Facilitator:

But they’ll also remember whether that teacher made them feel good about who they were, or made them feel worthless. Chris will invite us to reflect on our own experiences with good teachers and bad teachers, and contemplate one very important question for all teachers: how will you be remembered as a teacher?

Could you please give Dr Sarra a very warm welcome.

Dr Chris Sarra:

So how will you be remembered as a teacher? That’s the question I want to just kick around this morning, and for the next couple of days. Will you be remembered as a “deadly” teacher, as the headline to the conference suggests? I was having this conversation with Professor Hughes this morning, and he confessed that he remembers some things that a teacher said to him, and that was like two decades since you’ve been in primary school, or a few more than that I suppose. But even after many decades out of school people still remember a teacher, and many of us will still remember something that they said to us. And it could have been something that made us feel good, or made us feel deadly about who we were as a child, or it could be something that made us feel no good.

And this is the power and the magic of our profession. This is the power and the magic of our profession as teachers. In sixty years, seventy years time children that we’ve been in touch with will remember something about us perhaps. And we make a choice about whether that’s a good memory or whether that’s a not so good memory. All of us remember something about a teacher that we had.

We remember a teacher, and if they said something like, “You won’t amount to much,” or “You’re going to end up just like the rest of your mob,” I’m sure some of you will remember a teacher like that. Or you’ll remember a teacher you pulled you aside and said to you, “Hey, I reckon you can do this. Keep trying, keep having a go.” So will you remember as a deadly teacher, the one who said, “I reckon you can do this?” Well you get to make that choice. And I’d encourage you to continue to reflect on that.

And again I reflect on the power and the magic of our profession as teachers, and in our day-to-day exchanges. And to do that I want to just offer this; I hope you choose to be remembered as a deadly teacher, and not one who got caught up in thinking that just because you have a flash piece of paper that you’re big time, or something like that. Or just because you thought – you had a sense of power over a seven year old, eight year old, or whatever, because that’s not really about power. The power is in what can happen in the exchanges, and the power and the magic is in what you can get young children to believe about themselves, and to do as a result of your exchange with them. This is the power and the magic of our profession.

So if I was to ask you what is a deadly teacher? I’m pretty sure that if I went around the room I’d probably get similar sorts of answers. And I’ve asked this question a lot over many years, and it comes down to a couple of things. When people think of the best teacher that they had, and if you think in your own minds of a teacher that you had when you were at school who you thought
was great, this is probably what you would say about them: You would say that they were pretty fair, yet at the same time they were pretty firm. So they're firm and fair. You know, they didn't let kids muck up too much, but they probably let them play a little bit, you know, so they had fun. So firm, fair, and fun.

You'll probably say that they were passionate about what they did, and with a kind of passion that was infectious, that you just couldn't help be whipped up and excited about what they were talking about at the front of the room. It's probably true that they made time to get to know you outside of the classroom. So for them the relationship just wasn't about what was happening inside the four walls of the classroom, they probably came and kicked the ball with you, or shot some hoops, or took you on school camps, or went walking in the bush with you, or stuff like that.

So they made time to get to know us outside of the classroom, and you know what? The other thing I reckon you'd probably say about that teacher your thinking of right now? They cared about us. You know, they thought we were nice, and they cared about us. So they'd go out of their way to make sure we were okay, or something like that.

For me, just let me reflect on some of the teachers that I had. I remember very well a teacher, and I was only talking to him probably two months ago, he's in his eighties now, a teacher whose name was Mr [Bolch]. And he was all of those things. He was my grade four and grade five teacher, and the lead up to his classroom he was always renowned as “the very strict one,” so we kind of feared him a little bit. But Mr Bolch, there was something really special about him that I don't know he even realised, you know? With me he was all of those things, he was pretty strict, but he was fair, but there was one thing that really sticks in my mind about Mr Bolch that I will never forget, yet it was something that was just so – what's the word? Just would have cost him nothing. We were playing cricket one day, and you know them days when you have the pads and if you're right hand you put the pad on the front foot. And us being blackfellas going to school with no shoes on had the pads on. In fact I was wicket keeper.

And he saw me limping, Mr Bolch saw me limping because I was getting a blister on the back of my leg. He said, “What's wrong?” I said, “Oh Sir, I've got this blister on the back of my leg.” And so he took his hanky out of his pocket and he put it in, and he strapped it up behind the thing. And I remember in that exchange, in a way it was kind of intimate, and it was weird for me because I'd never connected with a teacher like that before, and no teacher had gone out of their way to connect with me. And all he was doing was putting his hanky in behind my blister so that it didn't get worse.

And I remember at the time feeling really weird. And it was one of those things that cost nothing for him to do, and he'd forgotten all about it, but I never forget that, I'm still here today talking about it. But it basically just showed that he cared for me. And that was enough for me to want to be the best that I could be.

So what the hell has this got to do with anything? I think I'm just wanting you to reflect on those moments that you have with children in your schools. And each moment is precious, and each moment sometimes costs us a lot, but lots of those moments cost nothing. Yet the returns are so great. What does it cost to say to a child, “Hey, it's lovely to see you this morning.” Or “Hey, I think you can do this.” Or “Hey, are they new shoes you got? Where did you get them from?” Those comments cost nothing, yet potentially could be remembered forever. And sets a platform for how those children engage with you in a relationship.
Chris' journey into teaching...

I left Kepnock High School in Bundaberg all those years ago, and I wanted to just explain a little bit. At the time people were talking about QTAC, Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre. The other kinds in high school were talking about that. And I thought, I’d better go and find out what this is about. So I went to see the guidance officer, I said, “What is this QTAC thing? I’ve got no idea, so what the hell is it all about?” He said, “Oh, that’s the form you fill in if you want to go to university.” And he said, “You’ve got the right number of board subjects,” he said, “Why don’t you fill in the form?” I said, “Oh, all right.” He said, “What do you want to do?” and I said, “Oh, I don’t know.” And I remembered year ten work experience, and I was a cabinetmaker. Only because I said I wanted to be a pilot <laughter> and the bloke said, “Oh you won’t be a pilot.” You know, he says, “Let’s be realistic.” So I wish I had Bob Somerville’s teacher – where’s Bob? I saw him – Yeah, I wish I had your teachers when I was in school, because that’s what I was dreaming about.

Anyway, I ended up being a cabinetmaker locked in a shed all week, it just drove me nuts, and I just knew that I didn’t want to do that. So the guidance officer’s talking to me and he says, “Well what do you think is the best job?” and I’m sitting there, I like phys ed, and I’m looking out the window, and there’s the phys ed teacher over there outside, and I’m thinking, “Phys ed teacher?” And he said, “Right, put this down. Put this course down, that’s at Kelvin Grove.” And he said, “You won’t get into that, but put this other courses down.” And the other courses were gardening courses, like agricultural courses at Gatton College. <laughs> It’s funny now when you look back, hey? It’s just – yeah, crazy.

So anyway, I filled in the form, and I walked out of the room and I’m thinking, what the hell was that all about? I just didn’t understand, hey. And I was youngest of ten, all of my brothers had finished grade 12, my sisters had finished grade ten, none of us had been to – I think I had one brother had gone off to university, so it wasn’t a big part of our family agenda.

Going to university...

But anyway, just because of that fluke occurrence, I got a letter from Kelvin Grove saying, “We’re looking to get more secondary Aboriginal teachers. We notice that you’re interested in teaching, come down.” And I had a TE score that was about 750, which was about here. To get into phys ed that year you had to have a score about 910, which was up here. So they got me down for an interview, down to the big smoke. And I did an interview, wrote some essays, and they must have liked it because they said, “We reckon you’ve got this. We reckon you can do this.” But I was a bit worried about that score up here. And I was saying to them, “Yeah, you know what? I don’t think I can do this.” And they were saying, “No, no. Look, don’t be afraid, don’t be scared. What we’ll do is, it’s a three year course,” because back in the olden days you could do a diploma and start teaching after three years. So they said, “It’s a three year course, we’ll just spread your course out over four years, and you can just get to know how it feels.”

So I said, “Yeah, all right, I can do that if I start on a lesser workload and get a taste.” So I started on probably about a 60% workload, got the feel for it. Second semester of the first year I did a 90% workload. And then you know in that first year of teaching you start talking about expectations, you start doing sociology, psychology, and all that, and I was into that. I could get that. But it also got me reflecting back on my own school experience and the things that I didn’t see when I was there in and amongst it. And it was all about expectations, you know?
And then in other places I remember sitting in year 11 maths, the advanced math, so I must have been fairly smart, but the math teacher handing back the papers. And the math teacher was a good guy, he was a funny little fat fella, and we’d have fun in his class. And he’s handing the papers back, and he says, “Oh Sarra got 75%, must have been an easy test.” And at the time it was – you know it was a joke, and I laughed. And what I didn’t realise at the time was I was receiving a message that I didn’t know I was receiving, and he was sending a message that he probably wasn’t aware that he was sending. And that is,”75% is probably good for you, so don’t expect too much more.”

And again if I can just take a moment just to reflect on the power and the magic in that exchange. Now his name was Mr [Melafonte] strangely enough, I don’t know why his name was – well that was his name. <laughter> And he was a little fat fellow, so we’d call him obviously – you know, blackfellas, we get names for everyone, so we’d call him “Elafonte”, that wasn’t too. <laughter>

But my point is, he was a nice guy, he wasn’t malicious, he wouldn’t have been racist, but you could argue that there was some racist kind of tendencies in and around that exchange, but not in any overt way. So that’s what I’m saying, there was power in that exchange. Because he was having a joke, but he was sending a message he probably wasn’t aware he was sending, and I was receiving one that I wasn’t aware that I was receiving. And this is why I’m saying we have to be so careful. We can just make a throw away comment like that, yet it can mean something.

Now I’ve been out of high school for nine years now – no gammon. <laughter> More than that. That was in 1984. ’84 I was in grade 12. And here I am talking about that again. So anyway, I finished college. Once I’d realised this kind of thing about expectations I went back to the people organising my course and said, “Look, I reckon I know what’s going on here. And you know what? I want to finish this course in the same time as everybody else that I started.” But what it meant was I’d have to pick up the workload that I didn’t do back in the first year. So in the second year and the third year I had to do 120% workload. With my little popgun kind of TE score of 750 here, pitted against these other guys who are all the big brainy ones, and yet here I was passing. And some of these guys were falling out, for various reasons. But it was a lesson for me. And I finished everything in three years, I caught up on the other stuff, did the extra work, and I’ve finished, and I passed everything, and I became a teacher.

A commitment to high expectations...

And you know, you’d think you’d be happy to finish college, but the truth is I was so filthy, I was so outraged, because I was thinking, what the hell was going on back in school? How could I not see that stuff? How could I let myself be sold short in that kind of way and not even know it? And if I’ve been sold short like that, how many other black kids are getting sold short like that, just because people don’t believe in them, or people don’t expect things of them? And not only black kids, how many other kids were just being sold short because of low expectations, and that kind of thing?

So I think that kind of sense of outrage about that whole circumstance probably fuelled – provided me with enough outrage I think to last me a career. Well certainly up until now anyway. Because from that point on I was determined to change expectations, that was the thing. And as an educator I never thought to become an expert in literacy, or whatever, I wanted to change expectations. And that was a big thing for me.
**Becoming a teacher...**

So I became a phys ed teacher, and I remember at the time they were saying – bear in mind this is like 1988, bicentennial year, that’s when I finished. And they’re saying, “There’s no jobs in teaching.” I think they say that every year actually. But they’re just saying, “No jobs in teaching.” And we’d finished exams, we did the last exam, and it was knocked on the head, I stumbled home. And then blow me down the phone rings at some ungodly hour in the morning, like quarter to 11 or something like that. <laughter> And I pick up the phone, “Hello?” and this fellow says, “Hello, this Craig Underwood from Darling Downs Department of Education. Can I speak to Chris Sarra?” I said, “Yeah, speaking.” “We have a job for you at Cecil Plains. Will you accept the job?” “Yes, I’ll accept the job.” And then he says, “Do you know where Cecil Plains is?” And I said, “I’ve never heard of Cecil Plains.” <laughter> I said, “But I’ll have the job anyway.” And it turns out it was just on the other side of Toowoomba, so it was good.

But the thing about teaching phys ed, I loved teaching phys ed and I loved teaching secondary English. But you know the thing that struck me most when I look back on that time as a phys ed teacher in that? It was a really small rural community. And remember I’m starting teaching fired up and passionate about wanting to make a difference for Aboriginal kids, and there was no Aboriginal kids in this school. But this whole expectations thing was just as toxic for poor white kids, you know? And I found that really tragic. I think back on some of the kids that I taught, I even remember their names and can see their faces still now. And they were subjected to the same bullshit – the same nonsense type of commentary in the staff rooms about how they wouldn’t amount to much, and how they’d end up like the rest of them, and all that kind of thing. And you’d just watch, and they’d kind of go through this cycle. So this whole thing about expectation is not something that we own as Aboriginal people, or Torres Strait Islander people, it’s just as toxic, I find, for poor white kids. And it’s just as filthy when you see it played out for them as well.

That doesn’t mean that we don’t have challenges for us as Aboriginal teachers, or Torres Strait Islander teachers.

**Journey into leadership...**

So anyway, I went on and did a whole bunch of other stuff, and eventually I became the principal at Cherbourg School. And again, Cherbourg at the time – and it was at a time, this was by 1998, I’d started writing my PhD, and I was up on this whole thing about expectations. And just the perceptions of Aboriginal children in schools, and knowing the reality, but also having that very, very deeply personal experience of knowing what it’s like to be subjected to low expectations, and seeing what effect that can have. But also that sort of circumstance in which I had the opportunity realise that and flip that, and have high expectations of myself I suppose, and seeing what could come as a result of that. So when I got to Cherbourg it was a toxic place, you know? And unfortunately it was just pretty usual, the usual kind of circumstance that you would see in Aboriginal schools, where there was this kind of chronic collusion with the toxic low expectations environment. And as I was in charge of a staff team that was colluding and nurturing this kind of toxicity by lowering expectations and feeling sorry for kids, and not ever challenging them. And sadly I had community colluding with that kind of low expectation as well, thinking that this is probably the best we can do. But my deeply persona experience knew that we could have something different, and so I was determined to change that.

And of course, you know the results at Cherbourg School changed quite dramatically. I was always a bit uncomfortable with being sort of put up as “the one” sort of thing. But we did shift some things, and it was a lot of us really sweat blood to make those changes. And what I like
about that is that other Aboriginal communities were watching on, and there were some that were doing okay already and saying, “Yeah, that kind of validates our story, or our insistence on high expectations.” What I liked most was that other Aboriginal communities were watching on and saying, “Well if this can happen in Cherbourg, we want it to happen in our community.” So we nurtured a new sense of expectation about Aboriginal children, and Torres Strait Islander children, and what we could achieve, and what was a good quality education for us.

**Stronger Smarter Institute...**

So I left and we set up the Stronger Smarter Institute, and at the Institute we said that we wanted to change the tide of low expectations of Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children in schools right across Australia. And I think we’re well on the way, I think the conversations have shifted quite dramatically.

We’ve come to articulate the Stronger Smarter philosophy as this: We say, “The Stronger Smarter philosophy honours a positive sense of cultural identity, acknowledges and embraces positive community leadership, enabling innovative and dynamic approaches and processes that are anchored by high expectations relationships.” And we say that, “High expectations relationships honour the humanity of others, and in so doing acknowledge one’s strengths, capacity, and human right to emancipatory opportunity.” So that’s complex in it’s own self, and I’m going to speak to this in more detail later in the workshop.

But it raises some questions, and I think in some ways you can see the reflections on my own schooling experience, and my own experience as a blackfella I suppose. It talks about this notion of embracing a positive sense of identity, and why would that be so important?

Schooling for us has been a situation where we’ve come in and the expectation is down here, and somehow we’ve colluded with that expectation like somehow that was our place. Well things are very different now, and I like to think that the Stronger Smarter approach has punched us through, and stuck a poker into the conscience of educators, and forced them to have to think differently about how we engage with every individual child, and how we understand their sense of cultural identity. And how we offer a classroom to them that lets them understand that just because they’re an Aboriginal child, or just because they’re a Torres Strait Islander child, that doesn’t mean that their place is somehow automatically on the bottom. So we have to offer something more positive. So that’s why it’s so important.

And I think what’s also important is for us to reflect on what that means for us as an Aboriginal teacher in school, or a Torres Strait Islander teacher in school, and a sense of incumbency, if you like, or a sense of responsibility about getting young kids to identify with you, so that they have an explicit reason in front of them to believe differently about what’s right for them. I struggle to watch on if there are Aboriginal teachers in schools who don’t talk about their sense of identity. Because of this, what I’m describing, is so fundamentally important for – whether it Koori kids, Murri kids, or any Aboriginal child, or Torres Strait Islander child, to be able to identify with you. So if you’re in a school and you’re not saying anything, or not presenting yourself as somebody with a positive sense of identity, then there’s such an opportunity lost, and that’s not a good thing.

It talks about embracing positive community leadership, and I think put simply, and later on I’ll talk more about this, that notion of what I’ve come to describe as that sort of being the victim
type leadership compared to that sort of booting the victim type leadership, and what I would urge us to do is contemplate a kind of beyond the victim type leadership, community leadership.

And so in a high expectations relationship we have to have the courage to be firm and fair. If we’re just fair and that’s all we know what to do, that’s a low expectations relationship. If we are just firm with no capacity to be fair, and all we know is to smash kids around, or smash communities around, and force them to get their bloody kids to school or cut their welfare payments, if that’s all we know, that’s a low expectations relationship. So in a high expectations relationship we have to show courage and compassion. We have to be firm and fair, so that we can push the buttons when we need to.

The Animal School – a fable recognising our children as unique individuals and learners...

I want to conclude with a story, this is my favourite story about education. It has nothing to do with Aboriginal schooling, but I think that the messages will be obvious. And some of you might know this, it’s called The Animal School, I had to print it off in big font again, written by a guy called George H. Reavis. The Animal School. Once upon a time the animals decided they must do something heroic to meet the problems of new world. So they organised a school. They adopted an activity curriculum consisting of running, climbing, swimming, and flying. To make it easier to administer the curriculum all the animals took all the subjects. The duck was excellent at swimming, in fact better than his instructor. But he made only passing grades in flying, and he was very poor in running. Since he was slow in running he had to stay after school, and also drop swimming in order to practice running. This was kept up until his webbed feet were badly worn, and he was only average in swimming. But average was acceptable in school so nobody worried, except the duck.

The rabbit started off at the top of the class in running, but had a nervous breakdown because of so much make up work in swimming. <laughter> The squirrel was excellent in climbing, until he developed frustration in the flying class, where his teacher made him start from the ground up instead of from the treetop down. He also developed a charley horse from over exertion, and then got a C in climbing, and a D in running.

The eagle was a problem child and was disciplined severely. In the climbing class he beat all the others to the top of the tree, but insisted on using his own ways to get there. At the end of the year an abnormal eel that could swim exceedingly well, and also run, climb, and fly a little, had the highest average and was valedictorian. The prairie dogs, they stayed out of school and fought the tax levy because the administration would not add digging and burrowing to the curriculum. <laughter> They apprenticed their children to a badger, and later joined the ground hogs and gophers to start a successful private school.

So will the ducks in your classrooms be great at swimming? Will the rabbits stay on top of the class for running? Will the squirrels stay climbing? Will the Eagles stay flying high? Will the eels survive without getting eaten by blackfellas? <laughter> And will the prairie dogs hang in there? It’s up to you about all of that. How will you be remembered as a teacher? Thank you.

<applause>

END OF TRANSCRIPT