

The Education Wars

Jeff McMullen

An impassioned call to support the social and emotional well being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has marked one of the largest and most important gatherings of educators in the ‘*Stronger Smarter*’ movement gathering force across Australia.

As the ‘education wars’ rage on over the best way to teach Indigenous kids, Donna Bridge, a Yamatji woman and Principal of the Fitzroy Valley District High School in Western Australia, told teachers gathered in Brisbane for the 2012 *Stronger Smarter Summit* that what was paramount was to believe in the worth of these children as Aboriginal people.

Bridges is one of the most hard-working and highly respected Aboriginal educators, previously honoured with the prestigious Western Australia Primary Principal’s Award for the outstanding results at the East Kalgoorlie Primary School. She is also one of the powerful advocates for Dr Chris Sarra’s *Stronger Smarter* program of creating “high expectations relationships’ to build education success that focuses on the whole child, not the narrowest of outcomes.

While bluntly admitting that many Indigenous schools were not achieving the Government’s national targets for literacy and numeracy, Bridges advocated a relentless national effort, persistently focussing on the genuine wellbeing of the child. “It took sixty years to get to this situation today. It is not going to be changed overnight,” she said.

This frontline assessment from one of Australia’s Aboriginal education leaders was supported by one of the world’s acknowledged experts on Indigenous learning, Russel Bishop, Founding Professor of Maori Education at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand. If Australian teachers took up all of the tools and the best approaches, Professor Bishop said, it might still take up to ten years to build a highly successful and enduring education system for Indigenous children.

The evidence cited by Professor Bishop strongly supports an education approach that emphasises the relationship between a quality teacher, students and families. Every school needed strong principals and clear agreed values that allowed no “deficit expectation” towards Aboriginal kids. Teachers needed to live and breathe the belief that they were making a difference and this included a commitment to “treat the children as if they were your own.”

The Executive Director of the *Stronger Smarter Institute*, Dr Chris Sarra issued his own challenge to all Australian principals and teachers. “I don’t care if you call it ‘*Stronger Smarter*’ in your community as long as you have high expectations relationships...Let’s stand up for our profession. We work hard and we work tirelessly...We need to tell the nation of the range of schools and people that demonstrates this high expectations relationship approach...Our approach,” Dr Sarra said, “is about doing things with people, not doing things to people.”

The 2012 *Stronger Smarter Summit* saw a good deal of scorn towards the millions of dollars of Government funds directed to a handful of schools trialling the *Direct Instruction* method of teaching now advocated by the Cape York Institute's Noel Pearson. This highly controversial and widely discredited rote learning approach, requires all teachers to work strictly to a script with students drilled to repeat only what is in their workbooks.

Dr Sarra noted that at Aurakun on Cape York, \$7.72 million dollars had been invested in a trial of the Bereiter-Englemann learning model of *Direct Instruction* which he criticised as "at best a costly remedial program." For that money, he said, you could provide a teacher for every one or two kids, but the results simply did not justify such a misdirected investment of education funding.

While *Direct Instruction* appears to have been heavily promoted by Rupert Murdoch's newspapers, leading academics at the Australian National University's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), William Fogarty and Jerry Schwab, have compiled exhaustive international research detailing the shortcomings and glaring failures of this brand of instruction since its introduction in some overseas schools in the 1960s and 1970s. While stressing that existing aspects of a highly targeted literacy and numeracy program are a necessary part of the curriculum for Indigenous students, the ANU researchers condemn the "lock step" focus on drill and rote learning.

"While early gains may appear as a result of the emphasis on decoding text, those gains evaporate and sometimes reverse in later primary years as learning requires comprehension and not just decoding. This inability to move beyond decoding to comprehension is particularly significant for children of low income and limited English-speaking families who may find themselves left behind. Recent research in Australia [on this rote learning instruction] reports increases in teacher attrition, decreases in student retention and completion, and a propensity for any indigenous or minority perspectives to disappear from the curriculum under such approaches."
[From *Indigenous Education : Experiential learning and Learning through Country*. W. Fogarty and R.G. Schwab, CAEPR. ANU, Working Paper 80, 2012]

The ANU researchers highlight the widespread educational evidence that Indigenous knowledge and local development aspirations must form a central component of Indigenous education. The challenge is to allow for learning that is both locally relevant and transportable to other places. Fogarty and Schwab argue that "experiential learning", the role of "learning by doing" and "learning through Country" can connect Indigenous students and provide a pathway to success.

At the *Stronger Smarter Summit*, outgoing Assistant Director of Indigenous Education in Queensland, Ian Mackie, was given a standing ovation after a frank and personal address targeting the previous era of low expectations that he said was responsible for the "equilibrium" of "poor attendance, poor outcomes and poor retention". Look at the ACT, Mackie suggested, where 96.4% of students completed the Higher School Certificate. He urged teachers to make a switch of thinking to ensure that every school in every community could bring such a solid performance for all Australian students.

The gap in school attendance has not been closing, Mackie warned, and this was an “economic time-bomb”, with poor school completions and low employment to be expected until we all joined in the education effort. The former teacher and Principal of Western Cape College said his essential mix of approaches included higher expectations of the Indigenous students, recognizing their identity, connectedness, persuasion and what he called “a service guarantee” to ensure that students got the reward for their work, not just a “twelve year away promise.”

Of Australia’s 150,000 Indigenous school-children, over 8000 in 102 schools across the nation are now part of the *Stronger Smarter* education movement. Success stories from schools like Yarrabah in Queensland underscored that the ‘strongest and smartest’ schools were those that heavily supported improved teacher/student relationships and brought the skills of Aboriginal families directly into the school process.

One of the most applauded recommendations at the education summit was from the Shepherdson College NT Principal Bryan Hughes who said paying Traditional Owners and other elders for their expert advice on issues and problems was suitably respecting their important role in lifting the educational expectations for all students. A “Learning on Country” program in this Northern Territory school also had boosted attendance and prepared younger children for many kinds of learning.

At Cairns West State School, Principal Michael Hansen had seen good improvements by developing genuine partnerships with parents and the community, case managing every student and removing distractions from teachers to let them concentrate on quality teaching. The Cairns West State School asks parents to sign a contract to commit to send their children to school 95% of the time but in return guarantees the families that the children will achieve a first rate education.

Clifton Fong, the Principal of Hall’s Creek School, in the Kimberley, described the morale change that comes to an Aboriginal community when a school helps create a high expectations relationship between the families and the teachers.

An assessment of the world’s leading education strategies carried out by New Zealand researcher, John Hattie, emphasises that the factor that overwhelmingly brings positive improvement at school is the quality of the relationship between student and teacher. This was explained further by Maori Professor Russel Bishop who said that teachers required both “high caring” and “high teaching skills” because this allowed Indigenous children to be valued and to use their knowledge. Aboriginal parents also have great aspirations for their kids, Professor Bishop said, and so schools needed to listen carefully.

Aboriginal educators gathered in Brisbane for the *Stronger Smarter Summit 2012* were inspired by the stories of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, young and old.

Jackie Huggins described the shaming impact of racism and discrimination but also her own determination to rise above that era of crushingly low expectations.

Lionel Bamblett, Manager of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, said that he had the greatest confidence in the wave of young Kooris leading the education charge.

Glen Brennan of National Australia Bank said that ‘higher expectations’ of Indigenous people were emerging in many corporations and that this would keep doors opening on opportunity, not closing them as in the past.

Edie Wright, the determined and highly talented Aboriginal education boss from the Kimberley, challenged teachers to understand that “two way” learning did not mean just the “teacher’s way” and that schools must realise why so many Aboriginal parents had gone through such very negative experiences at school in the past. The Kimberley Schools had embraced the *Stronger Smarter* vision, she said, because it was positive and with courage and leadership the lasting change would come.

As that wonderful Principal from Fitzroy Crossing, Donna Bridges, put it we know some students and some schools are struggling. But there was so much damage done over such a long time that we need patience and persistence, always valuing the child in everything we do.