

Stronger Smarter: A sustained and enduring approach to Indigenous education (whether education researchers know it or not!)



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Professor Sarra has been a Commissioner on the Australian Rugby League Commission since 2012. He is a Professor of Education at the University of Canberra, teaching and researching on school leadership, Indigenous education and equity in education. In 2004, Professor Sarra was named Queenslanders of the Year; in 2005, he was a finalist for Australian of the Year for Queensland; and in 2010, he was named Queensland Australian of the Year.

Abstract

In 1988, Professor Chris Sarra commenced his career as an educator. After a very personal revelation about how he as an Aboriginal student had been sold short by schooling, he became determined to change expectations of Aboriginal children in schools throughout Australia. It was a lofty career ambition, but one he feels he has achieved. The Stronger Smarter approach, which he developed and now shares with an army of hardworking and courageous educators, has had success—despite the questionable efforts of education researchers with little or no insight into the profound complexities of such an undertaking. This paper will reflect on aspects of the Stronger Smarter journey and invite education researchers to consider how to enhance this pursuit rather than get in the way of it.

In 1988, I started my career as an educator determined to change expectations of Aboriginal children throughout Australia. This passion and drive was fuelled by a very personal revelation about the extent to which I had been sold short by low expectations about who I was as a young Aboriginal student going to school in Bundaberg in the 1970s and 1980s. I was brought to this insight by the greatest teacher and mentor I have ever known, Dr Gary MacLennan. In my recent memoir, *Good morning Mr Sarra* (Sarra, 2012), I described how my mother and father had nurtured within me a very strong work ethic and a very strong, proud and positive sense of being Aboriginal. I explained that they kindled a fire in my belly, and Dr MacLennan came to me and threw petrol on it.

It is fair to say that my passion and desire to change expectations was fuelled by a sense of anger and outrage at such injustice. If I had been sold short by education, then how many other Aboriginal children were being sold short simply because teachers didn't believe in their capacity to learn and be exceptional? This had to change. When I look back on that time, I knew very well that changing expectations of Aboriginal children right across Australia was quite a lofty career ambition. It would take lots of hard work; lots of courage to say what needed to be said; and a thick skin. On reflection, though, I was very angry—and this was personal!

These days, I am not as angry as I used to be. Having made a significant and well-recognised contribution to education, and having achieving my lofty career ambition, I stand here as an educator with nothing to prove.

Recently, I was interviewed on a local Indigenous radio network by a young Aboriginal woman. The radio network was in Cherbourg. The young, budding radio presenter had been a student of Cherbourg State School when I was the principal there some years ago.

'This morning's guest is Dr Chris Sarra, a nationally recognised educator and my old principal from when I was there at Cherbourg State School', she commenced with an impressive degree of professionalism.

Mr Sarra, before we start this morning, I just want to say to you that I remember that message you always taught us. About being strong and smart and all the value that comes with that! I have carried that with me all my life, and I just wanted you to know that!

I've always been confident in any radio, print or television interview because I have always just spoken from the heart, but with that opening she floored me like no other journalist had ever done. How could I speak from the heart when my heart had just been stolen like that?

On another occasion, when I was back in Cherbourg to help deliver a Stronger Smarter leadership program, another student started to cry when he saw me. I was in tears, too, as he spoke to me. I remembered him as a young boy very well. I had described him as one of the brightest children in the school.

'Sir, it's good to see you, man.' He spoke softly, with slightly slurred speech. He wasn't a completely broken young man, but I could see that he almost had been at times in his life.

'Sir ... I've taken a lot of drugs, you know. But I just kept remembering strong and smart, strong and smart. That kept me alive, man.'

Many educators will have many such stories about past students they have run into and that wonderful feeling you get when they tell you how you made a difference in their lives.

I stand here as an educator among education researchers to challenge you to wonder about how you would measure that.

How do you measure the fact that your teaching and your philosophical approach to education can inspire children to inspire others?

How do you measure the notion that your Stronger Smarter philosophy has actually kept a young man on the hard road of staying alive, at a time when he was thinking it might have been far easier to just surrender to despair and walk with so many other Aboriginal ghost children?

It is these questions and more that I want to put to you today. As for the answers—part of me wants to say that I don't really care, but the truth is I do care. I want education research to be authentic and insightful. I want it to genuinely inform practice. I don't want to have a level of contempt for education researchers because, as an education academic and as an education practitioner, I seriously do value the role of education research—as long as it is executed in a way that enhances the practice of educators rather than hinders it.

In 2013, a report led by education researchers (Luke et. al, 2013) proposed to offer an evaluative insight into the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities project. The Stronger Smarter Learning Communities project was an \$18 million project, funded by then federal Minister for Education and Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard. It was designed to build the leadership capacity of school leaders in 'hub schools'—schools selected as models of improvement in the area of Indigenous education—to challenge, mentor and work with surrounding school leaders.

Accepting that it is inherently obvious that I would defend the Stronger Smarter approach against what I

perceive as the wretched and naive failure of Luke et al. (2013) to fully comprehend the profound impact the approach can have on educators, I am still compelled to seriously question the methodology and the motives of those leading the research.

My motive in raising this with you today is not to defend the Stronger Smarter approach. As I mentioned at the outset of this paper, I have nothing to prove as an educator, and the Stronger Smarter approach has proven itself over many years, despite those seriously questionable methodologies and motives I raise here. My motives in raising this with you is to invite you to reflect on the gross inadequacies of such research so that we might learn from them.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) provide for researchers what is fundamentally a moral and ethical orientation, and one that I am persuaded by. They write:

The social sciences are normative disciplines, always already embedded in issues of value, ideology, power, desire, sexism, racism, domination, repression, and control. We want a social science committed up front to issues of social justice, equity, nonviolence, peace, and universal human rights. We do not want a social science that says it can address these issues if it wants to do so. For us, this is no longer an option. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 11)

I feel that it is these principles that researchers forgot in their evaluation of the Stronger Smarter approach.

The Stronger Smarter approach asserts confidently that if we give Indigenous children hope; if we work from the assumption that they have strengths; and if we do things with them and their communities, then there is a tendency, *ceteris paribus*, all other things being equal, for them to succeed in education. The evaluation of the Stronger Smarter approach claimed to have found no evidence that this approach worked. What it failed to do was to measure what could not be measured, and so assumed it did not exist.

Thankfully, this evaluation has had little to no traction or credibility with real educators who understand the Stronger Smarter approach. I refer here to those educators who have the courage to stand on the front line and engage authentically with the often harsh complexities of the Indigenous education landscape, rather than flitting in and out to observe and research these dynamics from the safety of the luxurious outside. Of more than 70 research 'findings' listed by Luke et al. (2013), however, three cherry-picked findings did gain traction, serving the purposes of ideologues looking to discredit the Stronger Smarter approach by suggesting it has no effect on literacy, numeracy and attendance outcomes.

The researchers, of course, are not responsible for the use made of their work in a vicious personal and political attack on me by the right-wing columnist Janet Albrechtsen (2012). But they are responsible for the devaluation of an approach based on the necessity of self-respect, self-esteem and a positive self-identity.

From some, the cherry-picked findings expose some inadequacies of the Stronger Smarter approach. For me, the notion of simplistically linking our approach to literacy, numeracy and attendance outcomes exposes the gross inadequacies of those education researchers' attempts to understand, even in the slightest way, the complexity and profoundness of the Stronger Smarter approach and what it does for real and courageous educators, for Indigenous students and for Indigenous communities. It also exposes serious questions about their ability to identify and measure what is most useful to our education profession.

Let me give just one example here to ram home this point.

The principal of Yarrabah State School in Far North Queensland attended a Stronger Smarter leadership program. In his short time with us, he developed a profound appreciation of the need to engage community more deeply and more authentically. On his return to Yarrabah, he spent the next few months working extremely hard to get the community authentically engaged. One of the outcomes of his efforts was that 58 teenagers in the community who had been chronically disengaged from schooling were re-engaged in schooling. They did not set the world on fire as students—but they did not set the school on fire as juvenile delinquents, either.

As we reflect on this, it is not hard to see the challenges the re-engagement of such students could create:

- aggregate school attendance is likely to go down
- aggregate literacy and numeracy are likely to go down
- aggregate behaviour management issues might increase.

Simultaneously, it is not hard to see the profoundly positive benefits that the re-engagement of these students could create in community:

- reductions in vandalism and juvenile delinquency
- reduction in child sexual abuse in community
- reduction in incidences of petrol sniffing
- reduction of Aboriginal youth suicide.

There are many other profoundly positive effects I could name here—and even an undergraduate economist could tell us about the financial and economic returns on having 58 young Aboriginal men and women engaged in school in a way that sees them functional and on a pipeline towards a life that is honourable, hopeful and virtuous.

This is just one example of many. While the content is extremely complex, this is pretty easy to comprehend.

I could have explained this complexity and how to approach it in an evaluative sense, if only the researchers had made the effort to have just one conversation with me about it! One has to question the motives that would prevent such important and necessary conversations taking place. I will leave you to ponder this and create within your own minds the insights required here.

On accepting the 2016 NAIDOC Person of the Year award, which recognised my efforts as an educator and the efforts of those around me, I made a promise to every Aboriginal child in Australia. I reminded them that more than 25 000 Aboriginal students, in more than 450 schools throughout Australia, have been touched by the effects of the Stronger Smarter approach. I said to them, 'We will come for you!'

Somewhere, somehow, Stronger Smarter educators will touch the life of every Aboriginal student in Australia.

It is a lofty ambition, I know, but by now I know a thing or two about having lofty ambitions and transcending stifling expectations. With you or without you as education researchers, I will deliver on this promise. I hope Stronger Smarter educators can deliver on this promise to our children with you.

References

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