

Speaking out about wellbeing

Policy brief, April 2011

Aboriginal children and young people speak out about the importance of education

"Going to school everyday and getting a good education is not easy...but it would be a good thing." boy 14

What do children and young people say about education?

In 2009 the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA undertook research¹ to investigate children and young people's views on what was important to their wellbeing. As part of the research, more than five hundred 10 to 17 year-olds participated in an online survey, of which 6.4 per cent were Aboriginal. Of the 300 children and young people who took part in focus groups, artwork, storytelling and interactive forums, 14.8 per cent were Aboriginal.²

There was widespread agreement among the children and young people who took part in the research that a good education was vital. School was seen as a place where they could see their friends and, for some, it was an escape from family problems. However, there was a significant difference in the way in which Aboriginal children and young people spoke about education and schooling.

"Every kid in the state (should) go to school so they can get a better education and life so when they grow up they can understand themselves and people will respect them." boy 16

"If you have to fill out a form or anything...you might know [how to do it]." boy 11

What do Aboriginal children and young people value most about education?

Aboriginal children and young people who participated in the research, particularly those from the Kimberley region, were emphatic about the need to go to school to get a good education, a good job and a better life. They expressed a very clear understanding about the connections between a good education and a good quality of life.

"If you get a good education, you can have a job, you can get lots of money, you can buy a new house, a car." boy age undisclosed

"Make your kids go to school so they can have a strong mind and a strong culture, and so they can learn to write when they get big... and if you need an education...if you go to school you'll know more things...like if you want to be a doctor, you'll know more things about that." girl 9

Aboriginal children and young people acknowledged that attending school everyday and listening to the teacher would enable them to read and write. Many were strongly in favour of kids going to school everyday, and said they worried for those who did not attend regularly.

"They won't even know how to read and write; they only learn about language." boy 14

"Make sure every kid goes to school so that they meet friends and learn things they should." boy 11



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia



However, many Aboriginal children and young people saw a good education as something to aspire to, rather than something that happened automatically.

Some spoke of their struggles to attend school for reasons such as funerals.

"The thing that will stop me going to school is when my close relatives or whoever pass away, that makes me feel very upset. I wouldn't want to do anything, I wouldn't want to eat, just sit down and cry all day." girl 15

They also worried about moving away to attend high school in Perth or Broome because they felt their families would miss them.

Targeting those at greater risk

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child³ states that all children have the right to access good quality education and should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level they can. Education should help them develop their talents and abilities to their fullest potential. It should help them live peacefully, protect the environment and respect other people.

Aboriginal children and young people (0 to 17 year-olds) make up 44.2 per cent of the Aboriginal population of Western Australia – almost double the proportion of children in WA's total population.⁴ Of these, 22.8 per cent are full-time students and about two per cent attend schools in remote communities.⁵

Evidence shows that low educational outcomes among Aboriginal people are linked to intergenerational poverty and poor social inclusion, and can impact on wellbeing.⁶ Education attainment, therefore, is a priority in the Council of Australian Government (COAG) National Indigenous Reform Agreement and the National Partnership on Education. These major strategies have set a number of targets, ranging from access to early childhood education to the transition of young people from school to either work, education or training.⁷

The poor education outcomes of Western Australian Aboriginal children and young people are of great concern. The 2009 National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results revealed that Aboriginal student achievement in Western Australia is significantly lower than non-Aboriginal student achievement across every age group and every subject.

Regular school attendance is important not only for the achievement of numeracy and literacy skills, it also helps in the development of friendships and social inclusion. A positive school environment can increase competence and self-worth, as well as reduce emotional and behavioural problems.⁸ The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey concluded that the high proportion of Aboriginal students at risk of emotional or behavioural difficulties is one of the main factors contributing to poor academic performance.⁹ For Aboriginal children, tolerant and culturally inclusive schools free from social exclusion, racism and bullying are essential for a positive school environment.¹⁰

The progress that is being made

Despite wide recognition of these disparities, there has been some improvement in Aboriginal education over the past few years. Some schools are achieving good results and their programs are developing as examples of how to support and enhance the educational experience and outcomes of Aboriginal students.

The programs offered by these schools vary in their strategies and target groups, but share a number of critical success factors. These include: a child-centred approach to improving the educational wellbeing of Aboriginal students; a commitment to encourage student participation; and support from the local community.



An access program at Swan View Senior High School, for example, is achieving outstanding results in the number of Aboriginal students completing Year 12 and advancing into higher education, training or employment – with the support of local businesses and the community.

Encouraging disengaged Aboriginal children and young people back into education through sport and recreational activities is having considerable success.¹¹ There are a number of school-based sports academies in Western Australia that foster learning and leadership among Aboriginal children and young people through role models and mentoring programs.

These initiatives, however, need to be broadened to include interests other than sport – such as music and the arts. The Follow the Dream program¹² is proving effective in supporting Aboriginal young people to reach their goals, and traineeships and vocational education and training pathways offer employment opportunities for those who do not progress to university.¹³

Other strategies, such as the joint Commonwealth-State Governments' Smarter Schools: National Partnership for Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities, recognise a shared responsibility for improving educational outcomes. Selected schools will implement reforms to address the complex challenges facing students in disadvantaged communities.¹⁴ In Western Australia, schools will become 'community hubs', integrating education, health and other key services in the one convenient location.

Priorities for policy and program development

Western Australia requires a comprehensive, strategic approach to improve the education outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people. This approach needs to draw on evidence-based research and practices and must consider the expectations of schools, teachers, family and the community.

New and innovative approaches need to be implemented to help outreach services work with chronically disengaged children and their families, including a long-term investment in health and early childhood services. The model of integrated services on school sites should not only be limited to essential service providers, such as health, but must focus on establishing and fostering partnerships between government and industry to improve education and employment opportunities as children and young people transition through school years.¹⁵

The recent release of the *Aboriginal Education Plan for WA Public Schools 2011-2014* is a step in the right direction to address the educational needs of Aboriginal children and young people.¹⁶ In addition, the new directions for schools will contribute to ensuring that every student is successful.¹⁷

Most importantly, it is essential that the planning and development of strategies to improve Aboriginal education outcomes must involve the participation of Aboriginal children and young people and their families.



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- ¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2009, *Speaking out about wellbeing: the views of Western Australian Children and Young People*
- ² Ibid, 2009
- ³ *United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child* <http://www.ohchr.org>
- ⁴ CCYP calculations based on ABS, *National Indigenous Social Survey 2008*, 'Tables 2,6 and 8' data cubes, cat no.,4714.0, viewed on 22 February 2011.
- ⁵ Australian Government, Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services, Chapter 4: Schools Education*, p.4.11
- ⁶ Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, (WAACHS) Vol.2 The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People, chpt.8
- ⁷ Council of Australian Government (COAG) Reform Council, *National Indigenous Reform Agreement: Baseline performance report for 2008-09*. Report to COAG, 30 April 2010 <http://www.coagreformcouncil.gov.au>
- ⁸ Commissioner for Children and Young People, April 2011, *Report on the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*, chpt.7, pp.119-123
- ⁹ Ibid, p.123
- ¹⁰ Ibid, p.119
- ¹¹ *Australian Government, School based Sports Academies initiatives, Department of Education, Employment and Training* <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Indigenous/Schooling/Programs/SportingChance/Pages/SportsAcademies>
- ¹² Initiative of the Western Australian Department of Education The Follow the Dream program is designed to help Aboriginal students to reach their career potential by graduating from school with a Tertiary Entrance Rank for university.
- ¹³ Australian Government, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators Report, 2009*, Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, Productivity Commission, chapter 6 Education and Training
- ¹⁴ Australian Government, Department of Employment, Education, Training and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) National Partnerships, Smarter Schools. <http://www.smarterschools.gov.au>
- ¹⁵ Commissioner for Children and Young People, April 2011, *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*, Chpt 7
- ¹⁶ Western Australian Government, Department of Education, Aboriginal Education Plan for WA Public Schools 2011-2014 <http://www.det.wa.edu.au>
- ¹⁷ Western Australian Government, Department of Education, Focus 2011 Directors for schools <http://www.det.wa.edu.au>

