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# "I DON'T WANT *to* GROW UP *and* NOT BE SMART": URBAN INDIGENOUS YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS *of* SCHOOL

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## ■ Abstract

In light of the policy and research interests in optimising the educational experiences and outcomes of Indigenous young people, this paper aims to give voice to young Indigenous students' experiences of school and to convey a sense of the varied and complex nature of their educational and life pathways. Using a qualitative, life history research approach, 14 young people were interviewed seven times over two and a half years as they transitioned from primary school to secondary school in order to explore their perceptions of health, schooling and plans for the future. The findings demonstrate the complex and multifarious lived experiences of these young people and the incongruence with apparent assumptions underpinning education policies focused on improving and measuring educational outcomes. We argue that in order to avoid isolating, threatening or marginalising Indigenous (or any other) students within education systems, traditional educational pathways and trajectories need to be challenged so as to celebrate the cultural wealth of young people; recognise, value and build on their previous educational experiences; and support the transition across different learning and vocational avenues.

## ■ Introduction

There has been much debate in the academic literature concerning the relative contributions of the individual characteristics of Indigenous children and education system factors to the retention, attendance and achievement of Indigenous students in school. In recent years, many researchers and educators have argued for an education system which does not view the schooling and support of Indigenous children from a deficit perspective, but which provides a responsive and positive environment for their learning and educational progress (Godfrey et al., 2001; McNaughton, 2006). Schools that can approach Indigenous students in this way have the potential to contribute to positive change. Tripcony and Price (1999) have noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often aware that they may have little bargaining power in the broader fabric of society, but that schools can provide opportunities for students to develop the skills and knowledge they need to influence social change.

Studies of Indigenous student perceptions have identified that school is an attractive place to attend, particularly when students like their teachers, have realistic demands placed upon them, believe they can achieve at school and will benefit from regular attendance (Bourke et al., 2000; Godfrey et al., 2001). Students and their parents have noted that schools need to value Indigenous students and be safe, caring and welcoming (Bourke, et al., 2000; Godfrey, et al., 2001). The presence of Indigenous staff, other Indigenous students and a curriculum that is interesting and relevant and explicitly values Indigenous cultures are also important in improving Indigenous students' attendance (MCEETYA, 2004). However, other students identified that school was boring and they were less likely to attend due to conflict with other students or negative perceptions of their teacher (Bourke et al., 2000). Absenteeism has been described by some as a resistance by Indigenous students to an education system which has failed them (Godfrey, et al., 2001).

## ■ Systemic interest in Indigenous education

The Department of Education and Training (DET), formerly including the Arts (DETA) is the government

department responsible for the administration of public schooling in Queensland. Its administrative scope includes over 1300 schools (primary and secondary), 35 000 teachers and 490 000 students. The education of Indigenous children is a specific policy agenda of DET and is represented in two key policy documents: "Indigenous education: strategic directions 2008-2011" (DETA, 2008a); and "Indigenous learning and arts: strategic plan 2008-2011" (DETA, 2008b). The focus of both these documents is the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for Indigenous children and young people, with a particular interest in closing the gap between the outcomes and opportunities of Indigenous young people and those of their non-Indigenous counterparts. The "Indigenous education: strategic directions" (DETA, 2008a) policy is particularly focused this way and outlines the expectations of the department in relation to student outcomes and the strategies for achieving these goals. The following excerpts provide a sense of the approach taken by the government towards the education of Indigenous students:

Education is crucial to expanding employment opportunities and life chances for Indigenous students. Therefore we need to focus our efforts on achieving a measureable improvement in all Indigenous students' attendance, achievement and retention ... Personnel in schools, regions and central office will use this document to inform their planning to ensure that education services, programs and resources are sharply focused on improving education outcomes for Indigenous students in state schools (DETA, 2008a, p. 2).

The Indigenous education goal underpinning Education Queensland's (EQ) strategic direction is "strong students, strong results, strong futures" (DETA, 2008a, p. 3). In terms of realising this goal, EQ asserts that it needs to be "a capable and accountable organisation ... with an emphasis on performance, accountability, data-driven regional planning and action, aligning systems to facilitate effective education service provision" (DETA, 2008a, p. 3). Furthermore, the document outlines EQ's expectations of schools, regional offices and the central office of the department. For example, EQ expects that schools will:

- *expect and promote high achievement for all Indigenous students*
- provide quality teaching and learning
- build staff capacity to deliver priority outcomes
- adopt personal accountability for *improving Indigenous student performance*
- nurture and value Indigenous leadership
- forge partnerships with parents and community

- review student learning outcomes and teaching practice
- set targets, map and report on progress
- participate in cultural awareness activities that affirm Indigenous identity and cultural knowledge (DETA, 2008a, p. 3, emphasis added)

The improved outcomes are to be measured on the basis of attendance, retention, attainment (including literacy and numeracy) and workforce capacity including employment and Indigenous leadership (DETA, 2008a, p. 5).

While improving the achievement outcomes and futures of Indigenous students are important departmental goals to pursue, we note in these strategic directions an absence of reference to, or acknowledgement of, the complexity of these young people's lived experiences and the inadvertent assumption of the homogeneity of Indigenous young people's lives (Nakata, 1995). Further, there is little literature or "evidence" about the outcomes of these policies. Indeed, these policies follow several other well-written and well-meaning policies over the past decade (Pearson, 2009) but within each document there is little problematisation of the white Western perspectives on which they are based, nor recognition of systemic practices which may continue to (often inadvertently) discriminate (Nakata, 1995).

Underpinning much of the educational research and policy development is an ideological positioning of Indigenous students as the different "other" (Nakata, 1995, 2003). "Culture" can thus become a way of explaining Indigenous students' school performance rather than recognising the myriad of factors which may influence school attendance and achievement (Nakata, 1995). McNaughton (2006) argues that Indigenous children, as much as any other children are full of resources in their cultural, social and cognitive lives and that educators need to recognise these resources and capitalise on them. This may require a repositioning of power in acknowledging that much educational intervention which has gone before is based on the knowledge of non-Indigenous "experts" and that a shift is needed to value Indigenous ways of knowing in education (Nakata, 1995). Jude (1998) has suggested that requiring all Aboriginal students fit into white middle-class schooling is the same as denying them equality.

It seems that appropriate policy development is not the issue; rather, what is needed is a willingness to grapple with effective implementation of these goals for Indigenous students within their often complex and multifaceted home and school contexts (Malin & Maidment, 2003; Pearson, 2009). To do this, those concerned with the educational welfare of all students need to further understand how Indigenous young people engage with the school system and how their involvement changes over time. In light of the policy

and research interests in optimising the educational experiences and outcomes of Indigenous young people, the research reported in this paper has sought to give voice to young Indigenous students' experiences of school and to convey a sense of the varied and complex nature of their educational and life pathways.

## ■ Method

This research forms a part of a longitudinal Australian Research Council funded study titled the Life Activity Project (LAP) (Wright & Macdonald, 2004-2006) which was developed to explore the perceptions of Australian young people regarding health and physical activity. This qualitative research featured the narratives of a group of urban young Indigenous people. Ethical clearance was sought and gained from the university in which the project was based, the funding body, the Miangin School board and Education Queensland.

## ■ Participants

Participants were a group of 14 Indigenous young people (six male, eight female) aged 11-15 years who were initially enrolled in an urban non-Government school setting in Queensland, in which large numbers of Indigenous students were enrolled (Miangin School). This was a location where one of the authors had worked for 12 years and therefore had established relationships within the school. The school is a P-12 school of about 220 students, although the secondary school is significantly smaller than the primary school. Students represent a diverse range of social and socio-economic backgrounds and come from a broad geographical area and are bussed in to the school.

Young people were chosen purposively in order to include children with different activity levels, family make-ups, and body sizes. During the study, six girls and three boys moved to other schools and were followed up in those locations. One participant disengaged from formal schooling during the data collection period. Participants were provided with written and oral explanations of the research study and participant consent forms were provided to both the students and their caregivers.

## ■ Data collection

Each young person was interviewed seven times over two and a half years as they transitioned from primary school (Year 6 or 7 at the first interview) to secondary school (Year 9 or 10 by the final interview). Each interview was between 20 and 60 minutes in duration and took place either in the school environments, in the young people's homes or in a park. Some interviews took place with individual young people, while others were intentionally completed in pairs. On

a few occasions, interviews took place within a small group setting (not always just with young people in this study) where the young people indicated they would prefer this format. Different media were used as stimuli during the interviews including drawing, taking photos and commenting on magazines and media images. In addition, interviews were conducted with the school principal, the school physical education teacher and a sport and recreation officer regularly visiting the school. Data were also gathered from the researcher's observations when in the school and through informal conversations with students and staff members.

## ■ Data analysis

Data were analysed both thematically and through a process of discourse analysis (Luke, 1995-1996) where interview transcripts were read with a view to explore the ways in which participants were engaging with different discourses about schooling and Indigenous education in particular. Transcripts were read, coded and cross-checked between the primary researcher and her supervisors until consensus was reached, while ensuring text "bytes" were an authentic representation of the intent of the young people's comments. Care was taken during the analysis to avoid constraining the results to a particular theoretical frame, although theories around power and popular representation became useful at times (Hall, 2001). Following the analysis, each participant was given a "digital story" comprising their visual and verbal contributions to the research and asked again for permission to represent them with this content in academic publications.

## ■ Moving schools

Several factors appeared to impact why students changed schools and geographical locations. These included family re-location, behavioural issues and sporting opportunities. Table 1 outlines the participants' transitions across schools in order to give a sense of the mobility of some students.

Clinton, Soccer Girl, Kerrey and Jayden moved from regional to rural centres due to the family's desire for a lifestyle change. Talia, Sanae and Jacinta's families moved in search of employment or stable housing, although Talia managed to stay at the same school despite frequent moves. Tannika, Percy, Julie and Jacobi were asked to leave schools due to inappropriate behaviour and Jacobi eventually opted out of formal schooling. Percy, Julie, Sanae and Jacinta returned to Miangin School at various stages of the research period. For Percy and Julie this was partly because Miangin School offered the flexibility and understanding to re-enrol after behavioural issues. Willy moved schools to pursue



Table 1. Participants' transitions across schools (Note: Unshaded areas indicate attendance at Miangin School).

	2006			2007												2008			2009																						
Name (School year)	Nov	Dec		Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar											
Jacinta (6)				Suburban State School 1												Interstate W.A.												Interstate Sydney													
Jacobi (7)																															Not attending school	Unknown									
Julie (7)												Suburban High School 1																		Independent City School											
Kerrey (7)																															Rural High School										
Sanae (6)				Suburban State School 2												Suburban High School 2																						Independent City School	Unknown		
Soccer girl (7)																																Rural High School									
Talia (7)																																									
Tannika (7)				Suburban High School 3																								Regional High School			Suburban High School 3			Interstate Adelaide							
Big W (7)																																									
Craig (7)																						Rural High School																			
Damo (6)																																									
Jayden (7)																																									
Percy (7)																																	Unknown								
Willy (6)																					Private Regional Boarding School																				

an opportunity to further develop both his football and academic skills.

Of those students who went to other schools, many maintained a strong connection with their Indigeneity despite re-locating from a predominantly Indigenous school. For instance, while there were less Indigenous students at their new school, Kerrey and her siblings still identified with their Aboriginality and the school had “a little Indigenous group we go to” in which she participated, painting and watching educational movies. This group even had the potential to make their own documentary:

I think they’re going to film it and put it on SBS or something ... Aboriginal landmarks in the gully ... and then we’re going to go out somewhere else ... And we’re going to go out and have a look in the caves.

Table 2 provides a brief profile of each student and their decision for moving schools.

Table 2. Student profiles and reasons for moving schools.

	Name	Age during study	Reason for moving school	Aspirations for the future
Girls	Tannika	12-14	Moved to more local SHS Moved to another local school and then interstate to stay with family as “getting into trouble”	
	Talia	12-14	Stayed at Miangin School	Lawyer, dancer
	Kerrey	12-14	Family moved to rural location	Lawyer, doctor
	Soccer Girl	12-14	Family moved to rural location	Nurse, hairdresser, singer, professional soccer player
	Julie	12-14	Conflict with other students at Miangin School	Touch football player, career in Sport and recreation
	Jacinta	11-14	Family moved interstate	Lawyer, Public Servant
	Sanae	11-13	Family moved frequently due to lack of access to secure housing	
	Jacobi	12-15	Asked to leave due to significant behavioural issues Disengaged from formal schooling	Rapper
Boys	Willy	11-13	Pursuing career in ruby league	Professional NRL player, forensic scientist
	Damo	11-13	Stayed at Miangin School	Mechanic, Army
	Percy	12-14	Moved to more local SHS Returned to Miangin as suspended from other school	Mechanic
	Craig	12-14	Family moved to rural location	Mechanic
	Jayden	12-14	Stayed at Miangin School	Mechanic, Baker, gaming expert
	Big W	12-14	Stayed at Miangin School	Mechanic

■ Staying at school

Students articulated several reasons for staying at a particular school and factors which influenced their perceptions of school. These included the flexibility of the school, the relationships students had with school staff and the behaviour management approach of the school.

Flexibility

Although some students were able to maintain their attendance at Miangin school, staying at school was sometimes made more complex by family mobility and access to stable housing. Talia moved at least six times over the two years in which she was interviewed, although her family’s commitment to Miangin School and the school’s bus-run meant school remained a constant factor in her life. Jacinta, who at various times lived with family friends, extended family, her adult sister or her mother, noted that frequent re-location

made attendance more challenging at times due to transport and difficulty looking after, and moving with, her possessions.

It was too hard getting to school ... two buses and ... there's like a bit of a hike to the bus stop ... you have to get on that bus and then you have to get off at Cultural Centre and then you have to get on the bus to [Miangin School] ... And you gotta walk from the bus stop to here ... I'm getting money off her [mum] to go and get more new books and pens 'cause all of them got like soaked and stuff in my school bag ... because we couldn't get all our stuff at the time [of the move] ... so I might as well just go and get a new school book. But I hate it because all my school work is in those books and I like to have all my school work in my books not only for the teacher so that I can remember the stuff when I'm older so I'll still be smart (laughs). 'Cause I don't want to grow up and not be smart.

Attendance was seen to be encouraged and supported by some schools through flexibility and catering for additional needs of their Indigenous students. For instance, Jacinta noted that there were advantages for parents of children attending Miangin School:

I mean they don't have to worry about getting their kids to school, a bus can come and pick them up and drop them off. They don't have to worry about lunches because the tuck-shop provides lunches. Don't really have to worry ... um the teachers can help provide books and stuff for the parents who um can't help pay for that ... And it's also a comfortability for kids 'cause this school they can just come here and escape their home life and if their home life's going bad they can just come to school and you know talk to the teachers, have friends to play with and you're a lot more freer in this school than any other school.

### *Relationships*

Relationships with school staff and family associations with the school appeared to influence attendance at, and perceptions of the school for some students. For Percy, Julie, Sanae and Jacinta, the presence of family connections with the school (cousins or siblings in attendance or family members employed by the school) appeared to play a part in their return to Miangin School. Talia reflected the importance of these relationships in her perceptions of school, "I love my principal ... she's just always been there for me". She noted:

I like going to this school ... Just the way it is. Like there's a lot of Murri kids here and the teachers like they talk to you like I don't know like if you ask them questions they'll answer them ... they don't just say like "oh". Like you ask them about their family and stuff they'll tell ya.

However, if teachers were not prepared to divulge this information, it impacted on Talia's perceptions of them significantly.

I hate SOC with Mary (her teacher) she's so boring. I don't hate Mary. I hate SOC with Mary. I like SOC but Mary's just like I asked Mary if she was Aboriginal and I got in trouble for asking her that question. I said "Mary are you Aboriginal?" She's like "oh that is so rude ... don't ask me about my personal life". And I was like "ok then ... well she's obviously not Aboriginal then".

### *Behaviour management*

Kerrey noted that behaviour management was stricter at her new school, for example, "someone graffitied on the school. And if something happens like that they'll bring the cops in straight away" where as in contrast she reported "like if someone has a fight at Miangin School, it's kind of like lots of chances. This one's like three and you're out. No chances". Kerrey saw this positively "because it stops like all the trouble makers and that".

Jacinta appeared to have a balanced perspective on discipline; "everyone has to be strict but ... there's a boundary to be strict as well. You gotta balance it. It's like my mum says ... she doesn't want to hit us because you've gotta balance discipline with love". However, she also acknowledged that there was sometimes a cost to this approach:

Some kids just come here thinking it's a safe haven because there's not really any rules, you don't really get punished and I mean now they're coming down stricter ... And now there's police getting involved and stuff but before it was never like that. It was just like run loose.

Talia had some issues with other students. Some of these students had been asked to leave the school following conflicts that had been irreconcilable and Talia and others were also under disciplinary action as a result.

And we're on behaviour contracts ... so every morning we have to sign in with Bruce (the principal). He signs this ... like there's like five of us who are on it. And then we have to like get our teacher, every class our teacher has to sign ... and what attitude we gave and everything,

and like every afternoon we have to sign out with Bruce ... it's like we're on parole or something.

Despite this type of regulation Talia reported that "it's been good since I've been on this (behaviour contract) yeah finishing my work and all that".

While Percy enjoyed playing rugby league, this was sometimes used as a way of regulating his behaviour at school. He noted he wasn't playing inter-school sport "because I wasn't allowed to ... by the coach" after doing something he wasn't supposed to. In Year 7, Percy sometimes felt unhappy at school and noted that this was partly due to bullying by older students, for example when they "wet you with the fire hose". Percy's move to another school was "because my mum said there's too much fighting here", although after less than a semester away he returned because "I got suspended swearing at a teacher". He felt his treatment was different at the new school and noted that if he had sworn at a teacher at his old school "they'd just go ... oh well (shrugs shoulders)".

#### *Academic opportunities and performance*

Several students appeared to feel more engaged in their schooling experience because of the opportunities they were exposed to and their teacher's expectations of their participation. For instance, Kerrey noted that in science, her favourite subject, she had the opportunity to contribute to the class curriculum. "I think we're doing Human Bodies with Mr Cooper and I brought back a snake skin at Lomar and I've got to bring that in tomorrow so we can study under the microscope". Miangin School had also arranged that the students be involved in a training program run by a local Indigenous radio station "we go there every Friday miss ... we record stuff and that" (Big W).

Kerrey noted that with her move to a large country secondary school, there was the advantage of additional subject choices, although her choices were not always possible due to timetable clashes. "I don't like it 'cause I have to do catering 'cause there was nothing else to do ... I wanted to do HPE and Rec 'cause they were the only two I wanted to do out of like 10 subjects".

Some of the opportunities the young people were exposed to also seemed to foster high expectations of the students and impact on their perceptions of possibilities beyond school. Talia recounted an opportunity to visit a university campus arranged by her teachers and this seemed to encourage her to work towards a university education:

Yeah I'm going to uni. We went to visit the University ... some of us kids here, some of the high school. We went and seen all the brains and that stuff. We went to the library, a lecture room ... oh and we went to the um ... science lab and

did science stuff. It's big there ... I want to be a lawyer.

However, Talia noted that Miangin School had recently stopped offering a tertiary entrance stream at school and that this was a limiting factor for her:

We don't have OP [Overall Position for tertiary entrance score for selection into Queensland university courses] anymore here ... I wanted to do OP. They had OP last year and I was waiting till this year so I could do it but then they said we're not doing the OP anymore ... I do want to go to a different school but I've been here for so long that I don't want to leave.

Talia saw touch football as one avenue which may provide the bridge between her current school and one offering an OP stream, particularly as it offered a "touch football school of excellence". "I want to go to Creedy High School ... I tried to get in there but I couldn't get in ... I can get in through touch ... Next year I'm going to try out for the scholarship".

Besides Talia and Willy (who gained a sporting scholarship to another school in order to pursue a career in football), sporting opportunities did not appear to impact upon the choice of school for most of the students interviewed. While not a stated reason for moving schools, Kerrey noted the broader variety of sports she played at her new school – "we were doing hockey for PE and in Outdoor Ed. We just done any sports we liked. We done cricket, soccer and touch..." Feelings about the merits of each school experience were mixed. However, Kerrey felt that being in the country was "way better" even though it meant she no longer had access to opportunities like an elite athletics development squad, in which she had participated in the city. This group of young people expressed a multiplicity of rationales for their attendance at, or transition to, school, some of which they had little or no control over. Nevertheless, they appeared to adapt to and often make the best of, the context they were in.

#### ■ Aspirations and futures

The students in this study expressed a variety of aspirations and plans for their futures. Jacinta noted that she planned to move to a different high school the following year because "that's been my dream school since I was like 6". Jacinta and Big W both aimed to gain part-time work whilst completing high school. Big W noted "I'll probably still come back and do like afternoon work and that, down at [the supermarket] ... as a trolley boy" while Jacinta expressed her urgency:



Mainly what I want to do is get a job. Because I need a job 'cause I want a job now. I don't wait till I'm 14 to get a job. I want to go to one of those McDonald's things and get a job...so I can .... have money for myself.

Beyond high school, Kerrey aspired to an academic career "I want to be a lawyer or doctor" and had achieved an academic scholarship to support her financially in the final years of secondary school. She felt that either career choice provided an opportunity to help others "like being a doctor you can help people get better and stuff. Being a lawyer you can help people win cases or not go to jail and stuff."

Like Kerrey, Talia aspired to an academic career although this changed over the course of the interviews from lawyer to hairdresser to dancer. Unlike some of the students interviewed, she had a clear idea of the pathway required to achieve this, largely through family members' experiences:

I want to go to ACPA ... yeah. Performing arts school. My sister-in-law goes there ... I wish I could do it now ... you audition... what you're majoring in ... Like I don't know if I want to sing or dance. But I love dance, I love both so I want to do both so yeah. But you still, even if you major in singing you still do dance ... I want to finish grade 12 first.

Regardless of career choice, she saw Miangin school as helping her reach her aspirations.:

It's like helped you do a lot of stuff ... gives you a lot of advantages...like sometimes it helps you when you finish school, they'll help you find a job like they won't just tell you to leave ... they give you like heaps of good traineeships and stuff like that.

Jacinta reported she might go to university but her priority was to get ... "one of those government jobs that you get real highly paid for". However, the financial benefits of work were also seen in the context of funding other interests "I s'pose I could be a lawyer but I dunno ... even no matter what job I have I'm gonna keep writing books on the side".

Although football was his primary reason for moving schools, after 12 months, Willy also spoke of academic pursuits if football did not eventuate as a career; "Maybe become a forensic scientist ... or yeah just play footy". Percy aspired to "design cars, be a panel beater and to learn about cars. Big W and Damo also wanted to be mechanics when they finished school with Damo stating he wanted to "go in the army ... to be a mechanic". However, these boys did not seem as certain about the pathway to achieve their aspirations with Percy noting "I wanna go to college or university".

Jayden had already organised a job as a baker following school, acknowledging that although it may not be his dream job it was "better than being at school" and that it fit his strengths "Because baking does more maths than anything else ... that's what I'm really good at". These findings demonstrate the diversity of aspirations for the future among this group of young people and their ability to seek out and navigate different pathways to work towards these goals.

### ■ Perceived abilities and cultural wealth

Generally, the students interviewed appeared confident and realistic about their abilities. Kerrey and Damo described themselves as being both "sporty and smart" and Talia also saw herself as having both physical and cognitive capabilities, noting her favourite subject was maths "Cause I like using my brain and all that". Like other students, Talia reported her sporting achievements, in her case as a touch player, noting that "I won touch player of the year a couple of years ago". Tannika was less confident in her academic abilities, explaining "I'm good at touch, sports actually. I'm good at SOC, I'm not good at maths". For her, school attendance rather than achievement was viewed as a positive aspect about her life.

I: And some good things about you?

Tannika: that I play touch and go to school

Many of the students identified their Indigeneity as a source of strength and a positive aspect of their lives. Like several other students, being Aboriginal featured in Tannika's descriptions of herself. "I'm an Aboriginal kid that goes to Grommly High and black hair, dark brown eyes, short hair". Tannika also asserted that she felt more comfortable having friendships with other "blackfellas", although this included both Indigenous and Pacifica friends. "I'm just used to hanging around blackfellas from when I was at Miangin school". Talia, Kerrey, Julie and Jacobi placed great value on being Aboriginal, with Talia noting that "we have a lot of history ... traditional things that like white Australians don't have" and Jacobi stating "It's just mad being Murri". Jayden, who cited a range of cultural heritages, also noted cultural wealth from being Irish, because I'm kind of Irish. I got luck of [the] Irish".

Kerrey felt she needed to assert her Aboriginal identity at Miangin School because she was not dark skinned:

When I first started, some other kids were calling me white and not black and so I'd get up them. I'd be like yeah it doesn't matter about the colour of my skin. I'm black. I've got my black family. I can prove it with me. I'd be like just going off

and I'd tell them how you don't have to be black-skinned to be black.

Percy and Jacinta were both proud of their Aboriginal heritage but expressed balanced views of the role race played in their skills and abilities. Percy did not feel that being Aboriginal impacted on his health or on sporting ability, noting that "different coloured skinned people are pretty faster". Jacinta noted:

There's nothing really different besides a black person and a white person. They're all the same. It's only just a skin colour. It's not really a difference to me. It's just ... I like being ... I feel comfortable in my skin ... I can be friends with anyone but once ... it's not about their skin it's about their personality and if they're rude or if they're respectful and nice.

However, several students had experienced racism. Percy noted "people say bad things about my culture and all that". This had occurred "around the shops" when people had said "watch out you black someth'n. Like swearing and that". Julie was also aware of public stereotypes about her as an Aboriginal young woman, stating that she thought it was important that people knew that Indigenous young people "are at school and they do you know work". Conversely, Kerrey did not feel she had experienced racism at her new school and she noted with wry humour that "I get called Blackie at school".

Kerrey's ability to be assertive also featured in her descriptions of herself and she attributed her confidence to her family. "I like encourage a lot of people, I'm not shy, like I'll speak out, if someone tries to put me down, I won't let them. My family's taught me never to be ashamed of what you are". Overall, the students expressed a confident and positive view of themselves and their cultural heritage.

## ■ Discussion

The experiences, opportunities, aspirations and understandings of the young people in this study differed considerably. It is clear that the pathways that many of these students navigated through school were often complex and multi-faceted. Many of the students articulated common discourses about the benefits of staying in school and like previous research findings (McInerney, 2001) their aspirations and motivations reflected those of many non-Indigenous students. However, unlike Tatz's (1999) observations that for the majority of Aboriginal youth, life is dictated to them, many of these young people articulated their agency in making choices about their futures, although they recognised the limitations of these aspirations within their home and school contexts. The ability to make choices about schooling and the future may, in part, be

a reflection of the urban context of this study, where there is greater access to schooling options and young people may live in close proximity to several schools.

Students' comments also reflected previous research findings that relationships between teachers and students were significant in their perceptions of both the teacher and the schooling experience (Bourke et al., 2000; Fasoli & Ford, 2001). While sport was a factor in school choice for some, it was not articulated as a reason for attending or remaining at school *per se*, as had been reported elsewhere (Simpson et al., 2001). Additionally, students did not report social exclusion as a reason for leaving school (Minniecon, 2005), although it did necessitate some changes in school location.

The comments raised by students in regards to issues of behaviour management were also diverse in perspective. It seemed that in some ways having strict boundaries and consequences for behavioural issues was deemed positive and helpful, while for others, to have a "three strikes and you're out" policy would exclude them from any kind of educational opportunity. These issues are not neat and easy to resolve and provoke consideration of behaviour management and re-engagement policies and processes that acknowledge such variation. Perhaps the importance of relationships between the school, the families, the students and the teachers goes some way to approaching these complex issues (Zyngier, 2003). Regardless, it seems necessary that schools continue to engage and re-engage with the students in an open-minded and flexible manner rather than make moral judgements about the directions they choose or the reasons for the directions. Similarly, it is important that easy transition into and out of the system is accommodated by schools and the system, recognising that for a myriad of reasons a child's educational interests, opportunities and directions will change during this phase of life, and that providing the option of flexible and extended educational opportunities may in fact result in the most satisfactory educational outcomes for these students (Tatz, 2009). In continuing to engage, there is the necessity to provide, support and promote a sense of hope for the future and an awareness of the access to avenues through which these hopes may be realised.

Although Miangin School was not an Education Queensland school, it was clear that it, and other state high schools the students had attended, did in fact set high standards for their students both in terms of academic achievement and behavioural standards. However, while much emphasis is placed on setting high expectations in the educational outcomes and achievements of Indigenous young people, in the absence of accommodating the differences in the lives of Indigenous young people and recognising the socio-cultural complexity and heterogeneity of their lives, we suspect that the intentions of education

departments will be undermined (Nakata, 1995; Jude, 1998). While we understand Pearson's (2009) argument that it is important to set high expectations of Indigenous young people in schools, these must be balanced with an acknowledgement that "achievement" may not occur in the conventional (or largely linear) fashion instantiated in education systems. Expecting young people to conform to a single or even preferred avenue of educational attainment may well be inconsistent with their experiences and the nature of their engagement with the system (Jude, 1998). As such, these expectations may well be detrimental to Indigenous young people's sense of possibilities and, somewhat ironically, the realisation of the department's goals of "strong students, strong results, strong futures".

Students' comments also highlighted their awareness of the discourses circulating within education spaces concerning themselves as Indigenous students and of the ways in which they navigated cultural interfaces everyday. As Nakata (2007, p. 201) has noted they were able to make choices "according to the particular constraints and possibilities of the moment" while recognising they possessed and navigated different knowledges. The cultural wealth and capabilities possessed by these students needs to be recognised, with educational initiatives capitalising on these strengths rather than identifying deficits based on traditional and linear outcome measures (Zyngier, 2003). These students seemed to acknowledge that no school was perfect but they *were capable of navigating the system* they were in.

## ■ Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to demonstrate the, at times, incongruence between the apparent assumptions underpinning education policies focused on improving and measuring educational outcomes such as Indigenous student attendance, retention and attainment, and the complex and multifarious lived experiences of these young people. Our conclusions are not that the goals of higher standards and better educational outcomes should be tempered, but rather that these policies be instantiated in schools in a manner that acknowledges and accommodates these complexities. We argue that in order to avoid isolating, threatening or marginalising Indigenous (or any other) students within education systems, traditional educational pathways and trajectories need to be challenged so as to celebrate the cultural wealth of these young people; recognise, value and build on their previous educational experiences; and support the transition across different learning and vocational avenues. This may require, for example, flexible entry and exit processes into and from schools so that the engagement and reengagement opportunities of students allows for continued

learning and development, albeit over a longer period of time or via unconventional avenues. Such processes would need to be well supported by systems which are able to communicate a transitioning student's learning experiences and outcomes so that their learning progress is not hindered by the transition, but appropriately supported in a coherent manner. Fundamentally, however, the agents of these policies in schools need to be aware of and sensitive to the varied experiences and opportunities of Indigenous students, as well as the cultural wealth they bring to the learning environment itself. This may well be best practice for *all* young people.

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