

High-Expectations Relationships: a Foundation for Quality Learning Environments in all Australian Schools





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Preface

This paper has been developed by the Stronger Smarter Institute and is based on concepts and approaches that the Institute has developed over a number of years of running leadership programs for school and community leaders across Australia.

The paper draws specifically on the published and unpublished work of Chris Sarra and David Spillman, but also incorporates concepts that have been developed by the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program facilitators and through group conversations with the entire 2014 Stronger Smarter Institute team.

The paper introduces the concept of High-Expectations Relationships, which together with a 'positive sense of cultural identity' and 'embracing positive Indigenous leadership', forms one of the three 'pillars' of the Stronger Smarter philosophy and approach.

We recognise that in introducing the concept of High-Expectations Relationships in this written form we are not able to provide the in-depth understandings that are possible through the experiences of the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program.

Through our internal discussions, we also recognise that the paper raises many questions which are not addressed: *What constitutes high-expectations leadership? When is it appropriate or necessary for a school leader to develop High-Expectations Relationships? In what contexts is it possible to create true equal power relationships that move beyond the role of teacher or school leader? In what contexts does the 'role' still need to be part of the relationship? What are the characteristics of a high-expectations classroom?*

We hope this paper will provide a basis for discussion and we invite our Stronger Smarter Leadership Program alumni and others to provide their thoughts on what a High-Expectations Relationship means in the classroom, school and school-community.

The Stronger Smarter Institute 2014

High-Expectations Relationships

Through the work of the Stronger Smarter Institute with school and community leaders across Australia, the term High-Expectations Relationships has emerged as a broad concept central to the Stronger Smarter Philosophy and approach. While the elements of High-Expectations Relationships have been embedded in the Institute's work since the foundational work of Dr Chris Sarra and the staff and students of Cherbourg School, it is only in recent years that the Institute has begun to describe this concept. Through the critically reflective conversations held as part of the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program and other work of the Institute, the Stronger Smarter Institute has developed an understanding of the types of behaviours required to enact high-expectations for all students in the classroom, school, and school community.

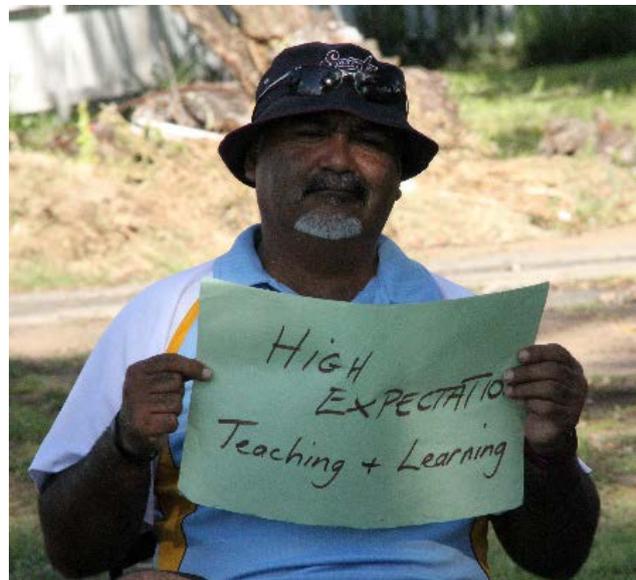
High-expectations for all students has been discussed in educational theory for some years. While much has been written about the importance of *believing* in high-expectations, less has been written about what teachers need to do to *enact* high-expectations in the classroom and the school community. More recently, Dr Chris Sarra's work in developing the Stronger Smarter Philosophy has brought consideration of the need for high-expectations to the forefront of discussions about Indigenous education in Australia.

The Stronger Smarter Institute promotes high-expectations leadership in schools to ensure high-expectations classrooms and learning environments with high-expectations teacher/student relationships. High-Expectations Relationships provide a unique and essential centre-stone of the Stronger Smarter approach. In this paper, we describe how underlying and out of awareness beliefs and assumptions can impact on high-expectations in the school and classroom. Through a framework of High-Expectations Relationships, we discuss the dispositions and capabilities needed to enact high-expectations. Using both the Stronger Smarter Institute's work with school and community leaders, and drawing on the work of other researchers, we describe how the High-Expectations Relationships that teachers and school leaders can develop with students, peers, parents and community can impact on improved educational outcomes for students.

Understanding High-Expectations

Researchers both in Australia and overseas have described how teachers working with minority and disadvantaged students may voice a commitment to high-expectations but their actions do not always match this commitment. The Stronger Smarter Institute's work with school and community leaders has shown that the underlying and 'out of awareness' beliefs and assumptions that teachers may bring to the classroom can impact on how high-expectations is enacted in a school or classroom.

Historically, Australian society has conditioned us to have low expectations of Indigenous students. In Australia, high-expectations for Indigenous students has too often been built on 'deficit' thinking and interpreted as meaning students should be 'mainstream'. The deficit positioning of Indigenous people is strongly reinforced in education (Vass, 2013) through the language of 'disadvantage' and the discourse of progress and enlightenment (Harrison, 2007; Mills, 2008).



Agendas such as *Closing the Gap*, where resources are allocated to education systems and schools for Indigenous children on the basis of a 'need to catch up', continually use language that reinforces deficit perspectives. Deficit discourse amongst teachers posits that Indigenous children are less able to learn than their non-Indigenous counterparts because of their external situation (Sarra, 2008; McNaughton & Mei Kuin Lai, 2008). Such deficit discourses can be self-perpetuating, where preconscious patterns of assumption and thinking facilitate 'out of awareness' searching for evidence to reinforce them.

This situation is made even more complex by the fact that some Indigenous people have been so heavily socialized by this deficit colonial gaze that they have come to accept negative stereotypes as part of their identity (Gorringe *et al*, 2011; Sarra 2005). Sarra (2005) demonstrated how such a negative sense of identity among Aboriginal children and their families fuels low expectations of

both self and others, preventing educational engagement and achievement. Dr Sarra's research revealed the negative and inaccurate perceptions held by mainstream Australia of what being Aboriginal means (notions of alcoholism, laziness, welfare, dependency and aggressiveness) (Sarra 2005, 2011a p.77), in contrast to Aboriginal self-perceptions relating to notions of pride, respect, family, ways of connecting, and connections to land and spirituality (Sarra, 2011a p.102).

The literature tends to highlight cultural differences. Research generally focuses on how best to help Indigenous students fit into the system, rather than exploring what Indigenous students may bring with them to the learning experience. This leads both to a belief that Aboriginal children need to be taught differently, and to the possibility of a loss of cultural identity in the classroom. The Stronger Smarter philosophy rejects the negative 'deficit' thinking for both teachers and students, and promotes the idea that the same high quality teaching strategies used for all students are relevant for Indigenous students as well. By focusing on the strengths of students and teachers, Stronger Smarter encourages a strong sense of cultural identity, belonging, and being valued for all students with the belief that this will improve student learning.

Research on low socio-economic status (SES) students both in Australia and overseas has shown how social conditioning and out of awareness beliefs and perceptions can result in watered down expectations and poor choices of pedagogical and teaching strategies. The quality of teacher/student interactions can be affected by seemingly inconsequential behaviours, for instance how much a teacher smiles or makes eye contact with students (Marzano, 2007). The result can be unproductive teacher/student relationships where students respond negatively and the quality of student work is lower (Bishop & Berryman, 2006, 2009). In attempts to manage poor student behaviour, teachers may adopt 'defensive' teaching strategies whereby they simplify content and reduce demands on the students (Griffiths et al, 2007). Learners who appear disadvantaged can be regarded as unready for high-critical thinking activities (Torff, 2011), and teachers may choose pedagogies that revolve around providing information, giving directions, setting assignments and tests rather than expecting higher-order thinking skills (Perso, 2012). Content becomes removed from students' personal experiences, background knowledge and culture, contributing to the students' further alienation from schooling and school knowledge. A self-fulfilling prophecy results whereby disadvantaged children receive watered-down lessons which limit students' academic growth (Torff,

2011). In Australia, quality pedagogy has been most absent where it is most needed – in schools and classes with high levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students of low-socioeconomic status (Griffiths *et al*, 2007).

Out of awareness, negative stereotyping and low expectations from teachers can affect student engagement in class. Bishop and Berryman (2006, 2009) report how Maori students in New Zealand explained their own absenteeism and disengagement as a way of asserting their own self-determination in situations where they believed the teacher held low expectations and treated bad behaviour as being ‘Maori’ and good behaviour as being assimilated into the majority culture. Teachers in the same study focused on socio-economic problems as the main cause of low Maori achievement.

Rose (2012) suggests Australian education systems have overtly suppressed and devalued all aspects of Indigenous knowledge and, as a result, ‘racism by cotton wool’ occurs. In the absence of knowledge, teachers wanting to do the right thing but afraid of getting it wrong take an easy option. Classrooms disengage students, they don’t receive a high quality delivery, and students are ‘lured’ into accepting mediocre standards. Sarra (2011b) describes how teachers collude with low expectations when they think they are being responsive to culture, for instance by providing easier homework because they don’t think the students will do it, or accepting without question that Indigenous students are usually absent on Thursdays and Fridays. In contrast, teachers collude with *high-expectations* when they challenge such behaviour, visit parents to find out why the students are away, and engage in dialogue to discover what might need to change.

Sarra (2014) explains that the difference between high-expectations rhetoric and High-Expectations Relationships is crucial. High-expectations rhetoric will see a child suspended from school for swearing at the teacher. A High-Expectations Relationship will try to understand the circumstances that caused the incident, and look at a range of constructive solutions. The child might still be suspended, but the response might also result in teaching the child that this way of speaking is not accepted at the school, or the teacher apologising to the child for backing them into a corner.

Challenging deficit Indigenous self-perceptions was one of the critical undertakings of the Strong and Smart agenda at Cherbourg School (Sarra, 2005). ‘Strong and Smart’ gives students the belief that they can celebrate their

own culture and still be smart academically. In his PhD research, Sarra describes the professional challenge for teachers to begin to move beyond deficit thinking.

It has seemingly been easier for education authorities to hold Indigenous communities culpable for failing to engage with schools for the purposes of education. It is easy to describe Indigenous communities in a complex social and cultural context and to attribute student failure as a direct consequence of the context. However the professional challenge for classroom teachers and their support infrastructure is to reflect inwards and evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching practice and ask what it is that they are doing or not doing as a teacher that contributes to Indigenous student failure. (Sarra, 2011a, p.161).

Deficit conversations in the staffroom can not only reduce teachers' expectations of Indigenous students, but also disempower the teachers themselves as they reduce the teacher's belief that they can help Indigenous children to succeed and achieve (McNaughton & Lai, 2009). Once teachers can reject the deficit theorising and understand their out of awareness beliefs and assumptions, the teaching strategies that are needed become clearer. Teachers can begin to think of themselves as being able to solve problems (Bishop & Berryman, 2009).

A High-Expectations Relationships is an authentic two-way relationship that is both supportive and challenging. High-Expectations Relationships begin by honouring the humanity of others. Sarra (2014a) explains that for mainstream and Indigenous Australia this means recalibrating the relationship so that we are first connected by our humanity and can purge the toxic and restrictive binary of same/other.

In a High-Expectations Relationship, each individual's strengths and capacity are acknowledged and spaces of equal power are created. Cultural, intercultural and



conversations processes allow respectful, open dialogue in a safe and trusting environment. In this way, challenging conversations and collective sense-making allow groups to co-create solutions and pathways to change. The Stronger Smarter Institute believes that, while at one level the concept and processes of High-Expectations Relationships are key for policy-makers in Australia, they also provide a basis and framework whereby individual teachers and school leaders can make a difference in the classroom, school and school community.

Firm and Fair: The foundations of High-Expectations Relationships

The role of the teacher is considerably more complex than simply a deliverer of content. The Stronger Smarter Institute's work is based on a belief that the relationship a student has with their teacher is an influential force in their ability to achieve in the classroom (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). The Institute sees the 'contact



zone' of education as the place where the teacher and student meet and co-create learning. This should be a space where individual cultures, talents, preferences and interests are honoured and equitable power dynamics are upheld.

In a school environment, High-Expectations Relationships (H-ER) combine the belief of high-expectations with the behaviours and dispositions needed to create a high-expectations learning environment. Teachers and school leaders need to develop quality relationships not just with students, but within the staffroom, with parents, and with the school community.

Creating quality relationships and a high-expectations learning environment requires the establishment of high levels of trust and safety and the courage to challenge both oneself and others. Sarra (2011c) describes High-Expectations Relationships as being both firm and fair.

A relationship is anchored by high-expectations when we have the compassion to be fair, by engaging in acknowledging and enabling processes when we can, as well as having the courage to be firm, by challenging and intervening when we need to.

Being 'fair' in the relationship is essential to establish trust and safety. Here, 'fairness' requires the desire and ability to actively enquire and listen to 'others' to begin to understand how they see the world and their place in it. Taking the time to observe and acknowledge the strengths of an individual or community signals a belief in the sense of capacity and worth of others, that they are worthy of a 'fair go' and that people are capable of lifting themselves if they are given the right opportunities to do so (Sarra, 2011c). H-ER find ways to support, develop and embrace this capacity, as opposed to assuming it is not there in the first place. For Indigenous people, who were historically considered either 'non-existent' or, at best, 'savages' and whose children were separated from their parents to explicitly teach them how to be 'less Aboriginal', starting from a point of truly honouring the humanity of others is essential to make a difference to educational outcomes for Indigenous students (Sarra, 2011c).

When we acknowledge the humanity of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people we can get to a space where we can acknowledge the challenges and complexities we face together. Not just challenges and complexities for Indigenous Australia, but challenges and complexities for all Australians. Further, we acknowledge a sense of Indigenous human capacity to rise above such challenges, as well as a sense of worthiness; Indigenous Australians afforded the right to an opportunity to rise. (Sarra, 2011c).

The 'fair' aspect of H-ER can be described as 'socially-just relating' (Mills, 2008) which is characterised by empathy and compassion, deep listening, genuine interest and non-judgement (Spillman, 2013). This leads to equitable power relations and enables the establishment of trust and safety within the relationship.

As well as being 'fair', H-ER also need to be 'firm', which can be described as critically reflective relating (Spillman, 2013). This is characterised by courage, resilience, rigour and firmness in order to challenge mindsets, in self and others. Being 'firm' means having the courage to challenge and intervene when we need to, for instance at times when individuals or communities are clearly not exercising their responsibilities appropriately (Sarra, 2011c). In the staffroom, this may mean challenging deficit discourses. In the classroom, this could mean challenging behaviour and engaging in an authentic dialogue with children and

parents to discover what they might need to change. For teachers, this may also mean reflecting on classroom practice to consider what might need to be done differently.

Clearly H-ER require both socially-just relating (fair and compassionate) and critically reflecting relating (firm and courageous). Socially-just relating, on its own, may be supportive and affirming but lacks the rigor and robustness necessary to challenge and intervene and facilitate positive transformation. If a classroom learning environment is fair but not firm there is a danger that defensive teaching strategies or 'racism by cotton wool' leading to low expectations, may come into play.

Likewise, H-ER will not work if it they are only 'firm' but not 'fair'. Critically reflective relating needs the strength of a socially-just relationship in order for the challenging conversations to take place. Without the trust, safety and feedback of a socially-just relationship, critically reflective relating may be perceived as uncaring and lead to defensiveness and disconnection. When both the fair and firm aspects of a High-Expectations Relationship are in place, these challenging conversations can enable positive transformation of personal assumptions and practices.

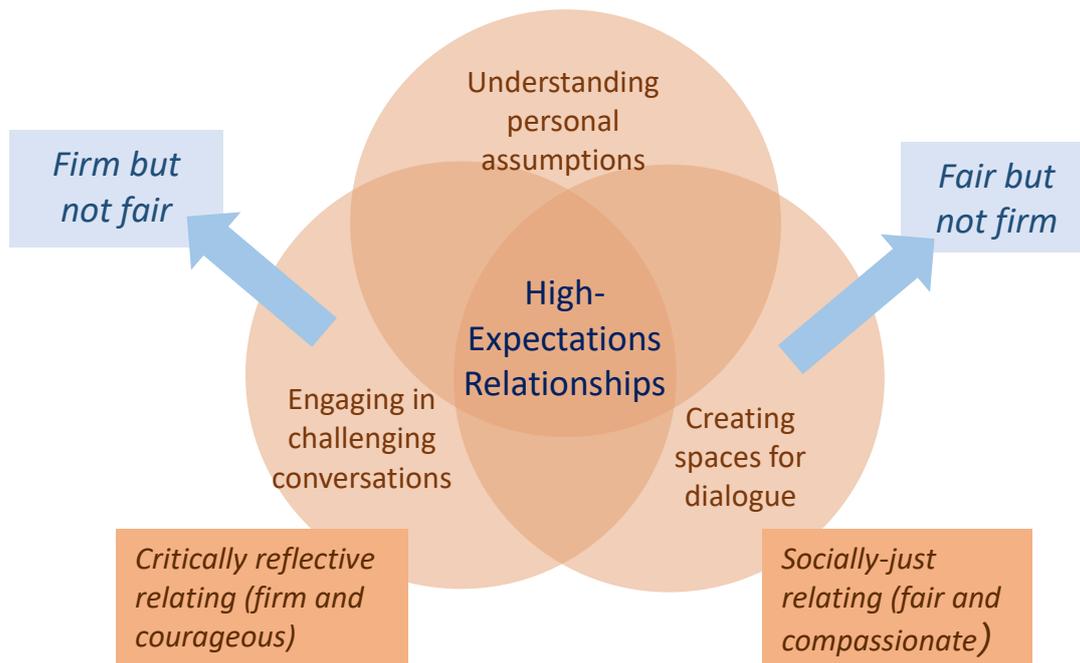
Appendix 1 provide examples of possible High-Expectations Relationships responses between a teacher and their students, colleagues and families.

A framework for High-Expectations Relationships

The Stronger Smarter Institute has developed a framework for High-Expectations Relationships. This framework covers the domains of self, student, peer, parents/ carers and community and describes High-Expectations Relationships through the elements of understanding personal assumptions, creating spaces for dialogue, and engaging in challenging conversations.

A High-Expectations Relationships Behavioural Index (HERBI) instrument is being trialled during 2014 as a self-reflective instrument to show if and how High-Expectations Relationships can be sustained and strengthened over time.

High-Expectations Relationships Framework



Understanding personal assumptions

The Australian teaching population remains almost entirely of Anglo-Australian, middle-class backgrounds (Mills 2008). In addition the socialising processes of a middle-class upbringing, reinforced by the implicit rules and norms of schooling, are so powerful they appear to be largely resistant to preservice teacher education efforts to focus on understanding diversity (Mills 2008). The out-of-awareness values and beliefs laid down through these socialisation processes lead to habitual patterns of perceiving, thinking, judging and behaving. It is in this way that society has conditioned us to have low expectations of low SES and Indigenous students, also highlighting why it can be very difficult to change such perceptions and judgements even for those who genuinely believe in high-expectations for all. We may not realise that underlying beliefs promote low expectations, or may not be aware that our actions, behaviour or pedagogic choices do not support our high-expectations beliefs. In addition, we may be dealing with students who have a negative sense of their own cultural identity and parents and community who have a negative sense of the value of schooling based on past experiences. Public discourse around educational underachievement and failure frequently relies on deficit accounts that attribute blame to disadvantaged groups. Indigenous communities and the children themselves are seen as the cause of the failure.

The solution is complex. Teachers need to begin by developing their own personal leadership skills to fully understand how their own beliefs might impact their teaching. The Stronger Smarter approach asks teachers to take responsibility and '*put a mirror on ourselves as educators.*' Within a High-Expectations Relationship, the teacher has to contemplate and understand not only the 'baggage' of the child, but also the baggage they carry themselves. It can be too easy to blame the community and the social and cultural issues of the children. The Stronger Smarter approach, however, challenges teachers to ask themselves the confronting questions: *What is happening in my classroom that is valuable to Indigenous students? What am I doing that contributes to failure, to absenteeism or disengagement?* (Sarra, 2011b). A teacher with high-expectations will expose students to rich and varied tasks, and push students with complex language and complex tasks, clarify expectations and direct awareness to the requirements of the activities (Sarra, G. *et al*, 2011). A teacher who believes children can't achieve because of their social groups reduces their self-belief in their capacity to teach these children. This can impact

on their relationship with students in the classroom and their choice of pedagogies, which can both potentially contribute to poor student achievement and disengagement.

The High-Expectations Relationships framework has a key element of critical self-reflection and seeking personal feedback to acknowledge the specific dispositions, strengths, weaknesses and cultural assumptions that shape 'self'. Teachers are asked to reflect on their day to day 'transactions' with students and to contemplate whether or not they are colluding with a negative stereotype. Against the backgrounds of such reflection, an educator can make up their own mind about whether their personal and professional rhetoric matches the day to day realities of their exchanges with children and colleagues. Teachers need to recognise the dynamic that underpins failure for many Aboriginal students, and start to confront problems of low attendance and low achievement, rather than laying the blame on the children and the complexities of their communities (Sarra quoted in Perso, 2012). High-Expectations Relationships need to be initiated by focusing on gaining a deeper understanding of both oneself and others as unique cultural beings.

Creating spaces for dialogue

At the same time as understanding personal beliefs, in order to build the platform of fair and compassionate 'socially-just relating', educators need to understand the unique talents, interests, knowledge, and circumstances of each student. Sarra (2014) suggests that teachers first need to 'look past the black faces in the classrooms', see students, curious to learn, and make honourable choices about what education outcomes are good enough. However, teachers then need to become receptive to cultural complexities.

Teachers need to expose themselves to histories documented by Indigenous peoples from Indigenous perspectives in order to challenge the dominant constructions of history and understand how 'low expectations' have developed as a result of what has happened in the past. Rose (2012) describes the danger that in the absence of teacher knowledge, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are trivialised and mis-represented in the classroom (*'half truths that distort our national identity' and 'promulgate a value system that places Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on society's fringe'*). Buckskin (2012) says that 'we as Indigenous people' ask teachers to honour our cultures, languages and world views, but also acknowledge that they have limited



knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and develop partnerships with those who know more. The Stronger Smarter approach involves embracing positive Indigenous leadership in the school community in a way that goes beyond consultation and involves co-creating pathways and solutions.

A key aspect of the Stronger

Smarter philosophy is the importance of maintaining a positive sense of cultural identity. Educational literature talks about the notion of the 'other' but then sets about ways of bringing people 'in from out there so they can enjoy the luxuries of being 'same' or mainstream. The Stronger Smarter philosophy celebrates the notion of 'otherness' to the extent that we reject the need to be completely 'same'. In a Stronger Smarter approach, Aboriginal people can define what kind of 'other' they are: a strong smart 'other' that is more sophisticated and positive than the 'other' perceived by mainstream Australia.

Education systems tend to favour students who have the same cultural background as the teachers, writers and policy makers responsible for creating the course. A culturally responsive pedagogy where students are taught both their own voice as well as structures that will enable that voice to be heard in the wider world, can enhance the quality of teaching in the classroom (Delpit, 2008). Promoting a positive self-identity for students in the classroom, and recognising students as self-determining, culturally located individuals who are part of the learning conversation, is more likely to result in successful school performance than when there are excessive contradictions or tensions between the various aspects of self (Purdie *et al*, 2000). Positive classrooms relationships are built when teachers understand how they can respond to who the students are and to the prior knowledge they bring with them into the classroom (Bishop & Berryman, 2009).

However, understanding and celebrating a positive cultural identity in the classroom is only one component of High-Expectations Relationships.

Spillman's (2013) research in facilitating and evaluating collaborative conversational processes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators describes how cultural assumptions can stifle the rigour and possibility of conversations. Spillman provides an example where a Warlpiri man introduced the five essential elements of Warlpiri thinking – language, law, land, kin and ceremony. In the discussion there was passive acceptance from the group that Warlpiri men do and should think in terms of these five essential elements. However, Spillman points out that such an uncontested proposition reinforces the assumption that it is possible to know a 'real' Warlpiri man before even meeting one, and that when a Warlpiri man is met and interacted with, these essentialised characteristics may become the measurement stick of male Warlpiri authenticity. In this perspective there is no room to acknowledge experience, growth, learning and identity outside traditional Warlpiri culture.

Spillman explains that if the thinking is only about bridging a cultural gap, particularly where we have made assumptions about what is on the other side of that gap, then we can deny ourselves the possibility of fully recognising and



knowing the person as a unique human being with a complex and layered identity. By assuming that what we 'know' about a culture automatically applies to a person, we are in danger of limiting the conversation and can deny ourselves the possibility of a High-Expectations Relationship.

A High-Expectations Relationship requires high levels of trust and safety where challenging conversations can be held. In this way, people can liberate themselves from negative or disabling assumptions and create the

space for growth and positive transformation. As we described above, H-ER need the 'fair' aspects of equitable power relationships in place before the 'firm' aspects of challenging conversations can take place.

H-ER require a range of personal relational capabilities that are essentially conversational in nature. In building the relationship, we need to tune into the feelings, experiences, perceptions, strengths, needs and desires of others. We

let others speak for themselves and are genuinely and compassionately interested in what they communicate. As we build up trust and make people feel welcome, they become comfortable to discuss issues and believe that you care about what they are saying (Spillman, 2013).

In the contact zone of the classroom, teachers can build positive relationships with students by being genuinely interested in students as individuals, making time for students out of class, watching them play sport or asking about what they did on the weekend (Sarra, 2011b). Through positive interactions with a student, teachers can build an emotional bank account with students (Covey, 1990). Building this emotional credit means a teacher can still have the challenging conversations with students when needed, but without students feeling that the only exchanges they have with a teacher are negative. Within the school community, teachers can build positive relationships with parents and community by making them feel welcomed at the school, providing regular, positive feedback about their children, and making time to understand the unique circumstances of families that might affect students' wellbeing and learning. Sarra (2011c,) says

As a school principal I always set out to connect with the humanity of Aboriginal children and parents, regardless of the complexities they were located in, and even if they were coming to the relationship in a somewhat hostile manner. Clearly I was paid to be in the relationship and it was incumbent upon me to reach out positively. As we keep reaching out in an effort to connect with the other's humanity, eventually they reach out to us and the potential for a positive partnership emerges.

Engaging in challenging conversations

In a High-Expectations Relationship, once a space of safety with equal power dynamics has been established, it becomes possible to sit together (teacher/student or teacher/parent) as equals and agree on what expectations should be. This becomes a respectful relationship wherein both can challenge each other, the dialogue is open, and a way forward can be created in a genuinely collaborative manner. As an example, high-expectations rhetoric might be a zero-tolerance approach that sees a child sent home when he does not have full school uniform on. In a High-Expectations Relationship, the educator will sit with the parent or community, discuss the expectation, find out if the family can afford to buy uniforms and co-create a solution, for example, providing a uniform in exchange for the parent doing one-on-one reading in the classroom (Sarra, 2014 a,b).

In a high-expectations culture or environment, people become more open to having their mindsets, attitudes, expectations and practices challenged. In the school environment, this can mean ‘hard conversations’ both in the classroom and the staffroom. Sarra (2005) found that challenging the mindsets of teachers and Indigenous children and families was central to the transformation and success at Cherbourg school. The Stronger Smarter Institute believes that all teachers need to challenge perceptions by clearly articulating high-expectations, confront poor behaviour and poor attendance, fight racism, and celebrate cultural identity (Sarra, 2011b).

High-Expectations Relationships involve and are enabled by a set of conversational processes that enhance socially-just and critically reflective dispositions and capabilities (Spillman, 2013). When these conversational processes are embedded as routine within the life of a group, they become cultural practices, enhancing the likelihood of sustainability of the relationship. These conversational processes require strength-based conversations based on a relational view of culture that occurs through conversational circles and dialogue.

- ▶ *Strength-based conversations:* Beginning conversations by mutually acknowledging and affirming strengths builds connectivity, trust and optimism. Starting from a strength-based position enhances the likelihood of success when faced with complex challenges. In Indigenous education where there is a strong socialisation into deficit theorising, strength-based conversations and approaches are critical.
- ▶ *A relational view of culture:* Using a relational view of culture allows the relationship to move from an anthropological or racialised view of culture and the binaries of cultural differences, towards a focus on the quality of the relationship. Instead of focusing on ‘*who am I*’ and ‘*who are we*’ – questions which may invoke essentialised notions of identities and judgements of authenticity – the focus can move to understanding ‘*how are we*’ and ‘*how do I relate to self, others and country?*’ Culture in this sense is considered to be the habitual daily practices which rest on the shared basic assumptions, and sets of beliefs, values and stories we have been socialised into through our life within a group. These are the assumptions we do not have to consciously consider in order to perceive, think, feel, judge and act (Schein, 1992). Using this relational view of culture allows a relationship to focus on *how do we need to be together to be the best we can be?* Here the group can begin to think about how it can best work together.

- ▶ *Conversational circles:* Conversational circles are used as a process where group members can work towards a space of equal power, safety and trust. Within the circle, everyone's feelings, perceptions and experiences are ideally validated. As these spaces are developed, over time they can become spaces where ideas are challenged in a non-judgemental and productive manner.
- ▶ *Dialogue:* Dialogue, as a conversational process, focuses on synthesizing or building on the perspectives and ideas of others, and being ever-prepared to challenge one's own perspective and assumptions. Dialogue accepts the uncertainty of 'not knowing' and as such enacts an engaged curiosity about what others bring. In this way, it is contrasted with debate where we defend our own perspectives as 'known' or 'right', being unable to actively enquire into others perspectives with the possibility of shifting our own. Dialogue draws on multiple perspectives and enables collective sense-making and consensual decision making.

The High-Expectations Relationships framework uses these conversational processes to create spaces where there can be robust conversations on challenging or emotionally-charged topics with open and free discussion of different views. When a group can enact these capabilities, they collaboratively create a culture of trust and safety where there is an openness and willingness to challenge and replace personal attitudes, expectations, habits and practices that may be limiting or disabling. Learning environments are established where all students are challenged and can contribute, and school environments are established where school staff and the school community co-create solutions.



High-Expectations Learning Environments



When a significant number of adults within a school community enact quality relating, the culture of the school begins to shift positively, creating a high-expectations culture or environment where children can learn (Spillman 2013). The Stronger Smarter Philosophy with its focus on H-ER can provide a lens or framework and a shared language to work with staff across the school to develop a high-expectations learning environment. This is needed for the cultural transformation that is critical to student wellbeing and educational

success within a school.

In a High-Expectations learning environment young people are proud of their culture and their unique attributes; being different is not only accepted, but valued and actively sought. Here students care for and learn with each other. Teachers set high standards for students within a culturally appropriate and responsive learning context where students can bring their prior cultural knowledge and experiences to classroom interactions (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). Students have a sense of belonging in a supportive, positive environment (Purdie et al, 2000). For all students, the strong and smart message is enforced so that students become engaged with their work and believe that being 'young black and deadly' means coming to school every day.

Teaching is more than just standing at the front of the room transmitting new knowledge. In a high-expectations learning environment, teachers will adopt high-order, high-expectations teaching and learning strategies which involve working from what children already know, making content relevant while also explaining why it is important, and using practical, hands-on examples (Sarra, 2011b). Classroom pedagogies allow students to make a connection between school knowledge and the personal world they experience and understand, but without compromising the intellectual quality of their school experience (Griffiths *et al*, 2007). High-expectations learning environments are also places for fun,

where laughter is a regular cultural phenomenon.

A high-expectations learning environment has a vision that an Aboriginal child can be as smart as any other child in every other school, and that the level of education they receive should be as good as anywhere else in the country. The Stronger Smarter and H-ER approach is not about 'catching up the student' but about setting the high standards for Aboriginal education and teaching across Australia that should always have existed.

What we call great teaching strategies for all children are what we call great quality teaching strategies for Indigenous children. With a deeper knowledge of the context of Indigenous children, the strategies might be applied differently (Sarra, 2011b).

Conclusion

A belief in high-expectations for all students becomes complex when it is enacted in the classroom and school community. Underlying assumptions and out of awareness beliefs based on our social conditioning can get in the way and actions, behaviour or pedagogic choices may not support our high-expectations beliefs. This is particularly relevant in Indigenous education where public discourses revolve around deficit positioning and students may have a negative sense of their own cultural identity.

High-Expectations Relationships provide a framework to describe the behaviours, dispositions and conversational processes needed to develop quality relationships within the classroom, staffroom and school community to create a high-expectations learning environment where students can thrive and succeed. This framework incorporates both fair and firm. Fair, socially-just relating builds a space of trust where firm, critically reflective relating and challenging conversations can be achieved. High-Expectations Relationships understand historical backgrounds but then move beyond cultural assumptions to understand the context of the individual student or family. Cultural differences are celebrated, and strength-based conversations and a relational view of culture provide a basis for group members to work together to co-create solutions. Conversational circles and dialogue enable spaces where ideas can be challenged and multiple perspectives enact collective sense-making and consensual decision making.

As High-Expectations Relationships are developed across a school, students feel supported, cared for and engaged with their learning, and teachers understand



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their students and use the high quality teaching strategies that best support student needs. Families and the community feel welcomed within the school and support the school in promoting good student behaviour and school attendance. The Stronger Smarter Institute believes that school and community leadership to develop High-Expectations Relationships and cultures within their school environments is not only key to improving Indigenous education in Australia, but provides a foundation for quality learning environments across all Australian schools.

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Discussion questions

One purpose in releasing the paper is to promote discussion among the Stronger Smarter alumni and discussions in the Institute generated many questions and points for further discussion. Here are some suggested questions for discussion with your colleagues.

High-Expectations Relationships in the classroom

- ▶ *What constitutes a high-expectations classroom or learning environment?*
- ▶ *What is happening in our classrooms that engage our students with learning processes?*
- ▶ *To what extent are we aware of our students' preferences, capabilities, and strengths inside and outside the classroom?*

High-Expectations staff culture

- ▶ *What have we done in our school to create a culture that supports challenging conversations? What else could we do?*
- ▶ *What is the level of trust and safety between colleagues in our staffroom/s?*
- ▶ *What could we do to strengthen the level of trust and safety in our staffroom/s?*

High-Expectations Relationships in the school community

- ▶ *What have we done to create a High-Expectations school culture with parents, families and the school community?*
- ▶ *What opportunities exist to engage the wider community in our school and classrooms?*

High-Expectations Leadership

- ▶ *What do High-Expectations Relationships mean for a school leader?*
- ▶ *What is the relationship between High-Expectations Relationships and the role of teacher or school leader?*
- ▶ *In what contexts is it possible to create true equal power relationships moving beyond the role of teacher or school leader, and in what contexts does the role still need to be part of the relationship?*

High-Expectations with Self

- ▶ *To what extent do I critically reflect on my teaching practice?*
- ▶ *How often do I actively seek feedback on my practices from colleagues, students, community and supervisors?*
- ▶ *When presented with feedback on my practices that challenges me, do I respond with defensiveness, or do I look for opportunities to learn and develop?*

Appendix 1: Examples of High-Expectations Relationships responses

Situation	Low Expectations Response	High Expectations Rhetoric (Believing)	High-Expectations Relationship (Enacting)
A student arrives at school without a uniform.	Ignore the absence of the uniform, believing that confrontation isn't worth the time, effort or potential conflict.	Send the student home for not following the school rules.	Talk with the student about why they are out of uniform. Engage in a conversation with parents/carers about options, for example, the school providing uniforms if cost is an issue.
A student is not attending school regularly.	Refrain from talking to the student or contacting parents or carers – it is not the teacher's role to get students to school.	Suspend or punish the student for not adhering to school policy.	Work with the student to explore the reasons affecting attendance. Talk with the family to work together to find solutions.
A student enters your classroom visibly upset because of relationship difficulties with another student.	Ignore the student, or state that the demonstrated behaviour is 'ridiculous' and unnecessary.	Insist that students keep their problems 'out of the classroom' because everyone is 'there to learn'.	Talk to the student to determine what support they need in order to engage in the class or if another option is appropriate. Make a time to talk to the student further.
Two students are fighting in the playground.	Stop the fight and follow the school's procedures for unacceptable behaviour, thinking that it is typical of those students and they are on their way to a suspension.	Follow the school's procedures for unacceptable behavior and divorce yourself of any further responsibility.	Stop the fight, follow the school's procedures for unacceptable behaviour and actively engage with both students individually and together to identify the cause of the fight and address those issues. Encourage students to reflect on their behavior and accept responsibility for their part.
An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander parent or Elder complains about how elements of Indigenous	Listen to the complaint and decide to refrain from teaching Indigenous studies again.	Listen to the complaint and respond that as the teacher you are responsible for what is taught and	Engage in an open conversation with the parent/Elder to better understand their concerns, apologise for the distress. Consider options to address their concerns, for example,

history or cultural studies are being taught in your classroom.		that parents/Elders should not interfere.	invite parent/Elder to contribute to future lessons on Indigenous studies.
Students are heard using racist language when talking about a particular individual or group in the school (or in society).	Pretend not to hear the comments, as the situation is too complex, or it's harmless because it doesn't involve physical violence or casually tell the students to 'cut it out' without any follow up.	Confront the students and implement school's procedures for unacceptable behavior.	Intervene and explain that their language is inappropriate, implement school's procedures for unacceptable behavior and organize a time to meet each student individually to discuss motivating factors and potential harm of their comments and attitudes.
A student refuses to participate in or complete a classroom, homework or assessment task that it is "too hard".	Accept the student's attitude, and make concessions for their inaction.	Demand that the student completes all set tasks and outline the consequences if student doesn't comply.	Discuss their concerns and explain the importance of the task, work with the student to understand what 'too hard' means to them and which parts of the task need additional scaffolding and if there are other forms of support that the student may require in order to complete the task.
Teacher shows a video in class.	Show a video loosely tied to the curriculum without an introduction to the purpose and context and without follow-up activities as a way of simply keeping the students quite in the classroom.	Use the video to deliver the established curriculum inflexibly believing this will deliver on high expectations, but and with no consideration of for student interests, capabilities or preferences.	Develop an understanding of students interests and cultural backgrounds to deliver curriculum based on Culturally-Responsive Pedagogies.