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# INDIGENOUS MOTHERS' ASPIRATIONS for THEIR CHILDREN in PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA: *The* VALUE of EDUCATION and SCHOOLING

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## ■ Abstract

This project involved the collection of stories about the aspirations, goals and strategies from a sample of mothers of Indigenous children living in Perth, Western Australia. Analysis of the semi-structured interviews indicated that the education of their children was important for many of the mothers. Whilst some of the mothers preferred their children to learn about their Indigenous history, culture and identity, others valued the type of education that emanates from a mainstream-style school system. A major theme was a need for schools to partner with Indigenous parents in the decision-making process to engage the families in a positive education experience.

## ■ Introduction

Improving the wellbeing and status of Australia's Indigenous population is an important objective of Australian governments. Numerous strategies and programs have been developed over time to meet this objective. Although some of these have been successful, many have failed. Statistics on school attendance by Indigenous children paint a bleak picture. A recent review reported that:

- (i) attendance rates of Indigenous students were appreciably lower than those of non-Indigenous students; (ii) retention, progression and attendance rates of Indigenous students at the secondary level of schooling was especially low; and (iii) attendance of Indigenous students in more remote areas also tended to be relatively low (Bourke et al., 2000).

Although this non-attendance may be seen as a lack of interest in school, there are contrasting reports of some schools and communities across the nation achieving excellent results in this regard.

The research presented here followed on from the Bibbulung Gnarnep action research project conducted in Perth, Western Australia (Eades et al., 1999; Mahony, 2002), which aimed to assist Indigenous families to achieve the wellbeing potential of their children. The project involved a Home Visiting Program offering service delivery and referral around infant health, parenting, and the family's other psychosocial needs. The project team found that to deliver services effectively, it was necessary to understand the mother's context. After consulting with the mothers, it was decided to refer them directly to relevant service delivery organisations, and to focus the project on investigating that context. This involved asking a sample of mothers for their stories about their aspirations for themselves, their families and their children, and their ability to achieve them based on the contention that a narrative approach is more culturally appropriate than statistically measuring people against standards imposed by a colonising system, and gives an insight into their own culturally driven motivations.

Many participants spoke of issues related to education and school, which they considered important in their children's ability to achieve their potential. A major theme in the stories related to the effects of the mothers' own experiences of school and how the context and perceptions influenced how they intended their children to be educated. Their commentary provided useful insight into what factors affect Indigenous children's attendance and performance at school.

## ■ Methods

The research team comprised both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members. Although all were involved in designing the study and analysing the results, only the Indigenous investigators conducted the interviews. The trusting relationship which had developed between the mothers and the interviewers over the previous 18 months was pivotal. This and the Indigenous researchers' familiarity with the women's culture contributed to the richness of the stories. A strength of this qualitative study was the provision of both insider and outsider perspectives when interpreting the data. As with many qualitative studies, a great deal of detailed material was gathered based on responses of the experiences of a small number of women and their extensive networks.

## *Recruitment*

The fourteen women interviewed had been referred from a variety of sources – including an Indigenous Health Service, a maternity hospital, and networks in the community. Their ages ranged from 19 to 44 years with most in their early 20s. All but two had a male partner, not necessarily the parent of any or all of the children, and not necessarily cohabiting. One mother had nine children, and another had five, but the majority had between one and three children. The majority of women were Noongar, born in Perth and a small number were Yamatji from the Geraldton region.

## *Ethics*

Ethics approvals were obtained for the study including approval from an Indigenous ethics committee. The study was conducted according to National Health and Medical Research Council (1999) guidelines.

## *Data collection and analysis*

The 14 interviewees had previously been participants in a Home Visiting Program and had been referred for acute economic and psychosocial needs. Each woman was invited to tell her story in semi-structured interviews conducted by the two Indigenous

researchers in an environment chosen by the interviewee. The interviewers explained that they were interested in how the mothers' upbringing had affected their parenting style.

They commenced by asking the mothers to talk about where they were born and grew up. Some of the mothers continued their stories with very little prompting. Those who hesitated or came to the end of a topic were shown the interviewers' checklist of brief prompts, from which they were able to choose. The interviewers remained as non-directive as possible within an informal conversational framework, and their questions were mostly exploratory apart from clarifications. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Copies of the tape and transcription were offered to each participant and sensitive material erased if requested.

Contextual knowledge based on the interviewers' long-term relationship with each of the women assisted the team to make sense of the transcripts. Analysis involved all team members independently coding for categories, then meeting together to compare notes and decide on the major themes. The mothers whose stories are quoted in this paper are those who had evidence convincing them that schooling had worked for other Aboriginal people. The Indigenous team members identified six Indigenous community members (four women and two men, aged 32 to 68 years) who were able to provide further insight into these themes.

## ■ Health and education

This study intentionally took a broad view of what the mothers perceived as contributing to a child doing well. Health was certainly one of these factors, but given the close connection between poor socioeconomic status and poor health (Nguyen & Peschard, 2003, pp. 447-74) it is not surprising that "a good education" emerged as a key theme in the mothers' aspirations for their children. Some spoke of education as a goal in itself, others as an important step towards achieving goals. The goals ranged from lofty ones like stardom in sport or dance or music based on opportunities provided by the schools to more mundane ones such as "a good job" arising from educational qualifications. Education was seen as a strategy to escape or avoid poverty, which would improve the chances of their children to achieve good health.

Mothers described what they or their children needed to achieve their aspirations, or discussed the efforts they were making or planned to make to ensure a good education for their children. Four mothers focused on traditional learning such as connectedness with Indigenous family, history and culture, and did not speak of mainstream education. Their quotes are not included in this discussion, and thus only 10 of the interviewed women are quoted here.

Issues that interested the women clustered around themes that are by no means exclusive to Indigenous parents were: What is the value of education? Which school should my child attend? How do I support my child with schooling? Although these themes may have been familiar, the stories that emerged from the interviews reflected the diversity within Indigenous culture and circumstances. They provided evidence that each mother was connected with Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in a unique way. They had different responses to the challenges or adversity associated with their circumstances, different aspirations or fears that motivated their choices, and different histories that provided a context for their decisions.

### ■ Acknowledging the value of education

The likelihood of Indigenous families pursuing education for their children depended on their own experience. Mothers who could see people of similar social or cultural background to themselves making socioeconomic advances as a result of educational opportunities were more likely to believe education would help their children. Others were motivated by the knowledge that their own lack of education had limited their chances to improve their circumstances.

Several mothers who stressed the importance of education to their children's future had grown up in homes where education was valued. This value in some cases was demonstrated by the example of their parents pursuing higher education and careers ("my Mum's been a big role model for me in ... achieving my goals", says Mum 1), and in others by the parents' insistence on regular attendance (as shown by Mum 3 below).

Always instilled in me was the fact that you [need a] really good education because Mum and Dad ... often spoke of the fact that they didn't have the opportunity to get ... a good education. Mum had to leave school when she was in Grade 7, and that was the extent of her educational ... qualification was Grade 7, and my Dad left school when he was 14 to do an apprenticeship ... My mother I think having not been given the opportunity for an education really felt that what we needed was a good education and so she scrimped and saved to send us all to a private school so we got educated. I went to [a] good Catholic school and my brother went to ... College (Mum 2).

We always had to go to school every day. Always, definitely always had to go to school (Mum 3).

My parents were very strict on us like just make sure we go to school and um make sure we were doing everything right (Mum 4).

There were also mothers who had not pursued educational goals in their own younger years, but were now thinking about the subject differently:

I wasn't really thinking, career minded until ... I wasn't really worried about education when I was 15, 16 ... I want to go back now and study. I wasn't interested earlier. I think more for my kids now 'cause ... I want to send them to a good school (Mum 5).

Brief supplementary interviews with the six Indigenous community members were held to explore this theme further. Some indicated that, resources permitting, their families saw investing in the children's education as "making a sacrifice to get better jobs" or to "open opportunities you would never have had". Three in this group remedied their own lack of education by returning to studies later in life to expand their career opportunities. Family resource issues were important because life crises such as death or severe health problems could shift a family's priorities from pursuing long-term aspirations to adopting short-term survival strategies.

### ■ Choosing a school

Choosing a school for one's children causes anxiety for most parents, Indigenous or not, about how well the child will fit in, financial costs, the quality of teaching and learning, and whether the school is generally supportive. Most parents worry that if they make poor choices, their children will suffer. The Indigenous mothers spoke of their awareness that some school environments were racist, and some schools had expectations that were difficult to meet within the families' cultural and social context. Their stories describe how they consider options such as private schools or Indigenous community schools to reduce those risks.

For some of the mothers choosing a school was fairly straightforward. They were happy for their child to attend their old school:

I'd want him to have the best possible education umm going to send him off to a public school in his primary school years. Probably have a bit of tradition going on where I went to Local Primary and I'm going to enrol him to go there so there be a bit of family tradition going on there (Mum 1).

The mother made it clear that she was sending the child there for the proud tradition that attending it would establish, not just because it was the closest school.

Choosing an appropriate and supportive school for the children relied on evidence. Parents who had a good experience with a particular type of school

sent their children there. If their experience was not so good, their children were more likely to be sent to a different type of school. Experiences of friends or relatives, who could be trusted to understand the specific types of support their children would need, influenced the mothers' decision about the choice of school.

I'm trying to get [my daughter] into a private school not a public school because our next door neighbour's ... three daughters go to St N's ... and like they're really intelligent, you know, they know a lot and they learn (Mum 6).

She would be well taught. She would have a good education ... even like kindy ... they learn all their maths and that, they got special techniques of doing that, where [if] you send [daughter] to ... kinder in a public school she wouldn't learn as much (Mum 6).

My youngest brother ... if he was in a public school he would have got caught up forgotten about, lost and even like sporting he had a lot of opportunities where in public schools you don't get nothing. Yeah I think [partner] wants to send the girls to a good maybe a Catholic High School or whatever. A religious high school won't hurt them (Mum 5).

I want them to have a, you know I want to send them to a good school ... Not to a public school like I went. You just don't get no support (Mum 5).

These examples implied a perception of private schools as providers of a superior education, with "special learning techniques" and opportunities to advance. The more important distinction, however, may not have been between private and public but between well-resourced and poorly resourced schools. One of the women provided an example highlighting the difference between public schools in two different suburbs: one in a wealthy beachside suburb (which we have called *Beachside*) and the other in a suburb with fewer resources and higher population density (which we have called *Lessrich*). Her story illustrates the complexity of the distinction between health-promoting effects of schooling resulting from achievement, and health-damaging effects caused by social exclusion and lack of support (Malin, 2003, p. 1).

It was a lot rougher at *Lessrich* ... Just a lot of fighting, fighting for stupid stuff and got mixed up with the wrong people and that ... I used to fight a lot out cause out *Beachside* they were like really posh and that, and they used to own like all the three storey houses on *Beachside* and that,

and they're real snobby, and I found it hard(er) out *Beachside* than what I did out *Lessrich*.

[some of the hard things at *Beachside* were] Just the snobbiness and like just the way they acted and that, ... Even though I was white, you know but Aboriginal descendant ... there was still a lot of racism you know but because there was only me and CC and we were the only Aboriginals in that school, so yeah ...

Yeah it was like, I don't have to you know ... I could be myself not like how I was at *Beachside*. I was more like myself at *Lessrich* ... Like out *Beachside* you had you couldn't wear like earrings you couldn't you could only have studs not hoops you had to wear socks like up to your knees, and you had to have the school uniform you had to have tie, you had to have like your T-shirt tucked in and you weren't allowed to slouch you had to sit straight in class and then when we like went to *Lessrich* it was like ... you could slouch all you want and yeah you could just be yourself not have to worry about the teacher yelling at you or getting detention for nothing, yeah, it was good there. I liked it there better (Mum 6).

Although she described *Lessrich School* as rougher, with fighting and getting "mixed up with the wrong people", it seemed closer to her comfort zone than *Beachside School* where the people were wealthy and "snobby", with "a lot" of racism and only one other Indigenous student. When she was at school, she told the interviewers, she pressured her parents to move her from *Beachside* to somewhere more comfortable. In retrospect, however, she evaluated what was important somewhat differently:

Mum 6: Um the education out *Beachside* was better but I just liked I just like it out *Lessrich* as well. I mean it's different because out *Lessrich* you couldn't really teach but if I was a teacher there I wouldn't teach there because ... like no one would listen to the teacher and things like that.

[of having it so strict]

Mum 6: Yeah a lot of advantages that you can actually learn and that ...

Interviewer: Given yourself now and where you are now and you're reflecting on the difference between *Beachside* and *Lessrich* if you had the opportunity.

Mum 6: I'd go to *Beachside*.

Interviewer: Your daughter you would want her to go somewhere like *Beachside*.

Mum 6: See I'm trying to save to get her in a private school not a public school ...

On reflection, she concluded that while rules and insistence on conformity were hard for her to deal with at the time, they were accompanied by learning. So *Beachside School* was where the learning was, and if she had the chance to do it all again, *Beachside* is where she would go. In hindsight, she learnt that the indicators of inclusion at *Lessrich* – familiar posture and clothing, fighting and not listening to the teacher – were also associated with less learning. What she needed was a location where learning was a priority but where she did not feel excluded. At the time, Indigenous students were unusual enough at *Beachside* for her to feel isolated and unsupported in dealing with racism. She did not see how complying with strict rules would help.

For her own child, she was working towards what she believed will be a better option. She was saving for her child to go to a private school. Her neighbour's children, also Indigenous, demonstrated that learning is a priority at their private school. Their experience reassured her that her child would be less likely to experience the isolation and racism that made *Beachside School* so difficult for her. She also believed that as a paying customer she could influence a private school's response to any racism or exclusion her child may encounter.

### ■ Supportive schools

Although schools' effectiveness is often measured by their ability to impart academic skills, this is rarely possible without the school also having a strong supportive ethos. This includes setting up processes to ensure the emotional and social development of the children, and providing opportunities for parents to interact meaningfully with the school. To be supportive to Indigenous children, processes to foster their social and emotional development need to take account of Indigenous cultural and social circumstances.

Enembaru points out that in many cases Indigenous children must comply both with the ways their Indigenous culture expects them to behave and absorb knowledge, and the ways the schooling system's culture dictates (Enembaru, 2000, p. 178). Educational discourses, the expected ways of being and interacting and demonstrating knowledge within the formal schooling system, can often be foreign to Indigenous children's experiences. Their lack of familiarity with the discourses can lead to marginalisation, conflict and exclusion. Often, however, this difference in ways of knowing is not recognised by the school. Lessons commence with the assumption that the children

already have certain skills, even though these are not necessarily taught to young Indigenous children at home (Kearins, 2001, p. 172).

Mothers had strong but varied views on what kinds of support would be useful or necessary for their children. Some felt Indigenous schools provided the best support because they understood the social situations of their students, attempted to minimise the demands on families' resources, and provided extra academic assistance. Other mothers whose children attended mainstream schools (whether private or public) considered the schools to be supportive if they gave Indigenous parents a sense of being welcomed and included in decision making.

Many mothers believed schools did not take into account how difficult it may be for children to meet the school's requirements. A child's school performance may be affected by lack of sleep from going to bed late because the household does not have routine bed times, or due to attending to younger siblings overnight. Lack of breakfast may also be a factor, either because most of the household is not organised to prepare it, or because of budget issues. Completing homework may compete with other duties where children are expected to take responsibility for younger siblings once they return from school. Parents may be unable to help with homework tasks because of their own low level of literacy. There may be no space available for a child to do homework without interruption. This may explain the comment from Mum 6:

If she wants to come home from a public school with homework I'd be yeah that's fine ... I'd expect her to come home with something but if she went to a private school I'd be like no I don't think she should have homework because I ... would've paid good money for her to learn everything there (Mum 6).

Mum 6, speaking to an Indigenous interviewer, did not need to spell out the subtext: that if the child did bring the homework home she might not get a chance to complete it. So sending her to a school where it might be expected that all work was completed at school gave her a chance to keep up with her peers.

One mother described her satisfaction with an Indigenous community school where the social factors that could affect children's performance at school were acknowledged and provided for:

Sometimes like I go [to the school] Thursdays for pottery and ... I talk to the teachers and see how they going (Mum 3).

In the classrooms they've got time for the kids ... one classroom there's two teachers for a classroom and there's not much kids in it ... I like that idea, because then it's got time for kids and

there's two teachers in there and they got time for them which I don't have. In my school age, you [were] given a piece of paper and say "Here do this" ... but in this age, in my kids' schooling it's "Here I'll help you do it" ... they have the extra help there for them (Mum 3).

Well at [Aboriginal Community school] they've got like the uniforms ... you don't have to pay for uniforms ... the excursions are free, there's swimming – they go swimming every Thursday, they go to soccer, so they got the sports there ... for all the kids. ... Plus it's not just for primary schools, it's for high school as well there so there's actually bigger kids there. ... It's pretty good, you know, ... compare it with [the local government] primary school. ... You have to walk to school in [the local government primary school] but at [the Aboriginal Community school] they've got the bus um they don't have to walk anywhere. The only thing they walk is from one class room to the other but ... they get picked every morning and dropped off every afternoon, so it's pretty good yeah ... they like it there (Mum 3).

Several strategies at the school inspired this mother's confidence in the type of education her children were receiving. The first is that there were activities for mothers (the pottery classes), which provided an informal opportunity for mothers to speak to the teacher and see how their children were managing. She mentioned the small class sizes, but seemed even more impressed that there were two teachers in the classroom, and that children were assisted with their work rather than being given a task and left to get on with it. A bonus was the ease to get children to school in the bus: if they had been required to walk a long distance or catch public transport, this may have been sufficiently onerous that the children became less inclined to bother attending.

Factors that can become logistical difficulties for Indigenous families are the cost of uniforms and excursions, and problems getting children to school either because of transport difficulties or because nobody in the household is available to escort the child to and from school. Hence Mum 3's satisfaction with the free uniforms and free excursions, and the school bus which picked the children up and dropped them home.

This attention to cultural factors can perhaps be expected at an Indigenous community school. Other schools, though, also make an effort to address Indigenous students' needs. This takes considerably more than willingness – it requires knowledge of what students' needs might be, and skills and systems to engage them and their parents.

It's taken me four years to do it but we're here, we got the committee back to where we want. We do homework classes with the kids which is great 'cause all the teachers like it because the kids that don't do their homework at home they do it in homework classes ... Some of the kids they said how much they have improved through the homework classes, even though it's a couple of days a week (Mum 7).

Mum 7 was referring to a public primary school, and her involvement as a committee member of the school's Aboriginal Student Support Parent Association. The committee development of homework classes gave students twofold assistance. Firstly, it provided space and time for completing homework; and secondly, it provided adults who could help the children interpret what the teacher wanted. The result was a marked improvement in the children's ability to comprehend and keep up with the work assigned to them.

Descriptions have been given of the structures and procedures put in place by an Indigenous school, and a mainstream public school advised by Indigenous parents to ensure that their Indigenous students can participate and perform to the best of their ability.

Not all schools have incorporated culturally appropriate support for Indigenous children in their structures and procedures, but some respond very well to Indigenous children's needs on an ad hoc basis. One story of such an ad hoc intervention began in a distressing way:

He didn't want to go once and he wouldn't go, refused to go. So the ... Police Officer, (he works for the Education things on truancy), him and this other bloke come around and my son was dressed for school but he wouldn't go. So anyways they had to put him in the car, and we had to take [him] up to the school, and we had to literally drag him out of the car, drag him into class ... he threw himself onto the ground, wouldn't let me go ... two teachers had [to] carry him in the class room, he was screaming, running amok and all (Mum 8).

However, after what seems to be collaboration between the mother and the teacher, things gradually changed for the child:

He's one of them children ... who can't really adapt to change very much. Once you put him into something different they either shut off, close down and won't do nothing. He's one of them sort of kids, because he's slowly... talking to his teacher now. This is his second year he's been with her. See, she asked for him again and she asked me if it was okay for her to have him again and I said "yeah have him again because

he's built up that esteem and he's gotten to know you now" ... whereas if he was sent to another class he just, they would have to start all over again you know there'd be no progress. So I think that was a good thing for him, because I'm thinking "how is he going to be when he goes to another class? Oh God, he can't be in the same class forever" (Mum 8).

Having his needs recognised and met by being kept with the teacher with whom he already had a rapport was helpful both for the child and for Mum 8. The way Mum 8 described the interaction between herself and the teacher showed a perception of the teacher instigating the intervention, but Mum 8 having an important role in it. Mum 8's permission was asked, "she asked me if it was okay for her to have him again" and space provided for Mum 8 to talk through her understanding about why that would work for the child. This teacher may quite possibly have collaborated with a non-Indigenous mother in similar ways to resolve the child's reluctance to attend school. Maybe the important point here is not one specifically about Indigenous culture but about a teacher's willingness to take a child's context into account in addressing an issue.

This example is in striking contrast, however, to a number of descriptions of mothers' experiences during their own school days, where the response to their apparent misbehaviour or sporadic attendance was some degree of exclusion:

I didn't know who to ask [for advice]. ... I didn't know people really listen to you. ... Just missing school and ... and teachers probably think "ah that person's not worth bothering with" (Mum 9).

I got into a lot of trouble ... I was really bad. I played up wicked ... English I'd do that no worries, that was good, that's what I like to do, um but any other subject I didn't like it. I found it boring cos ... I wasn't really pretty much good at it. ... instead of them just accepting me for how I was like, they didn't, ... [this] played a major part in me messing around in school (Mum 8).

When brief supplementary interviews were held with six community members, there were comments that it has been easier to punish, suspend or exclude Indigenous children than try to understand and address what was happening to them. With a sense of being misunderstood, of no effort being made to understand why they behaved in particular ways, it is not surprising that these mothers had taken little interest in their own schooling and felt that at school "you just don't get no support".

The majority of the mothers we interviewed were, however, able to identify and direct their children

towards particular schools or strategies they would use to ensure that support was there for their children.

## Discussion

Indigenous communities have, since colonisation, experienced poor living conditions that have often been perpetuated rather than improved by government intervention. Discrimination, loss of control, forcible removal of children from their parents, poor education, unemployment, poverty, inadequate housing, overcrowding and ill-health have long been a feature of Indigenous people's lives (Broome, 1982, pp. 149-50; Collard, 2000, pp. 23-24; Dudgeon, 2000, pp. 43-50; Devitt et al., 2001). These factors, in conjunction with a failure to acknowledge or cater to Indigenous cultural needs and differences, have created a poor environment for nurturing Indigenous children's potential. Factors involved in the disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous families and communities are inter-related in complex ways. The failure of non-Indigenous policy makers and program designers to come to grips with this complexity can lead to simplistic single-factor solutions that are often ineffective.

Government-commissioned reports have repeatedly found that Indigenous families and communities want their children to be educated, but that they need the education to be delivered in ways that are culturally appropriate (Dodson, 1991, pp. 573-4; Trudgen, 2000, pp. 122-3). The reports have recommended meaningful consultation with Indigenous parents and community members on what is culturally appropriate.

The stories from these mothers in Perth, Western Australia uncovered a wide range of important themes. As initial contact with mothers was made through a child health research centre, it might be expected that their stories would focus on specific health issues. In fact, they talked about health concerns only as a context for other aspects of their stories. Many mothers instead spoke of issues related to education and the schooling process, which they considered important in their children's ability to achieve their potential. Perhaps because the conversations' focus was on aspirations rather than on concerns, the mothers concentrated on strategies they were using or hoped to use to achieve these aspirations.

Parents' and grandparents' oral histories of being poorly treated informed the respondents' views about the value of education. With so many resources distributed towards members of the dominant culture, many Indigenous people could easily (and arguably rightly) conclude that education may be an option for the advancement of non-Indigenous Australians only.

Formal education can be seen as a tool to allow a dominant culture to impose its values on another (Cowlshaw, 1999, p. 127). The fact that many schools do not recognise the validity of Indigenous-style

education (knowledge of family and traditional ways and values), and present their curricula in ways which exclude important components of Indigenous students' ways of being, presents another reason for Indigenous students to fail to engage with the system. Retention rates of Indigenous students beyond the compulsory age are dramatically lower than those of non-Indigenous students (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2003, p. 8).

All the interviewed mothers wanted to transmit Indigenous culture, knowledge and history to their children. All intended that their children would be well educated. Some mothers, particularly those with negative school experiences and no access to alternative, successful stories, had more to say about traditional forms of culture transmission. The threat of losing their culture as the eventual outcome of complying with formal education was perhaps enough to convince the mothers to preserve their Indigenous identity by staying as much as possible within their own culture. Without evidence that the system could benefit Indigenous children, it made sense for these women to avoid it.

The mothers whose stories are quoted in this paper are those who had evidence convincing them that schooling had worked for other Indigenous people. These stories demonstrated that investing their family's energy and resources in schooling was worthwhile if some of the difficulties associated with the process could be addressed. They clearly wanted their children both to learn Indigenous culture (through community and traditional means) and to go through the formal school system. Their interest in encouraging schools to recognise their children's Indigenous identity and to respond more appropriately shows a commitment to bicultural integration. Similar aspirations have been long held and expressed by Indigenous communities, not only in Western Australia but throughout Australia, and some schools have responded to those aspirations (Cowlshaw, 1999, p. 127) (Gordon *et al.*, 2002) (Dodson, 1991, p. 562) (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2002).

Pro-education stories from the mothers' friends and family are one explanation for why some mothers aspire to a good education for their children while others focus on other goals. Their aspiration, of course, does not necessarily guarantee that the children will attend school regularly, nor does it guarantee how long they stay at school. In her Northern Territory study, Scully (2002, p. 72) identified several features of the parents of Indigenous students with good school attendance compared to poor or average attendees. These included a higher level of education, higher paid and skilled employment, more contact with teachers, more involvement with school activities, more involvement with other community organisations, and aspirations for the children expressed as hopes for future employment, independence and self-reliance.

The mothers in our study, and the community members with whom we held supplementary interviews, bore out the link between parental education and employment and families with a culture of regular school attendance. Aspirations for the children in those families did seem to feature future employment and self-reliance. Parental contact with teachers and involvement with school activities, other characteristics of good attendance according to Scully (2002), may be affected by whether the school invites such involvement and how. As we have seen from the excerpts shown above, if a school is perceived to give "no support", Indigenous children may find it difficult to behave as expected or even to attend. The women describe very concrete ways in which this supportiveness can be demonstrated.

### ■ Conclusion

Indigenous mothers' stories and opinions form an important resource for understanding how best to improve outcomes for the next generation. Their stories tell of social resources within the community, of tested strategies to overcome obstacles, and of aspirations that motivate them to keep making efforts on behalf of their children. They also tell of need and hardship, but in these interviews it appears they have only done so as a context to explain the choices they have made.

Malin (2003) shows the complexity of the relationship between health and schooling in the context of Indigenous Australians, and in particular describes the stressful effects of social exclusion. Mainstream schools, which often uncritically reflect the views, structures and processes of the dominant culture, may contribute to Indigenous students' sense of social exclusion in ways that are more insidious and therefore harder to address than blatant racism.

Government initiatives to improve educational conditions for Indigenous children are often criticised as a waste of money unless parents take responsibility for ensuring that their children attend school. Our contention, based on the stories of these mothers, is that poor school attendance by Indigenous children in Perth, Western Australia, related as much to the perceived unsuitability of schools for these children as to parents' unwillingness to educate them. This paper showed that in many cases Indigenous families value education for their children but that some perceive the schooling available to be inappropriate. To keep Indigenous students in schools, Indigenous parents must be convinced that the Australian school system values what their children have to contribute and will provide a supportive environment in which all children can succeed. An understanding of family context and parental perceptions is an essential first step in influencing children to attend school and further local studies that focus on Indigenous families' situations, hopes and aspirations are recommended.

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## ■ About the authors

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