

# Cultivating Capability: Explicating What Works for Gifted Aboriginal Primary and Secondary Students

## Final Report



# Executive Summary

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## *Purpose and Design of the Study*

The current research was conducted by the Centre for Positive Psychology and Education at the University of Western Sydney in partnership with the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (NSW DEC) and the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (NSW AECG).

Gifted Aboriginal students are under-represented in OCs and SHSs. However, little is known as to why this is the case, why other gifted Aboriginal students opt to be educated in mixed-ability, comprehensive settings, and what the impact of academic selective settings is on gifted Aboriginal students. There is also a paucity of research addressing what types of gifted education programs attract and benefit gifted Aboriginal students and the extent to which gifted Aboriginal students are receiving an education appropriate to their needs. To begin to address these issues, the present investigation was conducted to provide preliminary insights into decisions surrounding applying for and accepting or declining places in academically selective settings. Hence, the current study was designed as a pilot study to inform a longer term goal to ascertain what works for gifted Aboriginal students and the impact of different gifted education settings on the educational outcomes and psychosocial wellbeing of these students.

Given the educational disadvantage of Aboriginal people, all parties were concerned that Aboriginal students are under-represented in opportunity classes (OCs) and selective high schools (SHSs). Hence, the main aims of this research were to explicate the:

- (1) underlying factors influencing the under-representation of gifted Aboriginal students in OCs and SHSs and the drivers of decision-making by students, parents, and family, on whether or not to participate in OCs and SHSs;
- (2) features of gifted education programs that attract gifted Aboriginal primary students; and
- (3) extent to which gifted Aboriginal students' perceptions about gifted education are similar and different to those of gifted non-Aboriginal peers.

Four research questions were posed to address these aims. These focussed on multiple stakeholders' perceptions of the:

- (1) drivers of decision-making on whether or not gifted Aboriginal students apply to participate in OCs or SHSs;
- (2) nature of the application process for placement in OCs or SHSs;
- (3) drivers of decision-making on whether or not gifted Aboriginal students accept or decline the offer to participate in OC or SHS; and
- (4) underlying factors that influence the under-representation of gifted Aboriginal students in OC/SHS.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders. These stakeholders included: students, parents, principals, teachers, Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers, Regional Aboriginal Education Consultants, and Aboriginal Education Officers.

## **Results**

### ***Research Question 1: Drivers of Decision-Making in Applying for OC/SHS Placement***

Of those interviewed, Aboriginal students were more likely to report that they themselves decided to apply whereas non-Aboriginal students credited parental influence. School staff reported parental encouragement as the major driver of the decision to apply for placement. This contrasted with Aboriginal students' views that they drove the decision and parents' views that decision-making was influenced from multiple sources. Parents of Aboriginal students and Aboriginal students were likely to credit the influence and encouragement of the school in driving their decision. Aboriginal stakeholders also noted that due to the limited information received, some parents were not aware of the application process or even the opportunity.

These results suggest that to promote Aboriginal applications, information should target both Aboriginal students and parents to increase their awareness and understanding of the benefits of attending OCs and SHSs and the application process. Education for Aboriginal students and parents could be helpful in increasing application numbers. Given the importance of school encouragement to families with Aboriginal children, Aboriginal students and their parents may benefit from: (1) greater encouragement from schools to apply; and (2) communication from schools to ensure that families are aware of the application process.

### ***Research Question 2: Multiple Stakeholders' Views of the Application Process***

Some teachers and ACLOs were not aware of the application process. Half those interviewed found the application process straightforward, while several interviewees suggested that more support is needed for Aboriginal families. Results indicated that most Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families did not use the online application process: Of the sample, only 5 applications were lodged online. Although staff suggested that Aboriginal families may not have access to the internet or skills to use it, 4 of the 5 online applications were from Aboriginal families. Most school staff and ACLOs emphasised that there was a need to provide additional support for parents of Aboriginal students.

It seems vital to ensure that teachers and ACLOs are aware of the application process, to ensure information is effectively communicated to Aboriginal students and their parents. The findings also suggest that more information needs to flow to families about the on-line process and that it may be helpful for schools to assist parents with access to the internet as well as make paper copies of the application available. Results also imply that better communication and awareness strategies about the application process for Aboriginal students and their parents may be useful.

### ***Research Question 3: Drivers of Decision-Making in Regard to Accepting or Declining an OC/SHS Placement***

Of the Aboriginal students interviewed, some declined their offers; no non-Aboriginal students declined offers. Generally, it was reported that students themselves, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, made the decision to accept or decline the offer. Reasons for accepting offers were similar for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students' reasons for declining their offers were: (1) the desire to stay with friends; (2) distance of the OC/SHS school; and (3) perceptions that the selective curriculum would be overly academic, to the exclusion of other interests.

Given the under-representation of Aboriginal students in selective settings and that some eligible Aboriginal students decline their offers, it seems important to develop strategies to address the reasons for the decline of their offers. These results imply that friends are important for Aboriginal students, and that Aboriginal students may prefer a 'rounded' course of study as opposed to an intensely academic curriculum. As such, it may be useful to promote that selective settings also follow a balanced curriculum. The distance of selective settings, especially in rural areas, was also noted as particularly problematic. One potentially potent way of addressing all these issues simultaneously may be the development of a system of 'virtual' selective settings, such that Aboriginal students could remain in their own home schools with their friends but still glean the benefits of a selective setting. Relative isolation of Aboriginal students in selective settings could also be addressed by setting up 'e-friends' networks for them.

### ***Research Question 4: Factors Influencing the Under-representation of Gifted Aboriginal Students in OC/SHS***

All participants stressed an urgent need to effectively provide information about OC/SHS opportunities and the application process to Aboriginal students and their families. Stakeholders also mentioned that the application process needed to be more pro-actively publicised and that teachers need to be better informed about the benefits of OCs and SHSs. A co-ordinated information strategy could ensure that all Aboriginal students, parents, teachers, and ACLOs have access to OC/SHS information. First-hand information could be supplied through OC/SHS Open Days, as well as through multi-media (e.g., a DVD) made widely available. The ACLOs suggested that selective settings may be more attractive to Aboriginal students and their parents if they incorporated Aboriginal Studies into the curriculum and promoted this. Participants also commented that it is important for all school staff to know more about Aboriginal Australia to address common misconceptions about the capabilities of Aboriginal students.

These results suggest that selective settings could attract more Aboriginal students if they publicised their Aboriginal perspectives. Teacher education could also be enhanced to ensure pre-service teachers are knowledgeable about Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal giftedness, and how to identify gifted Aboriginal students. Consistent with previous research (Craven & Bodkin-Andrews, 2011; Bodkin-Andrews, Craven, Yeung, Dillon, & O'Rourke, 2012; Bodkin-Andrews, Dillon, & Craven, 2010), some participants felt that Aboriginal students may not apply for selective placement due to low academic self-concepts. As research evidence demonstrates the importance of academic self-concept and its relation to beneficial educational outcomes, including achievement, enhancing Aboriginal students' academic self-

concepts may be a vital avenue to pursue to encourage more Aboriginal students to apply for selective placement.

### ***Summary and Recommendations Regarding the Decision Making Process for Gifted Aboriginal Students***

In providing these insights it should be remembered that the sample interviewed was small and qualitative methods were used. While the sample included a mix of city and rural stakeholders, generalising to the total population of Aboriginal students is problematic given their diverse heterogeneous make-up. However, the current findings are useful for identifying some preliminary directions to address barriers to Aboriginal students applying for and taking up gifted education and to inform the way ahead for future research.

The current findings underscore the necessity to ensure that gifted Aboriginal students are identified and encouraged by their school to apply for OC & SHS. However, there appear to be hurdles that need to be overcome to allow this to happen. Firstly, professional teacher development could focus on ensuring that pre-service teachers, and in-service teachers, are knowledgeable about Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal giftedness, and how to identify gifted Aboriginal students. Secondly, more information about the application process and the advantages of attending OCs and SHSs could be provided to teachers and ACLOs who then would be in a better position to effectively communicate this information to Aboriginal students and their parents. The Department of Education and Communities (DEC) could consider strategies to promote selective opportunities to principals, teachers, and the families of Aboriginal students. The DEC could also consider ways to effectively communicate how to apply for OC and SHS placement to all stakeholders.

The reasons for Aboriginal students declining offers of OC and SHS placement also point to what works for Aboriginal students. Family and friends are important to these students who would often have to travel long distances and leave friends to attend a selective setting. More rounded courses and the incorporation of Aboriginal Studies into the curriculum are also of importance to Aboriginal stakeholders. These latter points could be addressed by promoting that selective settings follow a balanced, culturally sensitive curriculum and the nature of their Aboriginal Education program. However, the former reasons for declining placement are more problematic but could be overcome by the development of ‘virtual’ selective settings. This would allow Aboriginal students, especially those in remote areas, to remain in their own home schools with their friends but still glean the benefits of a selective setting. The development and evaluation of virtual selective settings is another avenue that could be considered by the DEC to promote the uptake of OC and SHS places by Aboriginal students.

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## List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

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<b>ACLO</b>	<b>Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer</b>
<b>AEO</b>	<b>Aboriginal Education Officer</b>
<b>AECG</b>	<b>NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.</b>
<b>OC</b>	<b>Opportunity Class</b>
<b>SHS</b>	<b>Selective High School</b>

## Background

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National reports and all Australian governments in the last three decades have acknowledged that Aboriginal Australians are significantly educationally disadvantaged (e.g., Commonwealth of Australia, 2006; NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. & NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004). Recent research has further supported that Aboriginal Australians are one of the most disadvantaged Indigenous populations in the world (Cooke, Mitrou, Lawrence, Guimond, & Beaven, 2007; Hill, Barker, & Vos, 2007; Ring & Brown, 2003). It is therefore imperative to identify critical factors that would enable Aboriginal students to capitalise on educational opportunities to realise their potential. It is also critically important that all gifted Australian students are provided with the best education possible and experience their right to optimise their full potential. A number of primary opportunity classes (OCs) and selective high schools (SHSs) have been established in NSW whilst other primary and secondary schools educate gifted students in mixed ability settings (also known as comprehensive schools) or provide enrichment classes or activities for gifted students. However, there is an absence of evidence-based research in general in Australian gifted education (see Recommendation 8 of Senate Inquiry, 2001, into the education of gifted and talented children) and for gifted Aboriginal students in particular (Balchin et al., 2009). Moreover, although several studies have investigated the attitudes of parents, teachers, and students towards gifted settings and selective schooling (e.g., Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999), little is known about why gifted Aboriginal students are under-represented in OCs and SHSs, and why other gifted Aboriginal students opt to be educated in mixed-ability, comprehensive settings.

Our industry partners, the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC), and the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (AECG) are concerned that gifted Aboriginal students are not adequately represented in OCs and SHSs and that little is known about how best to cultivate the capability of gifted Aboriginal students. OCs and SHSs provide gifted Australian students with a specialised education that is tailored to meet the needs of gifted students with entry based on being identified as gifted on DEC tests plus school evidence. Recently in NSW, only 20 identified-as-gifted Aboriginal students were enrolled in OCs for 2011 out of 1755 places accepted (i.e., 1.21% of the NSW OC student population). In 2011, there were 45,184 Aboriginal students enrolled in NSW public primary and high schools, representing 6.1% of the total NSW public school population. Hence Aboriginal students are significantly under-represented in OCs, given the percentage of Aboriginal students in DEC schools. The research program that the DEC and CPPE are proposing is expected to address this issue.

In addition, annually many gifted Aboriginal students who are eligible to enter OCs and SHSs decline to participate. This is puzzling as clearly Aboriginal children are not participating in gifted education at a rate commensurate with their non-Aboriginal peers. Due to the paucity of research in this field (Balchin et al., 2009), little is known about:

- the underlying factors influencing the under-representation of Aboriginal students in OCs and SHSs;
- Aboriginal people's perceptions of the perceived benefits of and barriers to participating in OCs and SHSs;

As such, it is important to explicate the factors that may influence the low participation of Aboriginal students in OCs and SHSs. This partnership project addressed the urgent need for evidence-based research to identify why Aboriginal students are under-represented in OCs and SHSs, and what barriers there may be to participation.

One factor that may influence the decision-making of stakeholders resulting in the under-representation of Aboriginal students in OCs and SHSs is the critical factor of self-concept. Research on academic self-concept has shown self-concept to be both an important educational outcome in itself, and a critical factor that contributes to other valued educational outcomes (e.g., Craven, Marsh, & Burnett, 2003; Marsh & Craven, 2006). Numerous studies have identified strong relations of academic self-concept with coursework selection, adaptive academic behaviours, and academic achievement (e.g., Chapman & Tunmer, 1997; Eccles & Wigfield, 1994; Marsh & Craven, 2006; Marsh & Yeung, 1997a, 1997b; Muijs, 1997; Yeung & Lee, 1999). Hence the enhancement of self-concept is recognised as a vital goal in many education settings (see Craven & Tucker, 2003; Marsh & Craven, 2006). Researchers (e.g., Sommer & Baumeister, 2002) have demonstrated that a high self-concept promotes: goals, expectancies, coping mechanisms, and behaviours that facilitate productive achievement and work experiences, and impedes mental health problems.

As such we may envisage that enhancing Aboriginal students' academic self-concepts will enable them to perform better in academic work. However, little is known about Aboriginal students' self-concepts and even less about their relation to successful engagement in gifted education. Research so far suggests that Aboriginal students tend to have lower academic self-concepts, although their self-concepts in non-academic areas may not be any lower than their non-Aboriginal peers (Craven & Marsh, 2004). This is unfortunate as a relatively low academic self-concept implies that Aboriginal students, including those who are gifted, may be limited in optimising their potential because of a lack of confidence in taking up academic challenges.

More relevant to the present research focus, because academic self-concept may serve as an important and influential platform for decision-making in regard to whether or not to engage in OCs and SHSs, Aboriginal students' relatively lower academic self-concepts may lead to decisions not to apply or to decline offers. Such decisions, based on inferior self-judgement in academic ability relative to peers (see Guay, Boivin, & Hodges, 1999), may seriously jeopardize their opportunity of experiencing the benefits of OCs and SHSs that are available to all gifted students. However, there is little empirical evidence to elucidate the reasons behind these gifted students' choices, and little is known about their psychological needs, including ways to enhance their self-concept as a driver of academic achievement.

This research contributes to addressing this void in the literature by offering a novel study that elucidates the nature of psychological well-being in relation to gifted Aboriginal primary students' academic self-concept in different education settings (OCs, SHSs, and mixed-ability classes).

## Aims

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The central purpose of this research project is to synergistically capitalise on cutting-edge interdisciplinary theory and research in Aboriginal Education (Craven, 2011) and positive psychology (Mruk, 2006) to explicate what works to cultivate capability and maximise the potential of gifted Aboriginal primary students. More specifically the study aims to explicate:

- 1) The underlying factors influencing the under-representation of gifted Aboriginal students in OCs and SHSs and drivers of decision-making on whether or not to participate in OCs and SHSs by comparing and contrasting multiple stakeholders' (gifted Aboriginal students who have accepted or declined a placement in an OC or SHS and their parents, teachers, principals, and school Aboriginal Education Workers) perceptions and understandings about the: OC and SHS application process, benefits of participating in OCs and SHSs, and barriers to participating in OCs and SHSs so as to inform new and innovative solutions;
- 2) Features of gifted education programs that attract and benefit gifted Aboriginal primary students and the impact of these programs on educational outcomes and psychosocial well-being to provide a more nuanced and enriched understanding of potentially potent constructs that will inform tangible new solutions for intervention to cultivate capability and maximise Aboriginal gifted students' potential; and
- 3) The extent to which gifted Aboriginal students' perceptions about gifted education are similar and different to those of gifted non-Aboriginal peers to elucidate factors that are unique to gifted Aboriginal students so as to identify culturally appropriate strategies to seed success for gifted Aboriginal students.



## Research Design

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After receiving ethics approvals from the Department of Education and Communities and the University of Western Sydney, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students of OCs and SHSs, Aboriginal students who chose to decline an offer to an OC or SHS but were eligible to do so, as well as parents, teachers, principals, and Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers (ACLOs) or Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs) of the students. The participants were categorised as four groups: student, parent, school (including principals and teachers), and ACLOs (including AEOs and Aboriginal Education Consultants).

### *The Sample*

A total of 80 interviews were conducted with 20 students, 21 parents, 28 school staff, and 11 ACLOs (See Table 1). The student group included 12 Aboriginal and 8 non-Aboriginal students. Among them 12 attended primary school and 8 attended high school. The parent group included 13 parents of Aboriginal children and 8 parents of non-Aboriginal children. Thirteen were parents of primary school children and eight were parents of high school children. The school staff group included 14 principals and 14 teachers. The ACLO group included Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers, school Aboriginal Education Officers, and Aboriginal Education Consultants.

Table 1

#### *Profile of Interviewees*

	Primary		Secondary		Identity	
	OC	Non-OC	SHS	Non-SHS	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal
<b>Student (20)</b>	8	4	6	2	12	8
<b>Parent (21)</b>	9	4	6	2	13	8
<b>School Principal (14)</b>	7	4	1	2		
<b>staff Teacher (14)</b>	8	3	1	2		
<b>ACLO (11)</b>	4	4	2	1		

### *Research Questions and Analysis*

All interviewees were asked similar questions related to four research questions to capture and compare multiple stakeholders' perceptions. Table 2 shows the interview questions designed to answer the respective research questions.

Table 2

*Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions*

Research Questions	Interview Questions
<p>RQ1. What do multiple stakeholders perceive as drivers of decision-making on whether or not gifted Aboriginal students apply to participate in OCs or SHSs? To what extent are Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perceptions similar or different?</p>	<p>Whose idea was it to apply for OC or SHS?</p>
	<p>Was it something students wanted to do?</p>
<p>RQ2. What are multiple stakeholders' views of the nature of the application process for placement in OCs or SHSs? To what extent are Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perceptions similar or different?</p>	<p>What did you think of the application process?</p>
	<p>How well do you think the process suits Aboriginal students and their families?</p>
<p>RQ3. What do multiple stakeholders perceive as drivers of decision-making on whether or not gifted Aboriginal students accept or decline the offer to participate in OC or SHS? To what extent are Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perceptions similar or different?</p>	<p>Who made the decision to accept or decline the offer?</p>
	<p>Why did students or parents accept or decline the offer?</p>
<p>RQ4. What do multiple stakeholders perceive as underlying factors that influence the under-representation of gifted Aboriginal students in OC/SHS? To what extent are Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perceptions similar or different?</p>	<p>Do you think it would be a good idea to encourage more Aboriginal kids to apply? Why?</p>
	<p>What do you think can be done to advise or encourage more Aboriginal kids to apply?</p>

In analysing the interview data, the focus was placed on extracting major themes that were closely related to the research questions. Then evidence drawn from the responses of the interviewees was used to answer the research questions.



## Results

Five themes were extracted from the data: support, process, environment, awareness, and self. Each of these seemed to be a significant factor in influencing stakeholders' decision-making. Table 3 shows a summary of the themes and the nature of the interviewees' responses pertaining to the themes. Of the five themes, environment seemed to be the most influential. That is, it was mentioned by most of the interviewees as a dominant factor that influenced Aboriginal students' decisions to attend OCs and SHSs. Therefore, there seemed to be an emphasis on the support of the educational environment for encouraging Aboriginal students' applications for and adjustment to OCs and SHSs.

Table 3

### *Themes and Related Responses*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Response from Interviewees</b>
<b>Support</b>	Educational activities that address the individualised needs of students to meet their desire for academic success within and outside the classroom
<b>Process</b>	A series of actions or operations performed to apply for OC or SHS
<b>Environment</b>	Two aspects: (1) Persons around Aboriginal students positively or negatively influencing students' choices and actions regarding applying for and accepting or declining a place in an OC or SHS; and (2) the setting or environment which facilitates or hinders students' choices and actions.
<b>Awareness</b>	The interviewees' awareness and access of information which facilitates or hinders preference and action.
<b>Self</b>	The perceived self (including perceptions of individual traits, competencies, and values) in academic achievement situations.

# Results of Research Question 1: Drivers of Decision-Making in Applying for OC/SHS Placement

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## *Introduction*

Research Question 1 (RQ1) asked what multiple stakeholders perceived as drivers of decision-making on whether or not gifted Aboriginal students apply to participate in OCs or SHSs and to what extent Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perceptions were similar or different.

For RQ1, the analysis of the interview data yielded several major themes which are presented in the following order:

- 1) Primary decision makers (as suggested by students, school staff, and parents);
- 2) Students' desire to apply for placement; and
- 3) Multiple sources of influence.

## *Primary Decision Makers*

### **Student Responses**

From the interviews with the Aboriginal students, the students themselves seemed to be the major decision makers. They were more likely to report that they themselves made the decision to apply for OC/SHS and their parents had less influence on their decision, unless their parents were influenced by the school (see Figure 1). Examples of typical responses included:

*Facilitator: Did anyone else influence you to do that [to apply], or was it totally your decision?*

*Student: It was my decision (Aboriginal Student 15).*

*Facilitator: Was it your idea or did someone say "Hey I think you should apply."?*

*Student: I wanted to do it.*

*Facilitator: So you decided?*

*Student: Yeah.*

In contrast, non-Aboriginal students were more likely than Aboriginal students to report that their parents had a strong influence on their application for OC/SHS.

*Student: I think it was my mum's and dad's.*

*Facilitator: Is it something that you wanted to do?*

*Student: I don't really know if I wanted to then, but Mum and Dad really wanted me to (Non-Aboriginal Student 10).*

*Facilitator: Whose idea was it for you to try out?*

*Student: Mum's.*

*Facilitator: Okay, was it something you wanted to do?*

*Student: At the time I didn't know if I was ready to change schools or not but now I'm here I really like it a lot (Non-Aboriginal Student 19).*

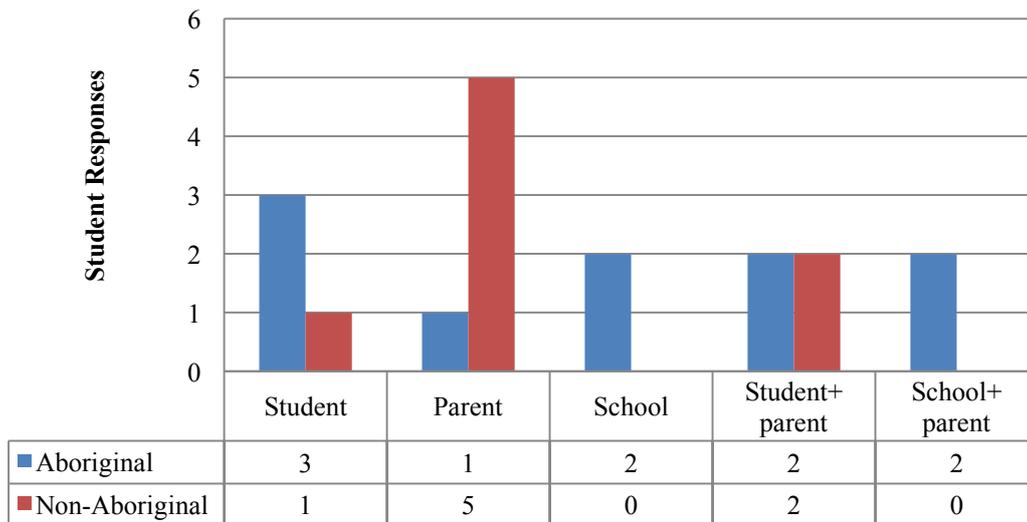


Figure 1. Primary decision makers – student responses (n=20).

Note. For all figures, sometimes the interviewees provided more than one response for an interview question, and responses to different interview questions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Therefore, the column totals for some tables may not add up to the number of interviewees but are more reflective of the number of responses given.

***From students' interviews, more non-Aboriginal students tended to perceive that their parents made the decision for them to apply for OC/SHS placement whereas Aboriginal students reported that they tended to make the decision by themselves. Given the fact that Aboriginal students are under-represented in OC/SHS placement, it might be useful to make Aboriginal students and their parents more aware of the opportunities.***

### School Staff Responses

Staff members from schools seemed to emphasise decision-making of both parents of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. A total of 13 school staff and 3 ACLOs suggested that a key driver of decision-making was parental encouragement to apply for an OC or SHS (see Figure 2). Some of the staff members interviewed believed that some students did not make the decision or did not want to apply for placement because they did not want to leave their schools. This is illustrated by the following comment:

*From my experience it would be predominantly parents also that have pushed for that and I would base that on comments from parents in recent weeks when we've had our orientation visits where children have been offered a place. Parents are very keen for them to come, kids are not so keen; they're a bit reluctant to leave their current school. So I think the push is more from the parents (Teacher 07).*

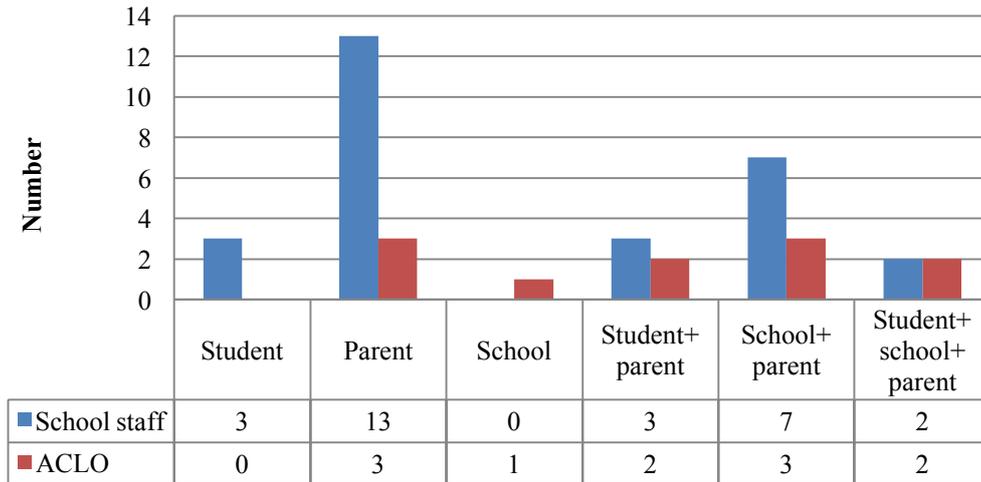


Figure 2. Breakdown of school staff and ACLO (n=39) responses in relation to who suggested applying for OC/SHS.

**School staff suggested in general that parental encouragement was an important driver of the decision to apply for placement for all students. This is in stark contrast to Aboriginal students' views that stated their ownership of the decision.**

## Parent Responses

Parents, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, seemed to perceive a balanced role of stakeholders in the decision to apply for placement (Figure 3). There was consensus between parents of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students that they played a very significant role but they also perceived that all stakeholders had an important role to play. However, parents of Aboriginal students seemed to emphasise the role of the school more than parents of non-Aboriginal students. This is illustrated by the following comment from a parent of an Aboriginal student:

*The teachers, otherwise he probably would not have applied if he didn't have the strong support of his deputy principal at the time (Parent with Aboriginal child 17).*

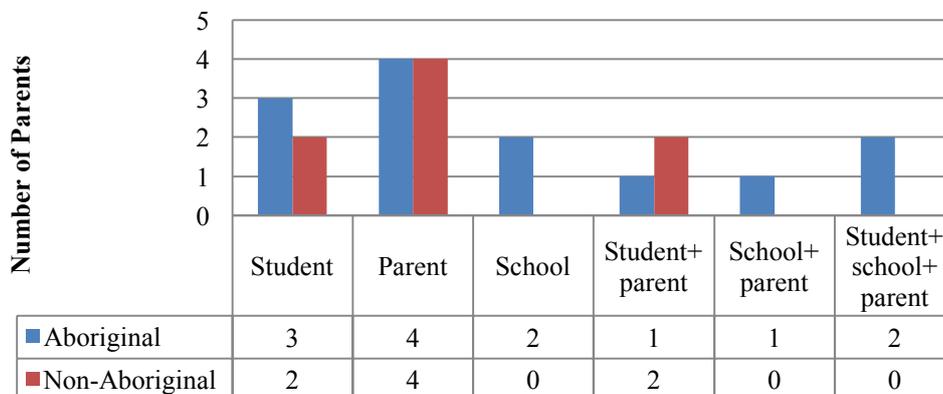


Figure 3. Breakdown of parents' (n=21) responses in relation to who suggested to apply for OC/SHS.

*In contrast to the perception of school staff that parents were the decision makers, the parents interviewed seemed to perceive a more balanced role of decision-making among various stakeholders. In addition, some parents of Aboriginal students credited the input of the school in decision-making. This implies that Aboriginal students and parents may benefit from encouragement from schools to apply for OC/SHS placement.*

### **Students' Desire to Apply for Placement**

This emerged as a very distinct theme and is therefore reported separately. This theme also echoes the finding above from the Aboriginal students' interviews of their ownership of decision-making. The data showed that the majority of Aboriginal (25/36) and non-Aboriginal stakeholders (29/44) interviewed suggested that a key driver of decision-making was the students' desire to apply for an OC or SHS placement (see Figure 4). The following comments from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants illustrate this theme:

*It was something that she wanted to do because she always likes to think that she's brainy, and something like that - this was right up her alley. She was like, I want to be in this class. Can I do the test? Can I do the test? So it was definitely something she wanted to do (Parent with Aboriginal child 14).*

*I was just going to do it. I didn't really mind whether I got in or not (Non-Aboriginal Student 09).*

*Well, I wanted to see if I could get into that class because I was thinking that it would be really great to have a challenge to go to that school (Aboriginal Student 01).*

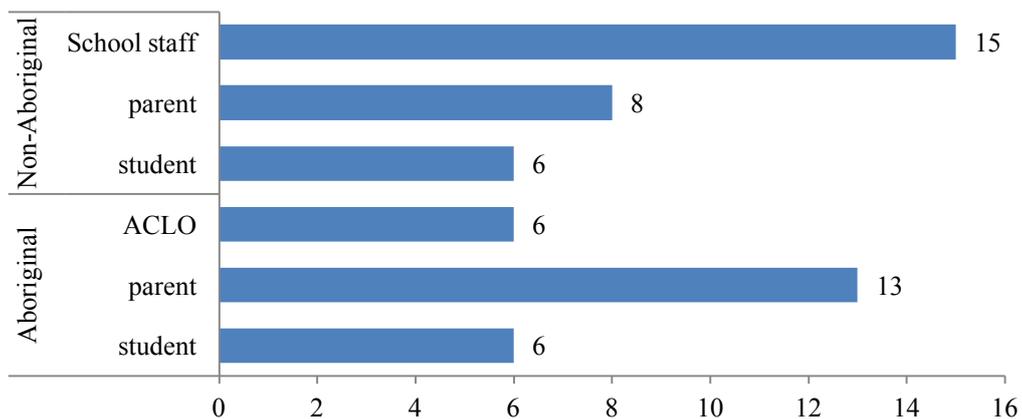


Figure 4. Number of stakeholders mentioning the theme of students' desire to apply for placement.



***This theme also echoes the finding above from the students' interviews of their ownership of decision-making. For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, parents suggested that the decision was mainly based on the students' desire to apply for an OC/SHS placement. These results suggest that students would benefit from information about OC/SHS to ensure informed decision-making.***

### ***Multiple Sources of Influence***

The data showed that the decision to apply or not may be a combination of multiple sources of influence. Combined influences included: parents' encouragement together with students' desire to apply (12/80) and a combination of school encouragement and parental encouragement (13/80) (see Figure 5).

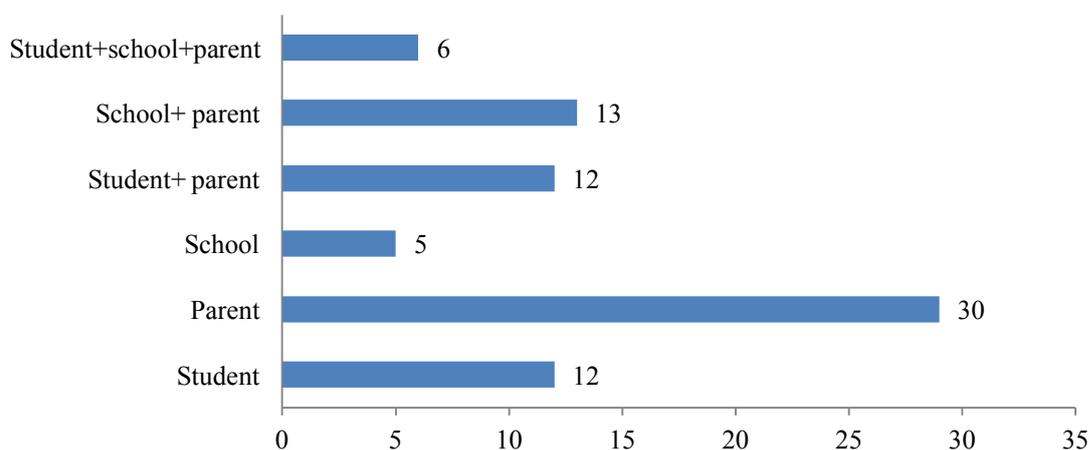


Figure 5. Key influential persons for application for OC or SHS entry.

Among Aboriginal interviewees, there were 4 students (see Figure 1) and 4 parents (see Figure 3) who suggested that the combination of students and parents, the combination of parents and school staff, or the combination of student, parent, and school staff together played an important role in influencing the decision to apply for OC/SHS. Among non-Aboriginal interviewees, 2 students (see Figure 1) and 2 parents (see Figure 3) shared the same viewpoint as the Aboriginal interviewees.

Some Aboriginal students' responses are:

*My school recommended it at first, but then my Mum stepped in and said that she really wanted me to go there, because she thought that it would be a great opportunity (Aboriginal Student 07).*

*Really it was me and mum's. Like we just both thought, yeah, we thought I'll just try (Aboriginal Student 16).*

Some parents also shared the same opinions, although parents of Aboriginal students emphasised the influence of the school more than parents of non-Aboriginal students:

*The choice was up to Jade if she wanted to. We gave her the option. Notes were sent home to apply for it, and I guess her teacher had a little bit of a part in it as well (Parent with Aboriginal child 03).*

*It started off earlier - my child wanted to do it and then he went off the idea and then I thought, well we'll leave it. And then, I think it was the last day when I ran into one of his former teachers and she said, well what have you got to lose by applying. If you apply and you get in, you can always say no, but then if he wants to go and then you haven't applied well, that's it. So I applied on the very last day (Parent with non-Aboriginal child 10).*

ACLOs also shared similar views:

*I think it is a collaborative approach where our students are seen from an Aboriginal point of view. I see our students achieving above the means and for x High School we've got two students at this high school and I think it's from the parent, the student, and the teacher - or the teachers they've got have put them up because they've seen the excellence in their work, their ethics, their leadership (ACLO 03).*

Hence in general, more non-Aboriginal participants reported that the decision was derived primarily from the student, parent, or the student and parent together. However, Aboriginal participants were more likely to suggest that the school had an important role to play.

In contrast, while acknowledging a joint decision-making process between parents and students, school staff perceived a strong influence from parents:

*More often parent than student from my experience (Principal 13).*

*The vast majority of the time it's the parents. The vast majority of the time it's driven by conversations the parents are having (Teacher 01).*

**Overall, most of the stakeholders mentioned a combination of influences for making a decision to apply for OC/SHS. However, more Aboriginal participants suggested that the school had a significant influence. In contrast, school staff felt that the decision to apply was primarily the parents. These results imply that encouraging collaborative approaches whereby schools, teachers, parents, students, and ACLOs are informed about OC/SHS and the application process would be beneficial.**

## **Parental Encouragement**

The distinctly different views of school staff regarding the multiple sources of influence from other stakeholders was further explicated by an important theme of parental encouragement. A total of 13 school staff and 3 ACLOs suggested that a key driver of decision-making was parental encouragement to apply for an OC or SHS (see Figure 2). This theme is illustrated by the following comments:

*With parental encouragement, yes I think so. I mean sometimes students can be reluctant, but the leadership around the issues comes from parents generally (Principal 03).*

*I guess maybe parents ... they think that they've [the students] got something extra that they have got to give that they're not going to get through mainstream or, I suppose, the normal day-to-day class or it*

*could get them further, I guess, in their education or their achievements apart from the normal class. They might be pushed a bit harder (ACLO 11).*

**School staff and ACLOs noted that parental encouragement was an important driver of the decision to apply. These results suggest that: (1) Communicating more about the process to parents of Aboriginal students and the benefits of encouraging their children to apply could be helpful in increasing application numbers, and (2) school staff may have underestimated their significant influence, which was repeatedly mentioned by parents and students, but not so much by staff members. It is also possible that some school staff members and ACLOs do not have adequate knowledge about selective settings and their benefits, and are therefore unable to supply the necessary information.**

### **School Encouragement and Communication**

In contrast to the perception of parents as the major source of influence, a total of 2 Aboriginal students (see Figure 1), 2 parents of Aboriginal children (see Figure 3), and 1 ACLO (See figure 2) reported that school staff (mainly teachers) primarily encouraged students to apply for OC or SHS. For example:

*It was sort of through our primary school. The teacher talked to the students. She thought it would probably be best to apply. Then, she talked to our parents and they agreed (Aboriginal Student 06).*

*It was my idea, because my teachers had always encouraged me to go further because they thought I was a bright student (Aboriginal Student 08).*

Aboriginal stakeholders also emphasised that good communication with teachers was important as, due to the limited information communicated to parents, some parents of Aboriginal children did not receive the information.

*Yeah, there was not really much advertising of the OC. It was just probably one letter and then if you missed that, you've missed everything. He even missed half of his things, so the teachers - if you don't - I guess you have to have good communication with some teachers; otherwise you'd just miss out completely. That was a big thing because I talked to some parents about why they didn't let their kids apply to the OC class as well; they didn't know about it (Parent with Aboriginal child 17).*

**Aboriginal stakeholders stressed the importance of school encouragement and of communication. They also noted that due to the limited information received (often just one letter) some parents of Aboriginal children were not aware of the application process, or even the opportunity. These results suggest that school encouragement and communication with Aboriginal families are essential to ensure that Aboriginal families are aware of the application process. The results also imply that multiple forms of communication, and a co-ordinated strategy, rather than reliance on a single announcement (e.g., by letter), would be helpful.**



## Results of Research Question 2: Multiple Stakeholders' Views of the Application Process

### *Introduction*

Research Question 2 asked about multiple stakeholders' views of the nature of the application process for placement in OCs or SHSs and to what extent Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perceptions are similar or different.

### *Knowledge of the Application Process*

Table 4 presents participants' opinions about the application process. While students and parents mainly expressed their opinions about the nature of the application process, school staff and ACLOs expressed their opinions on both the application process and the need for support in assisting parents of Aboriginal children with navigating the application process. These points are elaborated in the discussion below.

Four of 14 teachers and 4 of 11 ACLOs reported knowing very little about the application process:

*I have to be honest with you. I haven't seen the forms. At this school particularly, they don't get us involved in the OC. We just know of it. I'm not familiar with the process and I think that's something that we should look at (ACLO 01).*

*To be honest, I don't know, because I've never had to be a part of it. I've never even seen an application. We don't have an OC class here. I've never worked at a school that has an OC class. So I'm very much out of the loop (Teacher 02).*

Table 4

#### *Breakdown of Multiple Stakeholders' Comments about the OC/SHS Application Process*

		Support			Process		No Awareness
		More information needed	Improve selection process	support for the Aboriginal applicants	No problem	Length of waiting	On line
Student (n=20)	Aboriginal				6	1	1
	Non-Aboriginal				3	2	1
Parent (n=21)	Aboriginal				10	1	3
	Non-Aboriginal	1			6	1	0
School staff (n=28)		6	1	16	14	1	4
ACLO (n=11)		2		10	1		4
<b>Total (n=80)</b>		<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>

*Note.* \*Some participants offered more than one response, hence column totals will not add up to the total number of participants (80).

***It is of grave concern that some teachers and ACLOs were not aware of the process at all. These findings imply that teachers and Aboriginal Education staff could benefit from professional development in relation to the application process for OC and SHS entry.***

### ***Nature of the Application Process***

Half of the total sample (40 of 80 interviewees) reported that the application process was straightforward. These 40 participants included: 6 Aboriginal students; 3 non-Aboriginal students; 10 parents of Aboriginal children; 6 parents of non-Aboriginal children; 14 school staff; and 1 ACLO.

*It was pretty straightforward, I thought. Yes, just - I thought it was pretty - just fill out the form, send it off (Parent with Aboriginal child 03).*

The remaining interviewees (40) reported some concerns regarding the application process. The majority of these concerns were suggested by school staff or ACLOs, and typically related to the need for more support for Aboriginal families throughout the application process, as elaborated in the following section.

***While half of the interviewees believe the application process to be straightforward, the other half of the interviewees felt that Aboriginal families could benefit from support in the application process.***

### ***Additional Support for Aboriginal Families***

More than half of school staff (16/28) and the vast majority of ACLOs (10/11) emphasised that additional support would be beneficial for parents of Aboriginal students. They reported that many parents of Aboriginal children were not aware of the OC or SHS process and would experience difficulty completing the form.

*I think it would vary between Aboriginal parents. Once again, there would be a proportion of Aboriginal parents where that process probably isn't a great problem, but I would imagine - well I know - there are lots of parents that would need support to run through that process if that's what they wanted to do. They'd have trouble doing it independently (Principal 02).*

School staff and ACLOs also suggested that even when parents of Aboriginal students were aware of the application process they would need specific explanations and guidance on how to complete the forms:

*because Indigenous parents... they might not fully understand, and they're not going to ask questions if there's other people there. They're just going to sit and go, yeah yeah yeah, but not going to ask*

questions. So, you need to have those workshops and promote and support it with Indigenous students and parents (ACLO 10).

*I think the idea of filling in forms and things like that might be a little bit daunting, although I know that at this school we have Aboriginal engagement plans where we send forms home and I haven't had any trouble getting those filled in. But I did teach previously at La Perouse and often we used to set up with a community liaison person and they would go to the children's homes and things like that, that used to work really well. Just to explain the terms and processes and things around that (Teacher 06).*

**Most school staff and ACLOs emphasised that there was a need to provide additional support for parents of Aboriginal students. These findings imply that effective communication strategies about the application process for Aboriginal students and parents would promote wider awareness of OCs and SHSs and be of assistance in understanding the process. In addition, providing one-on-one assistance where required in completing the application form would be useful so that Aboriginal parents can be more inclined to voice any questions they may have.**

### **Few Online Applications**

Interestingly, only 1 Aboriginal student, 3 parents of Aboriginal children, and 1 non-Aboriginal student reported applying on-line. School staff and ACLOs also raised the issue that many Aboriginal families did not have access to a computer or the internet which is illustrated by the following comment:

*Well, majority of Koori families; Koori Goori Mula, Mula, Murri whatever, don't have access at home to internet facilities. So there's a sort of decline in getting applications filled out in that sense (ACLO 05).*

*... like now that we're really encouraging people to do the online process. We've offered the opportunity here for people to come in and we'll work them through it and whatever at school and help with that but I don't really think that it does really suit a lot of our Aboriginal families. I mean many of them don't have the computer facilities at home; a lot of them don't and some of them don't have the skills to utilise them either. I think the way we're going with the online applications is probably less encouraging of our Aboriginal students entering or putting their application in than perhaps when we did it on paper in the past (Teacher 10).*

**Results indicated that most Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families did not use the online application process. Regarding Aboriginal families in particular, school staff and ACLOs suggested the reason on-line applications were not used by this group was that some Aboriginal families may not have access to a computer or the internet to make an on-line application. These results suggest that more information needs to flow to all families about the on-line application process and that it may be helpful for schools to assist parents of Aboriginal students with access to the internet and also make paper copies of the application available. These processes may assist in increasing the number of applications from Aboriginal students.**

## Results of Research Question 3: Drivers of Decision-Making in Regard to Accepting or Declining an OC/SHS Placement

### *Introduction*

Research Question 3 asked what multiple stakeholders perceived as drivers of decision-making on whether or not gifted Aboriginal students accept or decline the offer to participate in OCs or SHSs and to what extent Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perceptions are similar or different.

### *Aboriginal Stakeholders' Rates of Uptake*

Figure 6 shows that almost half of the Aboriginal students (5 of 12) and approximately half the parents of Aboriginal children (6 of 13) declined the offer for an OC or SHS placement. In stark contrast, no non-Aboriginal students or parents of non-Aboriginal children declined the offer.

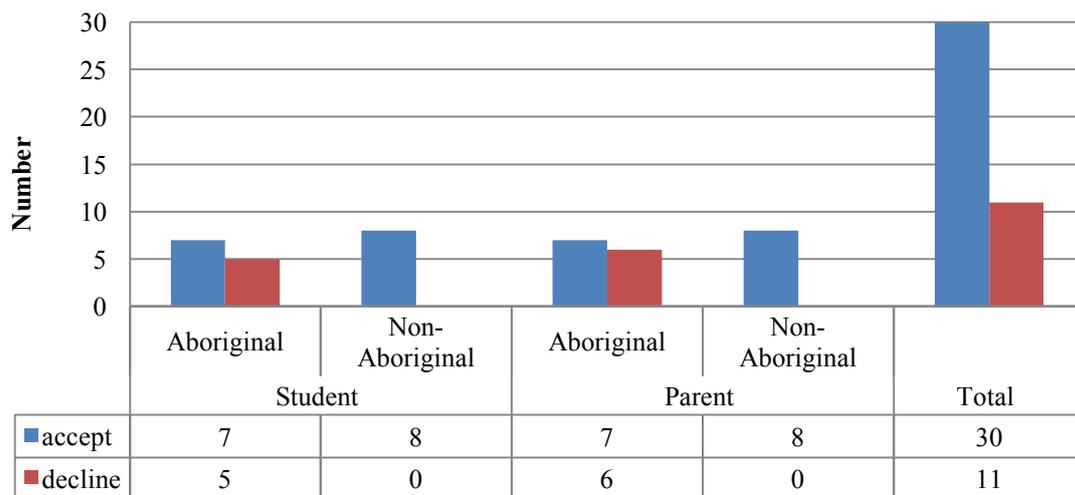


Figure 6. Breakdown of student ( $n=20$ ) and parent responses ( $n=21$ ) in relation to who decided to accept or decline an OC/SHS offer.

***For this sample, more Aboriginal students than non-Aboriginal students declined their OC/SHS offers. It should be noted that this trend is not consistent with state-wide data and likely reflects the scope of the research, in that the focus was on Aboriginal students' reasons for declining offers, and not that of non-Aboriginal students. DEC records indicate that on average, between 20% and 30% of students (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) declined offers over the 2006 to 2011 period.***

## **Primary Decision-Makers on Acceptance or Decline of an OC/SHS Offer**

Figure 7 indicates that 23 of 41 parents and students thought that it was students themselves who made the decision about whether to accept or decline the offer for OC or SHS. There were similar numbers of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students who reported that they themselves decided to accept or decline an offer (8/12 Aboriginal students and 6/8 non-Aboriginal students). However, parents of Aboriginal children and non-Aboriginal children differed on this issue. Seven of 13 parents of Aboriginal children reported that it was the student who decided to accept or decline an offer while only 2 of 8 parents of non-Aboriginal children noted it was the student's decision.

*Well, by then I had already changed my mind about going to [unclear] so I decided to go to x instead. So I think it was my decision to accept (Aboriginal Student 07).*

*Student: Well mum let me choose if I wanted to be in or not.*

*Facilitator: Okay so ultimately you decided?*

*Student: Yeah (Non-Aboriginal Student 19).*

*I decided straight away she was going and my partner wanted to consider lots of other options. But in my mind she was always going and she did (Parent with non-Aboriginal child 08).*

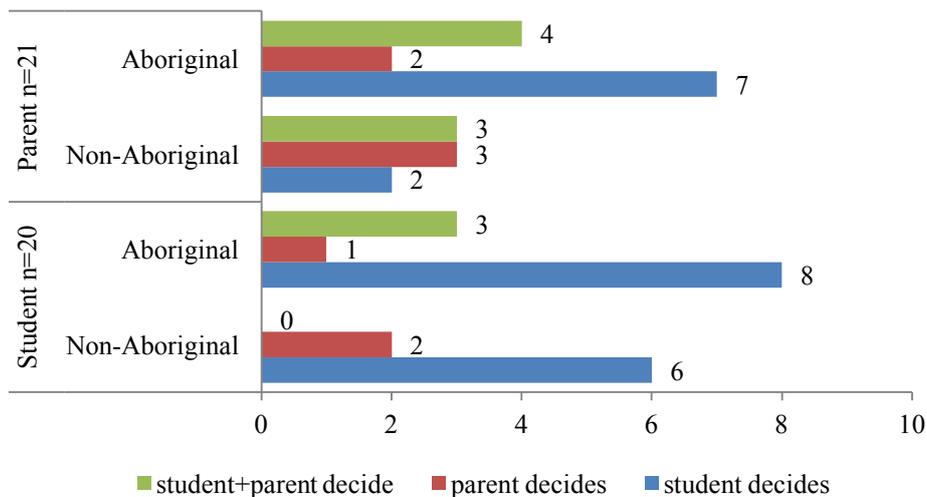


Figure 7. Key persons to decide acceptance or decline of the offer.

**Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students were more likely to report that they were the ones to make the decision to either accept or decline the offer, as opposed to their parents making the decision. These findings imply that it may be useful to ensure that Aboriginal students are better educated about the benefits of OC/SHS settings. The results also imply that it would be useful to educate parents of Aboriginal students about the benefits of OC and SHS so that they are better positioned to assist their children make an informed decision.**

## ***Rationale for Accepting an Offer***

Aboriginal students and parents of Aboriginal children (see Table 5) shared similar opinions to their non-Aboriginal peers about the reasons for acceptance of their offer. Most accepted the offer because of the stimulating educational environment offered. Participants emphasised that selective settings provided intellectual challenges and opportunities for students, smoothing the pathway to both SHS and university settings in the future.

*Well first off it's a selective high school so you get to learn a lot more and challenge yourself mentally because most high schools only do the basic stuff but x does the excelled programs. Yes, that's all I can think of (Aboriginal Student 07).*

*Mike needs challenging. He gets very bored in class. He needs to be stimulated. He finished his work, I believe, long before the others, and then he gets a bit disruptive. So, yes, he needs to be challenged, and I think that's just the school to do it for him (Parent with Aboriginal child 13).*

*For their child's self esteem, for confidence; knowing that that was such a big step to get into, the numbers especially, that was a major one for Hayden plus he said, Mum, this is going to start me to go to uni. I said yeah, you're right there so for him, it was his personal choice too (Parent with Aboriginal child 17).*

Aboriginal students and parents of Aboriginal children also noted that a key reason for accepting the offer was to continue to undertake schooling with friends, although it was also noted that friendship was a key reason for declining the offer; see later section.

*Some of the things I like, well first of all, the main thing I suppose is [Nell] is happy there, yeah, she's got a nice circle of friends (Parent with Aboriginal child 05).*

Non-Aboriginal students noted other key reasons for accepting offers such as making like-minded friends that were as intelligent as they were, or having a particular interest in the specialised programs offered by the school (e.g., sports, jazz). Aboriginal students also mentioned the same.

*Because I thought I can make the friends who are about as smart as me and probably have a better time than I did at my old school (Non-Aboriginal Student 20).*

*Because there's a junior jazz and senior jazz and also some bands here... it wasn't just the academic side of things that attracted to accepting the offer, it was also other things that the school offered (Non-Aboriginal Student 09).*

School staff and ACLOs also suggested that the supportive school environment fostered higher academic achievement and echoed that the selective setting enabled students to be with like-minded peers.

*The opportunity to be able to be in a likeminded situation. They find themselves being different within a mainstream situation and often their overall learning needs are not met within that context. So they see Opportunity Classes as a way of breaking free of some of those shackles and we actually offer that as part of what an OC selective class is all about (Principal 09).*

*A couple of good reasons is that children want to be with likeminded students or with students who are operating at a particular kind of academic level and that that sense of belonging to a group of children who are performing and thinking at a fairly different level to a lot of mainstream students, being in that cohesive, that homogenous or that kind of group, where they can find friends that they can communicate with (Teacher 14).*

Table 5

*Students' and Parents' Reasons for Accepting or Declining the Offer*

		<b>Accept</b>	<b>Decline</b>
	support	environment	environment
<b>Student</b>	Aboriginal	0	6 intellectual challenge/opportunity, family member influence, peer
	Non-Aboriginal	2 teacher encouragement	8 intellectual challenge/opportunity, peer, social reputation, extra-curriculum, close to school, transitional way to SHS
<b>Parent</b>	Aboriginal	0	4 intellectual challenge/opportunity, transitional way to SHS
	Non-Aboriginal	0	6 stay with friends, worried about higher intellectual challenge, like music or sports program in home school, long distance to new school
			3 intellectual challenge/opportunity, stay with friends

*Aboriginal students and parents had similar reasons to their non-Aboriginal counterparts for accepting the offer, including being in a stimulating intellectual environment and being able to stay with friends. Non-Aboriginal stakeholders emphasised accepting the offer because it allowed the students to make like-minded friends and engage in a specialised program of particular interest to them. As none of the non-Aboriginal students declined the offer, it may be that they and their parents are more likely to see the benefits of OC/SHS. As previously noted, providing Aboriginal families with information about the benefits of selective education may result in more Aboriginal students applying for and accepting places.*



## ***Rationale for Aboriginal Students Declining an Offer***

As noted above, more Aboriginal students and parents of Aboriginal children in comparison to non-Aboriginal students and parents of non-Aboriginal children chose to decline the offer (see Table 6). Some reported declining the offer as they were concerned about whether the high intellectual requirements of the OC/SHS environment would preclude them from participating in other non-academic interests.

*We didn't - obviously didn't put that on him because that's going to sway him and his choices but he had a talk to some kids that he knew who were there and decided that he didn't want to go because it didn't offer other stuff and that it was too academic. So he didn't want to be just studying. He wanted to be doing other things at school too, like his sport - he's quite involved in drama and stuff like that too. He just felt there wasn't enough of that on offer - that it was too academic for him. So he chose not to go for those reasons (Parent with Aboriginal child 11).*

Aboriginal students and parents of Aboriginal children also reported that many Aboriginal students declined the offer because they were reluctant to leave their friends:

*Yeah. It was mostly friends that came here, so that was a big factor of why I chose here, but - I don't know. I thought it would just be best for me to come here, rather than going to a new school, making new friends (Aboriginal Student 15).*

*But leaving friends was a big factor, he didn't want to - he just wanted to go on where - he wanted to go to a high school where his friends were... Yeah and we live five minutes from here (Parent with Aboriginal child 04).*

As indicated by the last comment, some Aboriginal students also declined the offer because of the need to travel long distances to attend the selective setting. Almost half of school staff (13 out of 28) and ACLOs (6 out of 11) also considered transportation an influencing factor for deciding to decline the offer.

*School was close, friends, and now she has a job. She's been working since last year and everything's just close for her (Parent with Aboriginal child 15).*

*It's a distance. Why I say that is because my son - he went from one school - because the school didn't have the selective subjects that he wanted. So he went to X for Year 11 and 12. So he's gone there for nearly a whole year and because it was burning him out - the travel from 6 o'clock in the morning until 5 o'clock in the afternoon - that's what he was doing every day - he said no. He just pulled the pin and went back to the old school. It was good because the school then had the subject that he wanted (ACLO 03).*

Some Aboriginal students preferred to stay at their local school because they wanted to be involved in a particular school program (e.g., sports or music program), which they did not feel would be available in OC or SHS settings.

*Probably I'm very sporty. I like to play sport and I like this school; it's a very good school and recently we just won the AFL final for our year. If I'd gone to OC I wouldn't have been able to do that (Aboriginal Student 11).*

*That even though the opportunities [sports] were there, they were quite limited opportunities because the students who attended school with him, didn't have the same interests or the same level of talent that he had. So he felt that he was disadvantaged in that way... He has extremely interest in a whole range of things, he felt that their interests were limited to the academic side of life only. One of his comments to me was, they can't talk about anything other than algebra. So he found it quite difficult to get them to talk about things other than school and study (Parent with Aboriginal child 11).*

*\* (This Aboriginal student studied in a selective school for one term and then transferred to a non-selective school.)*

Some school staff and ACLOs indicated that some students made use of an OC or SHS offer to gain a scholarship into a private school.

*I think also sometimes they apply and they use that then to get themselves into - some scholarships into some of the private schools. I'm pretty sure that that's happening, saying that I got a place at x now give me a scholarship and I'll come here - and I'm positive that that's occurring (Principal 06).*

Table 6

*School Staff and ACLOs Reasons for Accepting or Declining the Offer*

	Accept		Decline		
	environment	spt+en+self	environment	self	en+self
<b>School staff</b>	13 intellectual challenge/opportunity, being with friends, family member influence, good reputation of school, transitional way to SHS	6 Benefit or advantage	20 being with friends, long distance to new school, preference to home school, worry about new environment in another school, hoping kid to be "normal kid"	4 Use OC or SHS offer for scholarship in private school	6 Not suited to students' need or capability
<b>ACLO</b>	9 intellectual challenge/opportunity, being with friends, family member influence,	2 Benefit or advantage	10 being with friends, long distance to new school, preference to home school, worry about new environment in another school, hoping kid to be "normal kid"	1 Use OC or SHS offer for scholarship in private school	1 Not suited to students' need or capability

Note. spt+en+self= support+environment+self;en+self= environment+self; ACLO= Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers.

**Primarily Aboriginal students declined an offer because of the distant location of the selective setting and being reluctant to leave their friends. These results suggest that it is worthwhile considering the establishment of virtual selective environments to enable more access to a selective setting for Aboriginal students. Providing more access to OCs and SHSs in rural areas may also be worth considering, while e-friend/buddy networks for Aboriginal students in OCs or SHSs may make these settings more attractive.**

**Some Aboriginal students also reported declining the offer as they were concerned about whether the high intellectual requirements of the OC/SHS environment would preclude them from participating in their other interests such as sport and drama. These results imply that for some Aboriginal students, the academic focus of selective settings should not come at the expense of opportunities to participate in specialised areas such as sports and the creative arts.**

## **Results of Research Question 4: Factors Influencing the Under-representation of Gifted Aboriginal Students in OC/SHS**

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### *Introduction*

Research Question 4 asked what multiple stakeholders perceived as underlying factors that influence the under-representation of gifted Aboriginal students in OC/SHS and to what extent Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perceptions are similar or different.

### ***Communicating to Aboriginal Families More Information about the Advantages of Selective Settings and the Application Process***

All participants stressed that there was an urgent need to effectively provide parents of Aboriginal students and Aboriginal students with more information in general about the advantages of selective settings and more actively publicise the application process.

*They might not know about it. At my old school they didn't really put it in the newsletter, they just put it like, down the bottom. They didn't make it as a big thing (Aboriginal Student 17).*

*I just can't even think of how well it's publicised in general for the selective schools but I know that - maybe something that does target the Indigenous students... So if there was information that we could hand to students, well you know we're at least providing that information to them in a way that might encourage them to do so (Parent with Aboriginal child 06).*

*There's just not enough information out there to the community. Nobody actually knows what an OC class is... We had community thinking it was a class designed for troubled kids and we were bussing them in. Until they actually understood that the OC class is actually for gifted, intelligent students and you have to actually apply in order to get in there, then they understood. But see community don't know anything about selective schools or OC classes, because there's nothing out there. And the schools don't put anything out there to let the community know, let the parents know (ACLO 04).*

*The local schools who had applicants were saying that they [students] were getting information too late and weren't informed (Principal 09).*

Some parents of Aboriginal children also noted that there was a reluctance by some school staff to publicise the opportunity to apply for a selective setting as this could result in the school losing teachers.

*It's such a small, small school. You should think that the message would be out there and it's just not out there at all... this principal didn't want to lose another child. If he lost more children, he was going to lose more classrooms, so obviously he's upset because he's losing another child...I really don't know - maybe the council groups or just get the word out there somehow. I don't know how you would do it but just get the message out there that these classes are available and your child has a very good chance to get in (Parent of Aboriginal child 16).*

Further, schools may be reluctant to promote selective settings as they do not wish to lose their best students. One principal of a school that offered an opportunity class made remarked that some schools are saying:

*We want to have our own offering within the school to stop the drift. We want to stop the drift to non-government schools or more preferred schools or dilute the drain – our intellectual drain into the OC class program.... That you are stealing and taking away our intellectual property and helping dumb us down.*

**All participants stressed that there was an urgent need to proactively publicise selective schooling opportunities to provide parents of Aboriginal students and students with more information about the benefits of selective settings and the application process. There was concern that some school staff were not publicising these opportunities. These results imply that parents of Aboriginal students and Aboriginal students would benefit from having access to more information that is publicised widely. It would also seem useful to enable dissemination of information to be communicated from multiple sources (e.g., Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups, ACLOs, schools, DEC, Indigenous newspapers).**



## Teaching the Teachers

The data suggested that teacher education could be enhanced to ensure that teachers are aware of the benefits of selective settings and the application process.

*I don't think that much of it. It's based on the one test that they do. I'm not even sure what percentage is based on the marks that we give. We give marks from our mark book, from the primary schools. But I'm not sure what percentage is based on that. I'm not even given any of that information (Teacher 13).*

*As a teacher, you know, there's not enough information out there for teachers to actually know how to support their children and families to apply. That's just my own personal experience. I don't think I've ever seen an application for - that I could support a student or a family in applying for an opportunity class (ACLO 07).*

Participants also suggested that it would be useful for teachers to be trained on understanding Aboriginal culture and how to identify gifted Aboriginal students.

*Well I would say teacher training most definitely. In fact just recently I've been looking at a few different programs that we want to do with our whole staff that actually focus specifically on the way Aboriginal students learn and also in terms of language. I think the first step is more awareness about Aboriginal culture...I don't believe it's a teacher's place to teach culture but I think they certainly should be aware of culture in the community (Principal 12).*

*Again, helping teachers in the mainstream to identify those kids would be the very first thing because you have got to be able to identify them to get them to apply (Principal 03).*

*I think that gifted students need challenging and I think teachers who work with those kids - and this isn't restricted to Aboriginal students, I think what they need to be modelling and projecting is that embracing of all cultures, embracing of all areas of giftedness. It's what any good teacher will do. Show me an Aboriginal student who's doing well in a class and the majority of times I can show you a good teacher who is not teaching to Aboriginality but is teaching to very good teaching practice and very good interpersonal skills (Principal 14).*

Some staff also suggested that gifted Aboriginal students needed to be identified at an earlier point and their parents informed about placement well ahead of the application period to allow them access to information to make an informed decision:

*Communicating that with our parents and identifying these children at a much earlier point coming into the schools so that we can continue to work with parents and have them informed about that I think is way more important than just throwing them an application form in Year 4 and saying you should do this (Teacher 07).*

*Again, helping teachers in the mainstream to identify those kids would be the very first thing because you have got to be able to identify them to get them to apply. Obviously they need to look at, and my understanding is that they do use all sorts of learning taxonomy and model intelligence and model pathways and all of that, so the eight ways of learning, that's all in the same bucket (Principal 03).*

**Feedback from school staff suggest that teachers need to be better informed about the nature and benefits of selective settings and about the selection process. Participants suggested that enhancing teacher education could ensure that teachers have an appreciation of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal learning and talents and giftedness and how to identify gifted Aboriginal students. These findings suggest that it would be useful to develop resources for delivery to pre-service and in-service teachers to address this need. Some teachers suggested that earlier identification of gifted Aboriginal students and communication to parents of Aboriginal students would be useful to allow adequate time to consider selective placement opportunities prior to the commencement of the application process. It was also noted that a key to Aboriginal student success is teachers' interpersonal skills.**

### **Learning More about Aboriginal Australia**

Some stakeholders suggested that it was important for all school staff and students to know more about Aboriginal Australia to address misconceptions about the capabilities of Aboriginal students so that more Aboriginal students are identified and encouraged to apply for selective placement.

*If there was some more flexibility in the system to - just a bit of a small cultural component to stuff like this in the system, in the schools, to give I guess, not only a sense of identity for them to be proud of who they are in the schools, but also that everybody in the school - all the staff and all the students all have a better understanding of history of the country - a true history of this country - so that it will hopefully change people's minds and perceptions - negative perceptions that they may hold about Aboriginal students (ACLO 09).*

ACLOs also suggested that incorporating more Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum in selective schools may attract Aboriginal students.

*Maybe even do some more cultural-type subjects. I know Liam - who's not Aboriginal - he loves it when they have the Aboriginal week and they do all the art stuff and learn about the food and all that. So if the parents think maybe they're going to get a bit extra of their own culture learning - thinking outside the square that way (Parent of non-Aboriginal child 18).*



**ACLOs suggested that it was important for all staff and students to learn more about Aboriginal Australia to address misconceptions about the capabilities of Aboriginal students. This implies that it is critical that all school staff are aware that Aboriginal students can be gifted. It was also suggested that selective settings could be more attractive to Aboriginal students and parents if they incorporated Aboriginal Studies into the curriculum and promoted this. These results suggest that selective settings may find it useful to attract Aboriginal students by promoting how they address Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum.**

### **Enhancing Aboriginal Students' Academic Self-concepts**

Participants emphasised that many Aboriginal students did not feel their academic abilities were good enough to warrant an OC/SHS placement and there was a need to enhance Aboriginal students' academic self-concepts.

*I think they don't think that they're good enough. I think it's up to people who do think they're good enough to say, no, you are good enough. They need the encouragement. I think they need to be encouraged (ACLO 05).*

*Obviously they need to know that there's an available OC class in their area and then they need to have the confidence in their own abilities to want to try, because it does mean they're going to have to leave and start fresh. So I did have a little boy in my class this year who did that, started with us in first term and then left. So you'd have to be sort of a confident, social nature, I think, to want to make the split and start again (Teacher 02).*

*I would say, just go for it. You know, you never know until you have a try, and you know, really, you don't really know what a child is capable of unless they actually sit down and attempt something. So, and keep their spirits up. Like, always motivate them to do good; praise them, and they will. They'll want to do better with lots of praise (Parent of Aboriginal child 03).*

**A key reason identified by some participants for Aboriginal students not applying for placement was that they held low academic self-concepts, although responses of successful Aboriginal students indicate a high level of academic self-concept. Given the body of research evidence that demonstrates the importance of enhancing academic self-concept in and of itself and its relation to desirable educational outcomes including achievement, it would seem timely to enhance gifted Aboriginal students' academic self-concepts and encourage them to apply for selective setting placement. Participants stressed that Aboriginal students need to be encouraged by school staff in order to enhance their academic self-concepts.**

## Access to First-Hand Information

School staff also suggested that there was a need to provide Aboriginal students and parents with first-hand information about the benefits of selective settings.

*My advice would be to go and have a good look at maybe an OC class in action. My advice would be to talk to other parents and other children that have been in OC classes and think about what's the reason about going down that line. But certainly my advice would be to get to personally know what it means and some of the pressures that may exist (Principal 02).*

*I think bridging that gap between school community and the parents at home, so having perhaps community members and things employed, or a transition program or something where families can come in... offering it to perhaps all students and things like that so they can see what it's like and experience it and then their peers and things can see what a great thing it is that they're achieving, and also breaking down those barriers of unknown and things like that (Teacher 06).*

**All participants suggested that parents of Aboriginal students and Aboriginal students could benefit from access to first-hand information on the benefits of selective school settings on which to base an informed decision. Parents of Aboriginal students and Aboriginal students could benefit from attending OC/SHS open days to learn more about specific school programs. In addition, creation of a video or DVD made available on the internet might provide a useful resource for Aboriginal families to learn first-hand information from other Aboriginal families about their experiences in relation to selective school settings.**



## Strengths and Limitations

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A major strength of the present investigation is the conduct of interviews with various stakeholders (Principals, staff members of the schools, ACLOs, Aboriginal Education Officers, Aboriginal Education consultants, parents, and students) covering a range of facilitating factors and barriers that may influence the uptake of offers in selective settings. The direct comparisons of responses from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents and students are a particular strength in identifying the essential variables that may make a significant difference for decision-making. By identifying the major drivers of decision-making for specific stakeholders, it is possible to devise measures to address specific issues to change the phenomenon of under-representation of Aboriginal students in gifted education opportunities. Another strength is the large sample size ( $N = 80$ ) for a qualitative study. This has generated a large dataset with rich data, which has enabled a demonstration of consistency in opinions and perceptions minimising the possibility of flawed conclusions based on one or two responses that are not representative of the population. The triangulation of findings from consistent patterns of responses from a large sample of multiple stakeholders has provided some reliable data that will be useful for designing interventions to change perceptions and related actions regarding Aboriginal students' application for and uptake of gifted education opportunities.

A major limitation is the sole reliance on qualitative (interview) data to draw conclusions. From the perspective of quantitative research, the sample is small and does not allow sophisticated statistical analysis to provide a broad perspective of what specific factors would predict which outcomes in terms of perceptions and actions. It is not possible to specifically indicate the causal relations between beliefs and actions, and it is also impossible to examine change of beliefs and actions and their reciprocal relations over time. The current findings are useful for some preliminary direction as to devise immediate measures to address obvious barriers to Aboriginal students applying for and taking up gifted education. However, it is a crucial step to further examine this important issue with a large sample of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students using a blend of quantitative and qualitative methods and a longitudinal design so as to compare Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and their parents' views, and the views and actions of various stakeholders; examine change of perceptions, decisions, and actions over time; model relations between predictors and outcomes to identify the most salient predictors that make a difference; and cross-validate and triangulate findings from multiple data sources. Employing a sophisticated research design using a mixed-methods approach would be useful in this regard.

The present investigation has provided important information on which to base a future program of research to ascertain what works for gifted Aboriginal students. Hence, future research could consider ascertaining the impact of academic selective settings on the achievement and psychosocial wellbeing of gifted Aboriginal students, the types of gifted education programs that attract and benefit gifted Aboriginal students, and the extent to which gifted Aboriginal students receive an education appropriate to their needs.

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