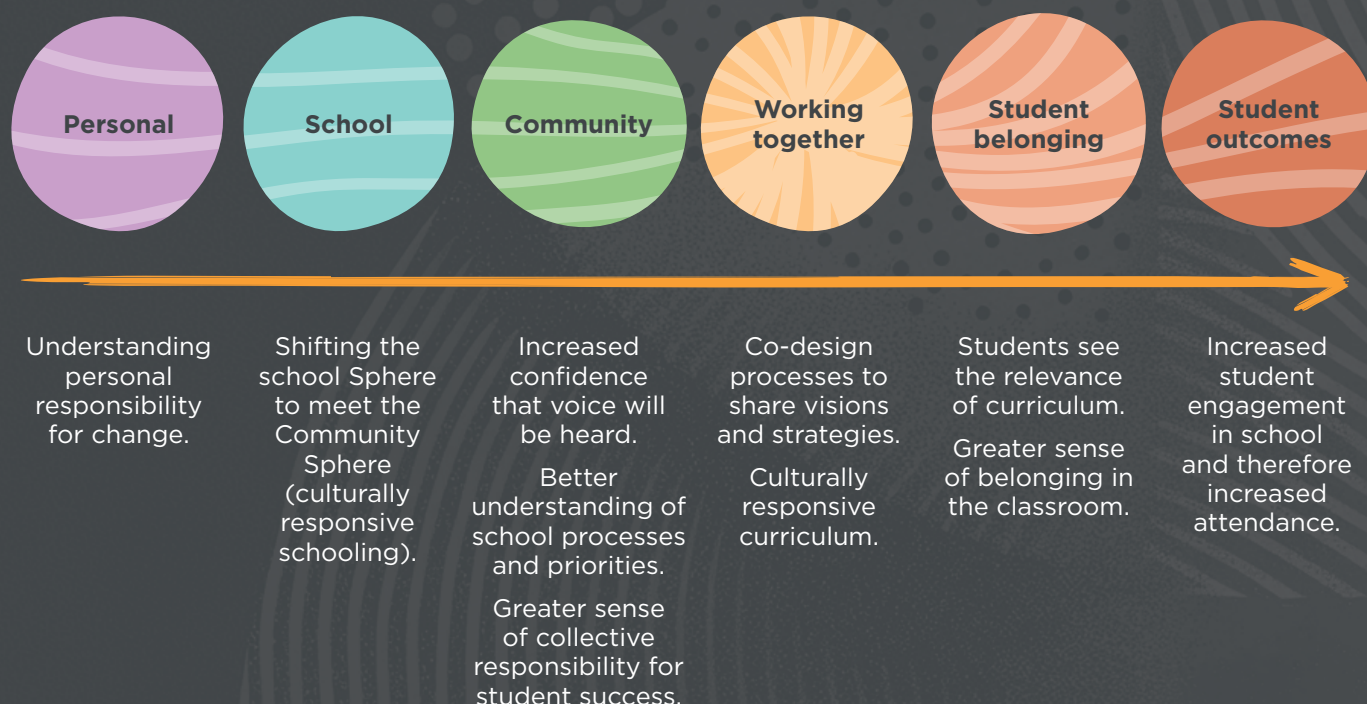
In the School Sphere, the Framework provides ideas for schools to review their cultural responsiveness and readiness to support Community Empowerment. This brings in the concept of High-Expectations Relationships as an essential component that weaves through

THE FRAMEWORK FOCUSES ON WHAT THE COMMUNITY AND THE SCHOOL CAN ACHIEVE TOGETHER

the whole Framework. The School Sphere considers the school's level of commitment to change and whether the school's level of cultural responsiveness will enable Community Empowerment.

Finally moving into the Community Sphere, the Framework discusses how schools can undertake a whole school community project for co-design as a way of embedding the community view within the school.

Figure 2: A strength-based approach to community empowerment

Personal	School	Community	Working together	Student belonging	Student outcomes
Understanding personal responsibility for change.	Shifting the school Sphere to meet the Community Sphere (culturally responsive schooling).	Increased confidence that voice will be heard.

Better understanding of school processes and priorities.

Greater sense of collective responsibility for student success. | Co-design processes to share visions and strategies.

Culturally responsive curriculum. | Students see the relevance of curriculum.

Greater sense of belonging in the classroom. | Increased student engagement in school and therefore increased attendance. |

Community Empowerment

Community engagement and school-community partnerships are a requirement of AITSL teacher standards.

The National School Improvement Tool requires schools to actively seek ways to build a strong connection with the local and wider community to enhance student learning, engagement, wellbeing, and opportunity, and the Family-School Partnerships Framework provides advice on how to do this. State governments have various projects and resources to support school-community engagement.

Traditionally, community engagement in schools has been seen as an activity to raise awareness and educate the community about issues, opportunities and resources to support their children in their schooling. In remote schools, community engagement is

seen as a tool to ensure parents send their children to school. When community engagement is framed as an activity that is controlled by the school, it

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT INVOLVES SHIFTING THE LOCUS OF CONTROL FROM THE SCHOOL TO THE COMMUNITY

becomes a process to involve community members in activities to gain community sign-off on decisions that have already been made. Community engagement is often the last thing on the list, or something to 'tick the box'.

This First Nations Community Empowerment Framework brings community engagement upfront as a core way of doing business

for the school. Community Empowerment involves shifting the locus of control from the school to the community. This should not be misunderstood as the community telling the school what they should do. It is, however, about shifting power. This changes from the school being in charge and 'consulting' with others, to a process that maintains a balance of power among all participants. When enacted authentically, this is a true partnership where the community has the confidence to take a level of responsibility for the education agenda.
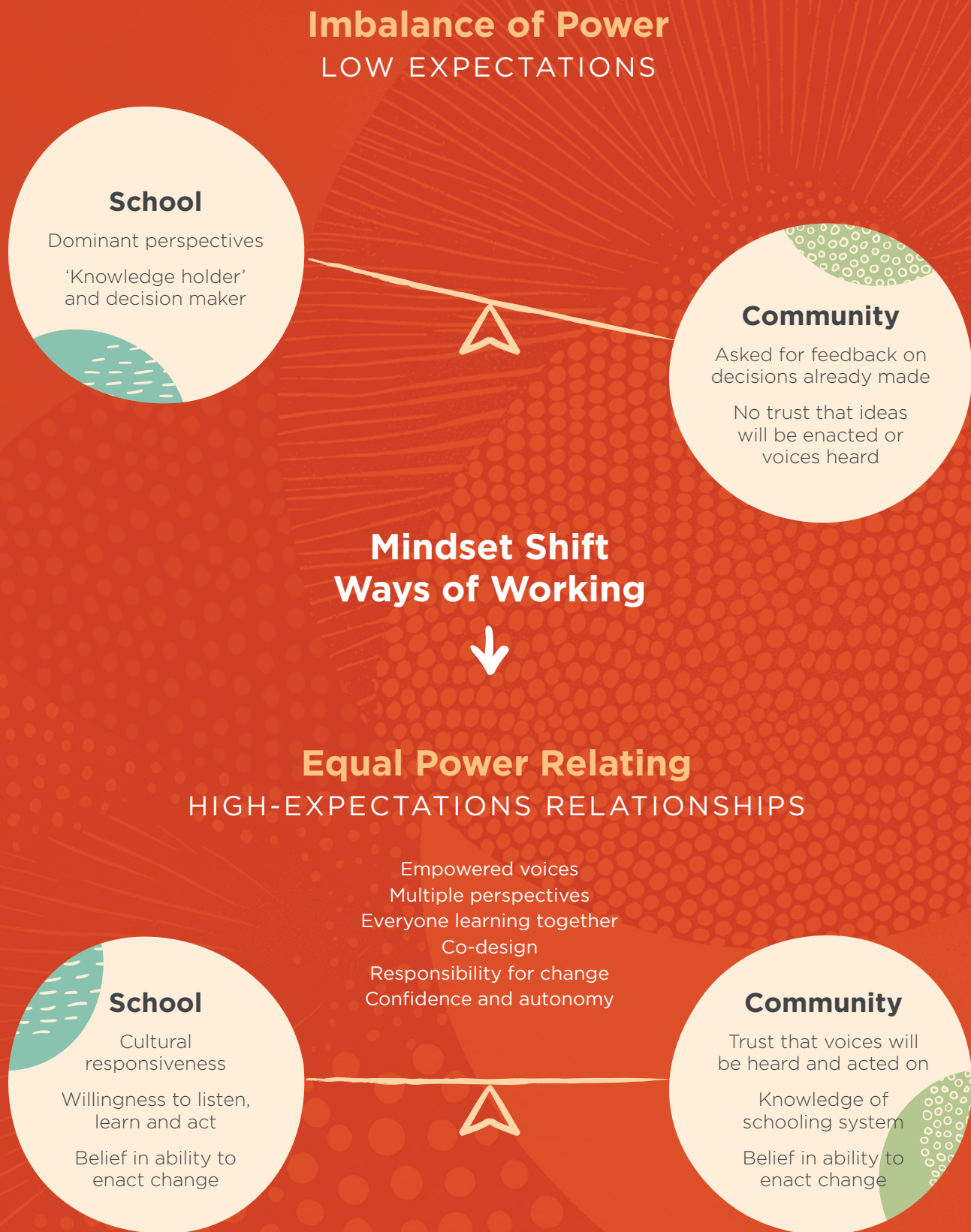
Figure 3 (p.7) describes the changes needed to shift the balance of power to a point of equal power relating and High-Expectations Relationships that provides the conditions required for Community Empowerment and co-design.

Figure 3: Changing the balance of power

Imbalance of Power
LOW EXPECTATIONS

School

Dominant perspectives

'Knowledge holder' and decision maker

Community

Asked for feedback on decisions already made

No trust that ideas will be enacted or voices heard

Mindset Shift
Ways of Working

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Equal Power Relating
HIGH-EXPECTATIONS RELATIONSHIPS

Empowered voices
Multiple perspectives
Everyone learning together
Co-design
Responsibility for change
Confidence and autonomy

School

Cultural responsiveness

Willingness to listen, learn and act

Belief in ability to enact change

Community

Trust that voices will be heard and acted on

Knowledge of schooling system

Belief in ability to enact change

High-Expectations Relationships

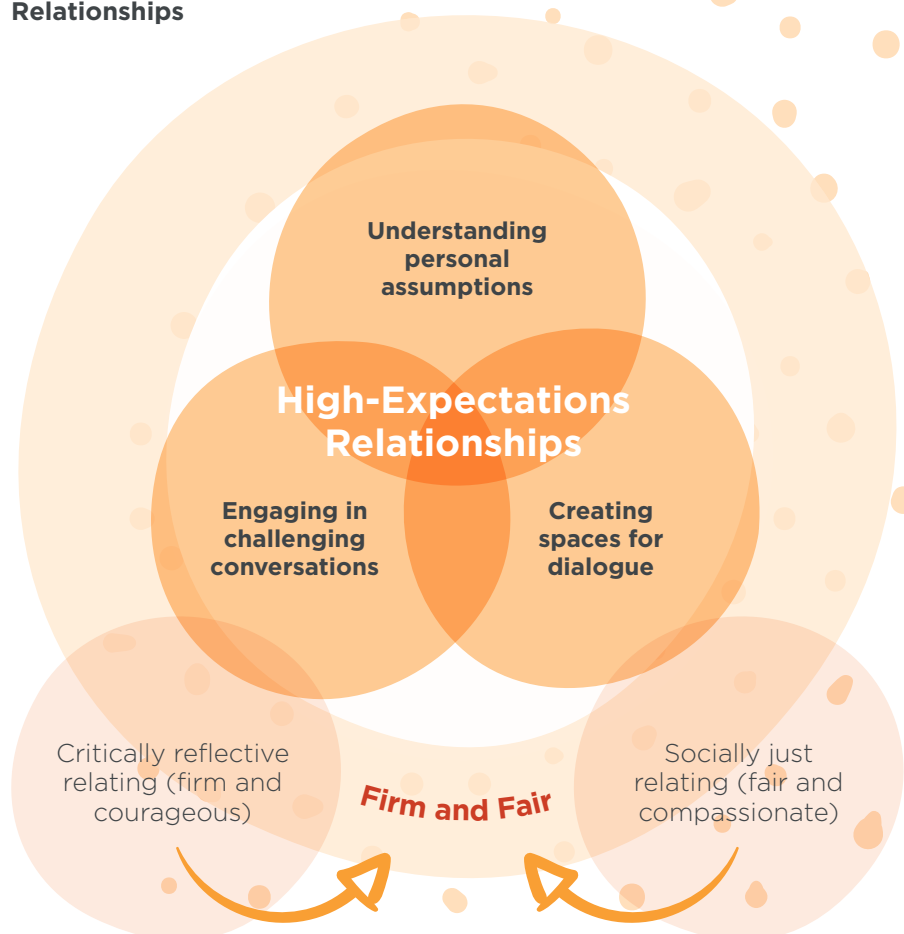## Relationships are a key underpinning of the whole Framework.

This is the building of relationships across the whole school community: between school leaders and educators, with students, parents/carers, community members and community organisations. Building relationships is everyone's responsibility.

The Stronger Smarter Approach describes High-Expectations Relationships as an enabling and empowering process to develop respectful, supportive and challenging relationships (Sarra et al, 2020; Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014). High-Expectations Relationships are built on mutual respect, deep listening, and understanding each other's perspectives. This requires reflecting on underlying beliefs and assumptions and how these may impact on interactions across the whole school community (Figure 4).

High-Expectations Relationships ensure a balance of being both 'firm' and 'fair'. Firm means being able to hold challenging conversations to address complex issues. However, holding challenging conversations also requires being 'fair'. This is about being compassionate and acknowledging and understanding the strengths and capacity that everyone brings to the conversation.

This enables a space of equal power with high levels of trust and safety where everyone can agree on what expectations should be. Time is made for conversational processes that will lead to collective sense-making and consensual decision-making to create pathways to change. Building High-Expectations Relationships can be challenging. It takes patience and time.

Figure 4: High-Expectations Relationships

Understanding personal assumptions

High-Expectations Relationships

Engaging in challenging conversations

Creating spaces for dialogue

Critically reflective relating (firm and courageous)

Firm and Fair

Socially just relating (fair and compassionate)

Personal Sphere: Mindset and Ways of Working

Moving the School Sphere towards the Community Sphere begins in the Personal Sphere.

This is described below as the Mindset needed to build Community Empowerment, and a set of Ways of Working.

Figure 5 shows how the Mindset and Ways of Working in the Personal Sphere, and a positive school environment and curriculum and pedagogy in the School Sphere are important for building the conditions for Community Empowerment and a co-design process in the Community Sphere. These elements will also be supported and improved as the whole school community becomes more empowered.

For Community Empowerment, and for a co-design process, the Mindset and Ways of Working apply to all stakeholders within the whole school community. However, these may be approached differently depending on social and cultural backgrounds.

Be the change you want to see in the world.

GHANDI

Figure 5: Framework for Community Empowerment

High-Expectations Relationships

Community, trust, confidence and knowledge

Co-design process

Community

Community Empowerment

Mindset

Curriculum and pedagogy

Personal

School

High-expectations Relationships

High-expectations Relationships

Ways of Working

Positive school environment

Mindset Shift

Responsibility for change
Be an agent of positive change and respond with possibility and action. Unpack 'out-of-awareness' assumptions to unlock the belief and confidence to challenge the status quo.

High expectations
A shift from deficit thinking. Find the balance of challenge and support. Move from high expectations of students to high expectations of self and for students.

Multiple perspectives
Be willing to sit with ambiguity and in a 'space of not knowing'. Value the perspectives of others. Practice deep listening so all voices can come together to share knowledge and lived experiences.

Ways of Working

Relationships
Build High-Expectations Relationships based on mutual respect, deep listening, and understanding other perspectives. Weave these respectful, supportive and challenging relationships through all interactions.

Equal power relating
Shift the locus of control towards local school staff and community leadership to bring continuity and sustainability. Enable spaces for dialogue where everyone can meet in a safe space to listen, learn and act together.

Local solutions
Seek local solutions. Recognise the strengths that already exist. Find ways to unlock and mobilise the collective knowledge and wisdom that already exists.

The Third Cultural Space
Be willing to learn. Become comfortable working in the Space where Indigenous Knowledges and Western world views complement each other. Move out of role and let go of being the knowledge holder.

Mindset

Responsibility for change

For co-design or for Community Empowerment, all participants in the process need to have agency and a sense of 'responsibility for change'. This is the first part of High-Expectations Relationships.

Our Western education system has effectively endorsed that, when it comes to First Nations students, it has been acceptable for school leaders and educators to believe that the locus of control lies externally. This, together with a lack of Community Empowerment, has meant that a sense of agency is lacking across whole school communities. There has been a belief that some form of external project or program is required before positive change can happen.

The Stronger Smarter Approach turns this around to move educators back to a position where the locus of control and the agency lies with everyone in the whole school community (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2018). For any process of co-design to work it must come from a place of educators having a sense of 'responsibility for change' and believing they can make a difference. Likewise it requires a level of Community Empowerment for community members to believe that their input will have an impact on future outcomes.

High-Expectations Relationships focus initially on the Personal Sphere to examine the impact of social conditioning and out-of-awareness assumptions. This provides a shift in thinking to move beyond cultural assumptions (often based in deficit thinking) to a more realistic and deeper understanding of the context of individual students and their families. This 'mindset shift' unlocks confidence to challenge the status quo and opens up the possibilities for the whole school community to challenge their beliefs around what is possible for students and the school and their personal role in contributing to this. This process requires the space and time for new learning. Throughout the process it is essential to respond with possibility. Listening and learning must be accompanied by action.

When challenged, do you respond with defensiveness or possibility?

High expectations

The concept of high expectations is embedded in the education system. However, there is complexity when it comes to enacting true high expectations, particularly for First Nations students. As mentioned above, this requires deep reflection. High expectations of students as performance standards can lead to a deficit view where Indigenous education is seen as 'a problem that needs fixing'. Expecting students to 'fit in' to the values and strengths defined by the Western education system can miss the strengths that First Nations students bring to the classroom.

As school leaders and educators move from thinking about 'who' they are teaching to 'how' they teach, this leads to a space where every student can be treated equally as a learner. When educators have a deeper understanding of the social and cultural context of students and their families, they can build the curriculum and teaching strategies that will meet diverse learning needs. This is a view of high expectations for all students in making excellent progress in their learning, and high expectations of educators to see their own role in ensuring success for every student.

Multiple perspectives

Leading on from a belief in personal 'responsibility for change', Community Empowerment is built on an assumption that any group of people has the ability to use their existing knowledge and skills to solve complex problems themselves. The process of Community Empowerment aims to unlock and enable this knowledge.

For school leaders and educators, particularly in remote schools, it is essential to recognise that a personal or lived experience of providing school services is not the same as the lived experiences of those who live in the community. For schools this means recognising the importance of diverse voices and perspectives in decision making and honouring the knowledge and expertise the community brings.

The enacting of High-Expectations Relationships seeks to provide spaces of dialogue where participants are willing to sit for a while with ambiguity and in a 'space of not knowing'. All participants acknowledge and appreciate the perspectives that others bring and practice deep listening to ensure all voices can come together to share knowledge and lived experiences.

Schools can provide the spaces to mobilise these diverse voices and perspectives to bring innovative solutions that can challenge conventional thinking. When schools are able to open up spaces where all voices come together, this can provide a platform of shared history, understanding, and commitment to move forward.

Ways of Working

Relationships

High-Expectations Relationships weave through all interactions. These are relationships built on mutual respect, deep listening, and understanding multiple perspectives. This provides the foundation for opening up spaces of equal-power relating and collective sense making.

Authentic human interactions become impossible when you lose yourself in a role.

ECKHART TOLLE

Equal power relating

These spaces of 'not knowing' and dialogue ensure that everyone can sit together in a space of equal power-relating. When schools create safe spaces where community members feel comfortable to speak up, empowered, and heard, this brings the opportunity to work together towards innovative solutions. Dialogue involves being prepared to challenge and replace personal perspectives and assumptions. For school leadership and educators this may mean stepping out of the traditional role of 'teacher' and into a role of 'learner', enacting deep listening with community.

Local solutions

The Stronger Smarter Approach is based on the idea that any group of people already holds the collective knowledge and wisdom to successfully meet the complex challenges they face. This is a move away from the idea that 'external experts' can 'provide the answers'. There is no 'one size fits all' and local solutions are always needed. Any process for Community Empowerment requires a strength-based approach. This involves the core underlying belief in the strengths and knowledge of the whole school community and works towards unlocking and enabling this collective knowledge.

The Third Cultural Space

When whole school communities work together in a way that First Nations perspectives and Western world views complement each other, this has been described as working in the Third Cultural Space (Davis, 2011; Mathematics Hub & Stronger Smarter Institute, 2023). This is a space for dialogue where diverse cultural worldviews come together to form unique knowledges. In this space, privileging community voices means moving out of role and letting go of being the 'knowledge holder' to ensure deep listening and learning.

School Sphere: Reviewing Cultural Responsiveness

For a process of Community Empowerment to be successful, the whole school must be ready to undertake a journey of Community Empowerment.

This is explained in more detail in the Stronger Smarter Approach (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017). The elements described below provide schools with the opportunity to review their own cultural responsiveness and readiness to support Community Empowerment.

Reviewing Cultural Responsiveness

Commitment to change

Success requires commitment at both departmental and school level to be prepared to allocate the time required for the Community Empowerment process to be successful. Commitment at departmental level may ensure that the commitment at the school level is sustained if school leadership changes.

At the school level, school leadership and educators all need opportunities for reflection to ensure the mindset shift and ways of working described previously are in place across the whole school. This is an assessment of the collective school Mindset and Ways of Working to ensure they provide the foundation for successful Community Empowerment. This could also be described as the level of staff cultural responsiveness (AITSL, 2022). The school and departmental commitment to the process should include allocating time for professional development and capacity-building for school staff. At the school level, this is a whole school shift in attitude towards Community Empowerment.

This is a shift from the deficit discourses around why students are not attending school towards looking at how the school environment can be more engaging for First Nations students. As shown in Figure 3 (p.7), this is a shift in power. True co-design involves a shift from the school or government organisation being the lead or controller of a project to being an enabler to ensure conditions for community to share ideas and take control of strategies.

It also involves a culture of High-Expectations Relationships across the whole school.

Taking time to understand the social and cultural context of the community is an essential starting point to developing collaborative approaches that privilege diverse voices and perspectives. For the whole school community to feel confident in sharing ideas, this requires the elements of High-Expectations Relationships: deep respectful listening, equal power relating, spaces for dialogue, and the confidence that school leadership will not only listen but also act.

Positive school environment

If the whole school community is to work together, parents, carers, and community members must feel comfortable within the school environment. A culturally responsive school has an environment and culture that feels welcoming for the whole school community and provides spaces for engagement and dialogue. This is more than the physical environment. Culturally competent and collegiate school leadership and staff, effective communication processes, high expectations, and High-Expectations Relationship all contribute to a positive school culture where students and community feel welcome.

A positive school environment prioritises High-Expectations Relationships throughout the school. It requires viewing and enacting high expectations through a relational lens where fair, socially-just relating enables the firm, critically reflective relating necessary for quality learning. It involves strength-based processes to value the strengths, local knowledge and community connections that teacher aides can bring to the classroom. It is being innovative in ways to engage with families to build the emotional bank account that enables spaces for challenging conversations when they are needed.

Spaces where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued, makes room for learning to truly begin.

Curriculum and pedagogy

Evidence shows that when students have a sense of belonging in the classroom and feel proud of who they are and their cultural background, this supports student well-being and has positive impacts on academic performance. As educators build High-Expectations Relationships with their students, they will also start to bring in more culturally responsive pedagogies. Community Empowerment can bring more First Nations perspectives and knowledge into the school, and as this is welcomed in the school it will work to further empower the community.

Community Sphere: A Process for Community Empowerment

The aim of Community Empowerment in schools is to establish on-going structures that enable community decision making in school governance.

Community Empowerment promotes community ownership of strategies and outcomes for student engagement, attendance and educational outcomes. This is achieved through setting up co-design processes that support the whole school community to agree on shared visions and ways of working together, and to design innovative and localised strategies to enable greater student engagement (and therefore attendance) at school.

For a co-design process to be successful, there needs to be a level of 'empowerment' for all stakeholders to have the confidence, knowledge and ownership to engage in co-design. At the same time, the co-design process itself that provides greater levels of participation, trust and agency, will further support Community Empowerment (Figure 6).

As described previously, there needs to be a certain level of cultural responsiveness within the school before embarking on a co-design process. It is important that school leadership prioritise the aim of understanding community educational priorities and drawing on the funds of knowledge available in the community and avoid letting the school's governance and reporting requirements overrun the agenda.
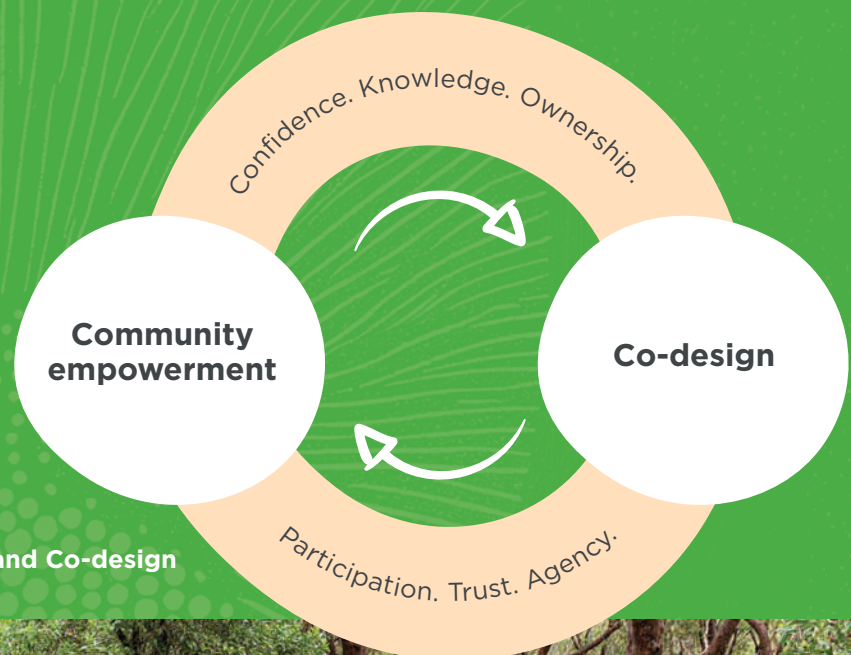
Figure 6: Community Empowerment and Co-design

Confidence. Knowledge. Ownership.

Community empowerment

Co-design

Participation. Trust. Agency.

High-Expectations Relationships

Mindset
Responsibility for change
High expectations
Multiple perspectives

Community Empowerment
Community ownership of outcomes and support for strategies
New ideas and solutions drawing on local knowledge
Sustainable solutions
Positive school environment
Strengthen Indigenous Knowledge (IK) in the curriculum
Whole community wellbeing

School
Commitment to change
Culturally responsive school
Curriculum and pedagogy

Ways of Working
Equal power relating
Local solutions
The Third Cultural Space

Community
Community confidence and knowledge
Co-design processes
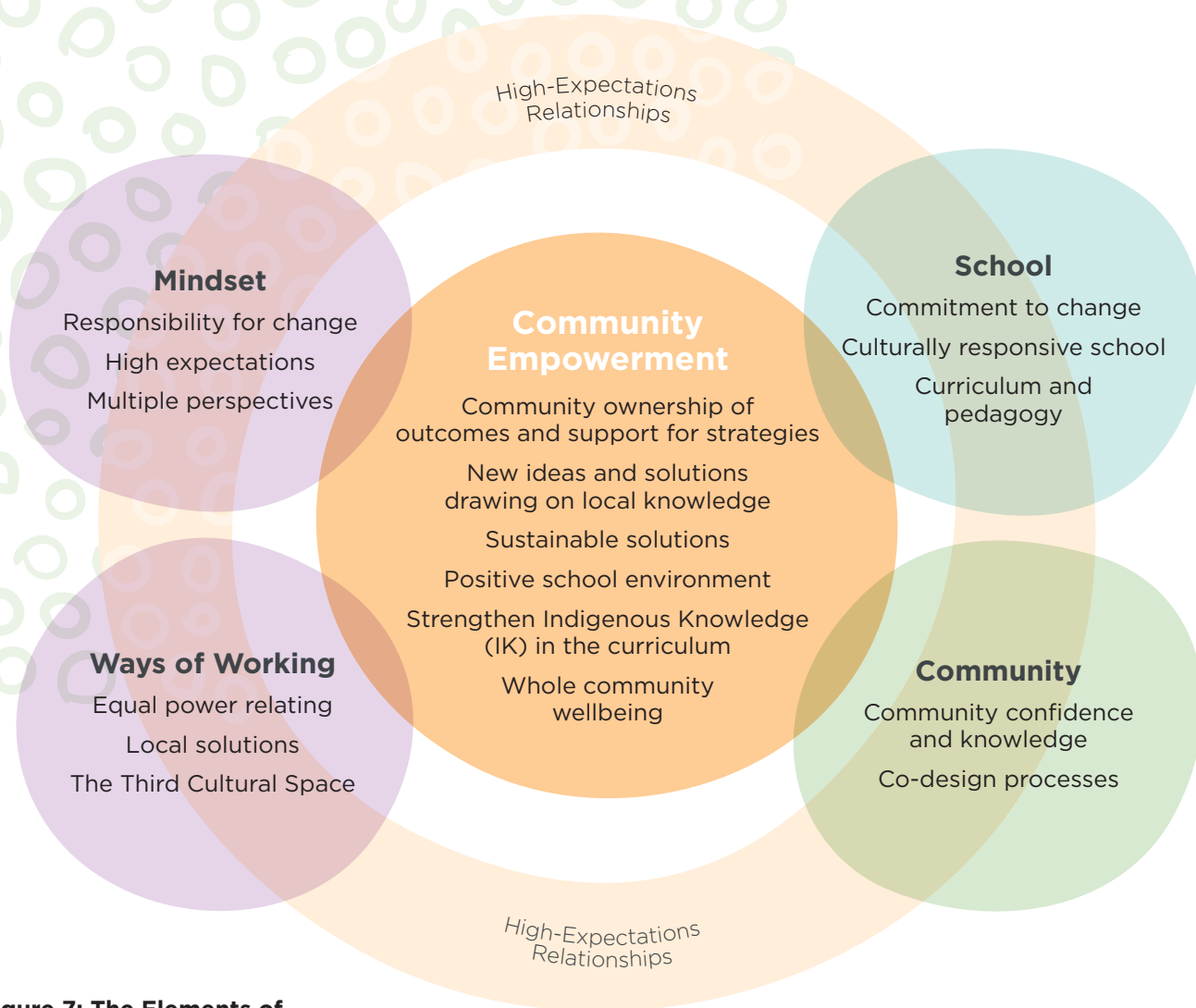
High-Expectations Relationships

Figure 7: The Elements of Community Empowerment

Success is greatly increased when schools have a deep understanding of the Stronger Smarter Approach and High-Expectations Relationships as gained through undertaking courses provided by the Stronger Smarter Institute. For successful Community Empowerment, High-Expectations Relationships must be prioritised so that they weave through all aspects of the empowerment and co-design processes.

The Mindset and Ways of Working discussed in the Personal Sphere apply equally to everyone involved in a co-design process. As well as school leadership and educators,

parents, carers and community members also need to have confidence in their ability to contribute, and a sense of agency and responsibility for change. Working in the Third Cultural Space means that there is a level of learning for everyone. For school leadership and educators this is learning more about the local community and culture. For parents, carers and community members this may mean a process where the school shares knowledge about current school strategies and priorities and processes.

The co-design process may be more effective for schools when it

involves an external Facilitator to support and mobilise the whole school community. This is most effective if the Facilitator is a First Nations led organisation. When the process is run by the Stronger Smarter Institute, it incorporates a number of processes specifically designed by the Institute to build relationships and understanding.

Figure 7 summarises the elements that provide the conditions for Community Empowerment: The Mindset and Ways or Working in the Personal Sphere, culturally responsive schools in the School Sphere, and co-design processes in the Community Sphere.

Summary

This Framework outlines a co-design process involving the whole school community.

It draws on community knowledge to develop strategies that improve student engagement and outcomes. This is based on the Stronger Smarter Approach.

This process requires commitment and engagement from all participants – the whole school community as well as at departmental level. Before any co-design process can begin, the conditions for success need to be in place. This Framework has described the Mindset and Ways of Working in the Personal Sphere and provides a brief overview of processes in the School Sphere to examine

a school's preparedness for a Community Empowerment and co-design project. For success, this requires a recognition of the time needed for both the Facilitator and the school to build relationships and networks across the whole school community. Success also requires the school to be committed to set the foundations of a culturally responsive school.

Further information on the Stronger Smarter Approach and High-Expectations Relationships is available on the Stronger Smarter website and the references provided on the following page.

References and Resources

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Empowering whole school communities for transformative change