

# Young Indigenous Australian Women's Stories about Achieving Higher Education and Empowerment

TAKAYANAGI, Taeko\* and SHIMOMURA, Takayuki\*\*

## 1. Introduction

A wide range of research has examined the sociocultural and historical aspects that influence Indigenous communities' environment and their well-being (Dudgeon et al., 2014). Evidence also shows that Indigenous peoples improve their standard of living by developing empowerment and self-help through education (Freire, 1970; Dudgeon et al., 2014; Stromquist, 2014; Bhopal, 2009). In Australia, Indigenous people have historically experienced discriminatory practices in education, such as segregated schooling. From the 1960s to the 1970s, co-schooling was gradually introduced; several more inclusive educational approaches were trialled (Parbury, 1999). However, a considerable educational gap remains between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia.

Indigenous women in Australia face disadvantages with regard to race and gender. Those barriers prevent Indigenous women from accessing educational and career opportunities (Doyle & Hill, 2012). Accordingly, it has been reported that Australian educational institutions need to integrate the traditional values and knowledge of Indigenous people into current educational programmes so that such people may comfortably attend those institutions. (Bierkerman & Townsend Cross, 2008; Aseron et al., 2013). Many studies analysing Australian Indigenous women's empowerment have tended to rely on quantitative data. Alternatively, they have used mixed methods with partial qualitative research, such as records of focus group discussions and quantitative evaluation of women's empowerment programmes (Varkey et al., 2010; Spry & Marchant, 2014). The present study aimed to determine the empowerment process of young Indigenous Australian women. It also aimed to identify their contribution to community development

---

\* JSPS RPD Fellow, Faculty of International Research and Education, Waseda University

\*\* Lecturer, Teacher Education Department, Kindai University

[Key words] Indigenous, Australia, higher education, identity, minority

from the perspective of individual women, their views on life and their educational experience.

In this paper, we contribute to current Indigenous studies in Australia by analysing life history interviews we conducted with young Indigenous women. This paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss the definition of 'empowerment' from the perspective of Australian Indigenous people and their efforts to improve their situation. We then illustrate our research method; we present our key findings, for which we use narrative and thematic analyses. Those data enhanced our understanding of young Indigenous women's experiences of education, empowerment, and contribution to community development. Finally, we suggest some effective support practices towards improving educational situations and promoting collective empowerment and communality.

## 2. Women's Empowerment and Community Development

In feminist literature, empowerment is a debated concept (Phillips, 2015). However, owing to diverse applications in women and development discourses, the notion of empowerment has played a strong role with respect to female autonomy. Empowerment has been a primary concern in women-focused development; that process has been encouraged by social work organizations to achieve women's development. In the context of Indigenous communities in Australia, empowerment is recognized as useful for identifying and discussing the disadvantages experienced by Indigenous people (Fredericks, 2009). The term 'empowerment' has been emphasized in programmes related to health, education, gender advocacy, and community development (Costello, 2003; Tsey et al., 2007; Whiteside et al., 2011). However, it has been observed that there has been a clear lack of understanding about the definition of 'empowerment' (Whiteside et al., 2011).

With respect to women's development, Kabeer stated that 'empowerment refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them' (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). As will be clarified in discussions below in the present article, empowerment was gained by some Indigenous Australian women; they did so through their efforts to establish power in discriminative situations that had hitherto been dominated by colonial influence and its legacy over

female autonomy. The interviewed young Indigenous women became empowered through education towards improving their everyday lives and making a contribution to improving their communities. Education itself does not empower learners, but it contributes to developing self-efficacy, which can be a basis for cultivating empowerment (Stromquist, 2014).

Relating the point of Kabeer (1999) to the purpose of this study, the ability of women to act within their communities as agents of change for community development is related to their own empowerment. In this study, young Indigenous Australian women pursued higher education by using existing women's networks and cooperating with one another. The present study is directly linked to concerns about the way empowerment is observed in young Indigenous women's educational experiences in Australia. According to Kabeer (2000), a key aspect of women's empowerment is whether they have the power and ability to make choices. Empowered women take the initiative to solve social issues: as Sen suggests, what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important' (Sen, 1985, p. 206).

Allen (1998) is critical of women's empowerment discourses that tend to focus on motherhood and development programmes based on women's major roles being housekeeping and childcare. That suggests an oppressive, fixed idea of womanhood in international development. Therefore, Young (1997) points out that women's empowerment may be considered in two ways. First, in an individual sense, a woman achieves more control over her own life, including family decisions or expenditures. Second, in a collective sense, women work together as a group to overcome structures that restrict them in society (such as in community mobilization for advocacy campaigns) or, as in the case of the present study, education strengthens the capacity to overcome discrimination. Allen (2008) suggests, therefore, that the collective ability of women to negotiate in a patriarchal community is a crucial step towards empowerment. Collective empowerment is not about developing a new initiative to produce a better solution: it concerns connecting efforts and strengthening membership within a working group towards small but continuous positive change. Individual empowerment is effective for women in making certain decisions;

however, collective empowerment is also necessary when women need to take positive social action through a group and attempt to bring about positive change in a community.

Women participating in education programmes tend to become empowered through enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence. Empowerment is indispensable to women's development. That point is highlighted in the narratives of the Indigenous Australian women in the present study. For example, Bhopal (2009) reported that interviewed minority Asian women in Britain stated that higher education contributed as a source of empowerment. Based on a qualitative study, Burgess (2016) suggested that Aboriginal female teachers in Australia had a notion of the good Aboriginal teacher as a person who could solve Aboriginal issues. Bainbridge (2011) reported in a study of 20 life history narrative interviews with Aboriginal women that the interviewees expressed the significance of performing Aboriginality as the core aspect of becoming empowered. The interviewees suggested that performing Aboriginality included the aspects of spiritual sensibility, cultural competence, and ethics of care and morality (Bainbridge 2011, p. 26). Educational experiences contribute to Indigenous Australians' ability to gain empowerment; however, the traditional values and elements of Aboriginal culture in the empowerment process are highly respected. Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) found among interviewed women that empowerment is the capacity to make effective decisions and to convert those decisions into desired outcomes.

The link between education and community development was explicitly made by Freire (1973). Freire regarded education as a way to change a community through collective action rather than individual achievement. He also suggested that adult learners acquire social skills or knowledge to bring about positive changes to reduce poverty through critical raising of awareness, or conscientization (Freire, 1973). Furthermore, based on her ethnographic study on indigenous women in Kenya, Takayanagi (2016) reported that uneducated women had become empowered through community development programmes by cooperating with one another in implementing those programmes.

In the context of Australia's Indigenous community, people value the well-being of their families and communities before individual benefits; communality and solidarity

are significant aspects in their lives (Dudgeon et al. 2014). Hence, in implementing Aboriginal programmes, the interdependence of individual and collective goals for Indigenous people needs to be considered (Dudgeon et al., 2014, p. 440). Some research has found that after attending an adult education programme, Indigenous Australian women declared an interest in helping other people in the community; that development was a cultivated capacity through the process of empowerment (Varkey et al., 2010; Spry & Marchant, 2014). Some Indigenous Australian women are keen to contribute towards building a healthy and supportive community (Varkey et al., 2010; Spry & Marchant, 2014). Hence, people try to find activities and strategies to develop a cooperative way for improving their community (Lugones, 2010). The pluralistic spirit of communalism is different from the individualistic thinking common in the West. Indigenous people attempt to make decisions that benefit communities rather than individuals' (Lugones 2010, p. 754). Mutual help is a widespread aspect of social life, whereby relationships among people are defined by mutual recognition and respect. Therefore, effective development programmes implemented in Indigenous communities require the integration of traditional knowledge with community-based management systems. The next section describes the research methodology used in the present study to record the voices of Indigenous Australian women.

### **3. Methodology**

In this study, we determined that a qualitative methodology was the most appropriate approach for documenting the thoughts of young Indigenous Australian women. We did so because many quantitative studies have been conducted to measure the impact of such Indigenous women's educational experiences on their well-being (Varkey et al., 2010; Spry and Marchant 2014). The qualitative research of a focus group discussion conducted by Aseron et al. (2013) was effective for collecting various opinions and determining how a group thinks about a particular issue (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). However, an individual study participant has limited time and space to express their opinion during a group discussion. In the present study, our use of a life history ap-

proach provided space for individual women to speak out about their experiences. Therefore, we attempted to situate ourselves as listeners and learners so as to build up our knowledge about their culture, traditions, and thoughts on education and their life experiences.

Between 2009 and 2010, we conducted life history interviews to determine the experiences of Indigenous Australian women. The life history method examines individuals' lives over time; it focuses on experiences and actions in people's lives so as to identify important incidents and aspects (Atkinson 1998). Key questions posed by the present research were as follows: To what extent did background elements affect the Indigenous women's decision making with regard to deciding whether to undertake tertiary education? What difficulties did they have to face in their lives? What did the interviewed Indigenous women expect from tertiary education? Those interviews were conducted almost a decade ago; however, we believe that the findings from that time are still significant in the present: the comments reflect the individuals' empowerment process and the motivation for community development that originated during their period of higher education.

With the assistance of the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney and Tranby National Indigenous Adult Education and Training in Sydney, we identified 12 Indigenous students aged 18-25 years. Block mode<sup>1</sup> students generally undertake part-time work, such as childcare and domestic work. Some Indigenous people did not participate in higher education straight after graduating from high school. Mobility is common among Indigenous youth, and so some had experience of living in both urban and rural areas; others were born and raised entirely in Sydney. Some young people, especially block mode students, were mainly based in their rural Indigenous communities. For this study, ethical approval was obtained from and procedures were followed in accordance with the standards of the University of Sydney's Ethics Committee (number 02-2009/11258). We obtained written informed consent from all participants. We identified 12 research participants. However, in line with the purpose of this article, we selected

---

1 Some faculties offer courses in block mode (also called or 'intensive' studies) to Indigenous students. With block mode, students can attend three intensive sessions (1 or more days) each semester on campus (The University of Sydney 2018).

three interviewees to clarify the process of empowerment through educational experience and motivation to contribute to their community. A key aim in this study was to create space so that Indigenous women could speak and be heard. Below, we present each individual with some biographical background. We then detail their educational experiences, followed by each woman's identity formation and motivation for community development. All the names are pseudonyms.

## 4. Research Findings

### 4.1 Case Study One: Matee

Matee was born and raised in New South Wales in a rural inland community that had a large population of Indigenous people. Her father was Indigenous and her mother non-Indigenous. She attended a Catholic school from Kindergarten to Year 10. At school, she had a strong interest in sports rather than academic studies. Her parents sent her to a boarding school in Sydney to gain better opportunities for sports and studies and to avoid negative social influences in the rural community. She married an Indigenous man and gave birth to a girl in Year 11 of her education. Although she dropped out of the boarding school in Sydney, she attended another secondary school and completed Year 11 and 12 in her home town. Matee wanted to become a teacher and went to university to do so. It is common for a young Indigenous woman to have a baby and discontinue schooling (Biddle, 2010). Statistical data clearly show that Indigenous women are more likely to have children earlier than non-Indigenous women (AIHW 2011, p. 76). Dropping out of education through early pregnancy is of course an issue that only women face. We attempted to determine how Matee overcame this common trend among Indigenous women. Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEA<sup>2</sup>) play an important role for young mothers in continuing their education:

---

2 There are over 2500 Indigenous Education Workers across Australia, but they work under different titles from state to state. For example, they are called Aboriginal Education Assistants in New South Wales, Koorie Educators in Victoria, Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers in Western Australia (Same Kids Same Goals, 2007).

Yes, I had a lot of support from my AEA because I was the second person in that school to complete the HSC (Higher School Certificate) with a child, and me being an Aboriginal person, an Aboriginal girl who had a baby, it's common, it's a common thing, but mostly people don't continue on to go to school whereas I did, so I had a lot of support from my AEA... through my sport, like my teachers who were also my coaches had gave me a lot of support, um... my AEA still helps me today from back there yeah...

Matee was the second Indigenous person at her public school to complete the HSC while having a child. An AEA staff member and Matee's coaches at her sports club supervised her studies and gave her encouragement. Matee never obtained tutoring support for the subjects she had to study; however, as a single parent, she received financial support from the government in the form of ABSTUDY<sup>3</sup>. Matee emphasized that her school's positive view on educational attainment contributed to her being able to complete secondary school. That experience shaped her positive view about continuing formal education and motivated her to obtain further education. Eventually, an Indigenous friend of hers informed Matee of a suitable programme for accessing higher education. Matee stated that the network and support from Indigenous people were strong after she graduated from high school. She believed that was an influence on her continuous empowerment and motivation for community development (Whiteside et al., 2011).

I heard a lot about the block mode programme from my Indigenous friend, and it was always something that I was interested in and obviously it fits me perfectly in being a young mother, I'm a single mother and I can study.... it allows me to study in my community.

---

3 The Australian government provides a fund called ABSTUDY for Indigenous people (Centrelink, 2017). Various kinds of programmes have been implemented for many years; however, progress is very slow, and many indigenous people are still the most disadvantaged in terms of educational achievement.



Single-parent families often have low incomes because it is difficult for the parent to work without adequate childcare and support. This is a major obstacle for Indigenous women to develop their potential and act fully in Australian society. Matee's case illustrates a typical issue of a young Indigenous single parent. However, because of the government's financial assistance through ABSTUDY and her Indigenous community network, Matee could participate in higher education. Matee explained her goal in wanting to become a teacher and why she wished to help her community. This point is significantly different from the individualistic cultures of the West. Matee's words highlighted her views on the Indigenous cultural aspects of communality. In keeping with the explanation of Mohanty (2003) that Indigenous and marginalized people help one another and that solidarity is needed to make a better change, her words indicated that Indigenous communality can affect community development and ensure that people cooperate and help one another:

Well, being a young parent and my goal is to be able to become a teacher to go back into my community and give... cause I know what the Aboriginal students are feeling and because I'm not just doing Aboriginal Studies, like I'm teaching in Geography, History, Aboriginal Studies and so and... I know that every Aboriginal student wants to do Aboriginal Studies because it's something that... that's the only way they're gonna learn about their culture that way at Mooree, so I... so that's what my goal is, to go back and help... there's a lot of single mothers going now, like a lot of young single mothers as well and they need the support... cause if they do not... they probably don't even have support from their family, let alone the school, so I'm lucky because I had the support from my family and the school but... if they don't have that support then they'll quit... so if I'm in the system then I will support them as much as I can because there's going to be a lot more young mothers, a lot and they're mostly Aboriginal and that's the truth... that's what people have to sort out face because it's the truth, and there's going to be a lot of Aboriginal mothers that are very young these days especially in Mooree...

yep, so if I go back, if I go back into my community teaching Aboriginal Studies to Aboriginal kids then that's some more support that they are gonna get... so that's what really got me interested...

White (2007) explained that an educated woman can be an important role model to young women. As a single parent with an educational background, Matee will certainly represent a positive role model in her community. Matee described how she discovered her identity:

Um, I found out when I was in Year One, so I was about six, maybe six, and because my parents are both fair-skinned, they don't look Aboriginal, they're only a little bit darker than me... well my mum's obviously Australian so she's got fair skin, she's white, and then my dad, he's got darker skin, but my dad because of like the stolen generations and stuff like that who were... they used to live out on the missions, my Nan did, which is his mum, and then they moved into town and really they stayed away from the Aboriginality thing, it was sort a being bred out... so they didn't find a need for me to know that I was Aboriginal, like... it wasn't really a big thing until most of my friends were Aboriginal, and then I got along with Aboriginal people like all the... all my friends were Aboriginal so and um... there was all these excursions that my friends were going on, I'm like... and that's when they told me that you are Aboriginal

During her childhood, her parents stayed remote from the Indigenous community and culture, yet all her friends were Indigenous. Matee found out about her Indigenous identity when she was in Year 1. On the occasion of her school's Indigenous cultural tour, Matee's peers told her that she was Aboriginal. When Matee was in Year 11 and 12 at the public secondary school in her home town, one of the subjects was Aboriginal studies. That was valuable for her to learn about Aboriginal history.

Matee also stated that her mixed origins were not always accepted in public; that

was because of stereotypical views, which regarded mixed origins as causing problems with identity formation. Matee said that she constantly had to assert her Indigenous identity in public. However, she reported that it could be difficult to change people's perceptions of what Indigenous people are like-perceptions that have developed in people's minds through the media, schooling, and other forms of socialization. Matee repeated that the support from her community encouraged her to continue studying and contributed to raising her empowerment. Because of the constant support and encouragement, Matee is keen to contribute to her community's social development.

#### *4.2 Case Study Two: Alinga*

Alinga was born in Queensland. She did most of her schooling in her mother's tribal area. Her mother was Indigenous and her father European. Alinga was trying to learn some Indigenous languages. She went to high school in Brisbane. Her four sisters and one brother did not advance beyond Year 10. She was the only one in her family to complete Year 12 and go on to further studies. Her cousin and uncle had studied legal studies and community development at Tranby, and so Alinga did the same course at Tranby as well as another course at the University of Technology in Sydney. Before her studies in the higher education institutions, Alinga worked in community development for Indigenous people; that experience led her to pursue higher education so as to help her community more effectively. Her relatives also influenced her in connecting with her Indigenous community, which led her to study community development. Alinga's connection with her Indigenous relatives had a positive impact on her career path and also her decision to continue to higher education. Education plays a vital role in a woman's self-development and career path.

I've worked with a lot of Indigenous community organizations and I've worked with the legal service and the tenancy service and that. The course that I'm doing at university is Community Management, Indigenous Community Management, and I thought with this course I could work in this Indigenous community where

I'd like to be helping them because a lot of people from my area have trouble with like, incarceration and that, like getting imprisoned and that, they have a lot of them [these] problems, a lot of drug and alcohol problems and so I want to be able to work with the community so we can get something happening to divert them from the prison system.

I do a Bachelor of Arts in Community Management and Adult Education. So that'll help me in the future to work as a CEO [Chief Executive Officer] or something like that and if I get the legal behind me then I could work in an ALS, an Aboriginal Legal Service. So I could work here in my community or I could go to a remote community and I would know how to run the service itself or start a new service. So that's why I'm just doing these little foundations.

Her remarks demonstrate the apparent community issues that have been historically and socially constructed through the colonial influence. Having observed community issues, Alinga had developed a strong motivation to work for her people in the community. In line with the explanation of Bell (2002), whereby women play the role of carers based on kinship bonds, Alinga's words demonstrated her strong link to her community. Alinga explained her opinion as to what she could contribute to the community in the future:

Basically, well what I said before, I'd like to work within my community. There's hardly any opportunities there at the moment. We've got a lot of Indigenous people around that area. And the main area that probably needs looking at would be the legal area which is why I thought to do this course and then I could work with the community and it's something that is very important. And doing the university too I can understand the ins and outs of how to run a service so I could eventually probably apply for funding and I could start my own program, it's what we all talk about, we need more programs in the regional areas.

The following comments show that she was proud of being Indigenous:

With no difficulties. It is funny at times because it's like I live as an Indigenous person, I have done my whole life, although my father's not Indigenous, there's not a boundary like I'm half German or Spanish or whatever, I just see myself as the one whole and it's Indigenous, and that's why I'm trying to find all the little connections. It's easier to just say one thing when you don't introduce yourself as someone that's Australian-Indigenous-Spanish-German, like that, so you just put yourself under one umbrella which is Indigenous. You're Indigenous in all those nationalities in your own countries.

Alinga is half-Indigenous, half-European. However, her words reflected her strong Indigenous identity. Doyle and Hill (2012) noted that Indigenous people, especially women, tend to have less access to formal and informal networks, which provide educational advice and career design; however, Alinga used her Indigenous networks and connections effectively to seek educational and career opportunities. Alinga's words showed that her motivation for higher education was based on her willingness for community development: she was very keen to bring about a positive change in her community.

#### *4.3 Case Study Three: Marlee*

Marlee was born in an Indigenous community in a small town on the south coast of New South Wales. Her mother was Indigenous and her father non-Indigenous. She attended primary school in her community and moved to Sydney when she was 14. However, Marlee's mother was raised by her adopted white family because her mother gave her up when she was born. After Marlee was born, Marlee's mother traced her history, found her mother's family, and discovered that she was Aboriginal. Marlee was told about her Indigenous identity when she was 10 years old. Marlee finished high school education in Sydney and learned an Indigenous language at university. At the time of the interview Marlee was studying a BA degree in history and Indigenous

studies with a diploma in education. Marlee stated why she wanted to become a teacher:

My mother was a primary school teacher, which... and I don't know, I guess it had a little bit to do with it... but I think that more than anything um... I learnt how important an education is, and how disadvantaged some are... like, I think it came from the experience of me having to do Aboriginal Studies by correspondence and not having that ability to have that there and having to work really hard to learn about something that was very important to me. I wanted to help change that, so I wanted to teach Aboriginal Studies for kids at school, and going away made me realise that... you know, education is the key to change. So something that I was passionate about, something that I was interested in and then putting those two things together: I wanted to do something that helped Indigenous kids at school... and, and the general... you know, the wider population as well. If you teach non-Aboriginal kids the history of our country, they're going to be a lot more understanding of the issues that are going on, rather than having that... you know, there's a lot of stereotypes, there's a lot of myths that happen... because people just don't know what's going on.

Marlee explained how she would help her community with her background:

Um... after ten years, I would like to teach for ten years, I think in schools. I would like to have children in this time, um... hopefully get married and have children, um... but then I think I would like to work in education in a policy sense, yeah... so if I, I don't know exactly what I wanna do yet, but I would like to work, maybe for the Department of Education, maybe in Aboriginal Programs... um, school community partnerships, maybe something like that... I'd also maybe like to work with Curriculum... Curriculum Development... I'd like to implement a wider... I would like to make Aboriginal Studies a subject in every school throughout NSW, not just for Year 11 but for Year 7, 8, 9, 10... just like history, math, English,

Geography... I think that Aboriginal Studies should be a subject. And if I could implement moving that forward even a little bit, implementing more into the curriculum I would be very happy with that.

Biddle (2010) emphasizes the importance of a role model played by an educated woman; thus, if Marlee becomes an educator, teaching and managing Aboriginal studies, her positive attitude to education will have an impact on younger Indigenous girls, encouraging them to continue education. Indigenous people have traditionally valued kinship and communality (Bell, 2002; White, 2007), and Marlee's comments underscored this point. Marlee described her identity formulation as Indigenous. Marlee explained how difficult it was for her to pursue Aboriginal studies without the help of an Aboriginal support office after having moved to Sydney:

I moved to Sydney when I was only one... there were only two Aboriginal kids in my school so that was hard, and I wanted to do Aboriginal studies in year eleven and twelve for the HSC but they didn't offer it at the school, so I had to do it by correspondence and that was very hard because we didn't have an Aboriginal support office or employment officer at the school because there wasn't enough Aboriginal kids. So I had to travel into Redfern to do the course and the school didn't want me to do it at first and then I got angry and then they let me study it.

Marlee felt discriminated against because of Aboriginality:

in Sydney yes, yes. Especially because I was the only one of two Aboriginal kids in the school and then people are very aware of it because it was such a... And because the school didn't want me to do Aboriginal studies it became a thing, yeah.

Marlee's comments indicate that without the availability of an Aboriginal support office, it can be difficult for Indigenous students to undertake Aboriginal studies.

Marlee's situation illustrates that minority voices tend not to be heard and that it is the majority that controls the school's decision-making process. However, Marlee's high motivation and commitment to taking Aboriginal studies led her to seek educational opportunities, overcome problems related to access, and find a solution. Marlee's words showed that her mother strongly encouraged Marlee to take Aboriginal studies and be proud of her Indigenous identity:

I was one of two Aboriginal kids at the school and it was... it was very hard, and I think that is where my identity went because it was hard... Because for me anyway at that age you're only fourteen, you're still working out who you are, and what you want to do, and the fact that I got told so many times at school that I was too black to be Australian and too white to be Aboriginal it's... that's when it all came in, the kids start getting in your ear and they start... it was hard... and I didn't have a lot of um... Aboriginal role models and a lot of support, I just kind of had my mum, and I'm just lucky that she was really strong in teaching us that we needed to be proud of what we were and that we shouldn't listen to what they were saying, you know...but the fact that she was so strong about it and she's like you should do Aboriginal Studies because the only way you're gonna get a stronger identity is if you learn about your culture and she was right, it worked.

Her strong sense of identity led Marlee to seek opportunities to take Aboriginal studies outside school. The experience of Marlee's mother, who traced back her own history and discovered her Indigenous identity, led Marlee to value her own Indigenous identity. Furthermore, the contrast in Marlee's life between that in the Indigenous community and in Sydney gave her a strong commitment to the Indigenous community. Marlee developed a commitment to help Indigenous people by constructing educational policies and programmes that are relevant and helpful to Indigenous people. Furthermore, Marlee can be a good role model to young girls in the Indigenous community.



## 5. Discussion

### *5.1 Education, Empowerment, and Community Development*

These young women were keen to speak about their experiences on education and perceptions of identity and motivation regarding community development. As Spivak (1985; 1988) states, silenced women need space to raise their voices, and the present study created such a space, in which young Indigenous women could express their opinions on Indigenous issues.

Unlike Marlee, in the case of Matee, the AEA played a vital role in keeping Matee in secondary education. The AEA created a comfortable space for Matee to discuss her personal and schooling issues. If there is an AEA working closely with Indigenous students at school, access to learning about Aboriginal culture and history for Indigenous students will be more easily available. In Australia, financial budgets and human resources for education are basically allocated by the federal government at the policy level, but they are not equally distributed to all schools across the nation. Hence, at the school level, the number of Indigenous students can influence the decision-making process of the majority: collectively, the voices of Indigenous students are heard. The majority has to recognize that it sometimes underestimates minority people's capacity and skills. Educators need to have the capacity to serve as social leaders. Matee, Alinga, and Marlee appeared to have developed confidence and empowerment through educational opportunities. Each realized that educational opportunities would help them become more self-reliant, and each found her own way to overcome challenges. Furthermore, Matee and Alinga made an effective decision towards bringing about their desired outcome, which was to contribute to their community based on their acquired knowledge (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). As Mohanty (2003) suggests, women's lives are influenced by many different factors, including education, race, and sociocultural and economic structures. The network and support system through their Indigenous communities contributed to Matee and Alinga seeking future involvement in their community development. In the process of gaining new knowledge and skills through the educational path, Matee and Alinga achieved a collaborative relationship with people in their community.

In one analysis, Hughes and Hughes estimated that about 60 per cent of Australia's Indigenous population work in mainstream jobs in cities, towns, and rural areas; they have mainstream living standards and are thus able to participate fully in Australian society (Hughes & Hughes 2010, p. vii). Like our interviewees, Indigenous university students could perhaps be categorized among that 60 per cent: studying at university is often a sign of participating in mainstream society. However, Matee, Alinga, and Marlee faced various social barriers in continuing on to higher education. Hence, to support their learning, assistance schemes like ABSTUDY and the provision of specialized education opportunities, such as Tranby Aboriginal College in Sydney, are still necessary. The parents of Matee, Alinga, and Marlee were committed to their children's education (as is the case with many middle-class parents in Australia). Thus, the parents encouraged their children to continue attending school until the end of Year 12, which gave them the chance to continue on to higher education. And through education, they would not be socioeconomically disadvantaged. Matee, Alinga, and Marlee reported that there were still disadvantages among Indigenous communities. Accordingly, educational assistance designed specifically for Indigenous people is necessary towards empowering them to become self-reliant and work for their communities' improvement.

Overall, the three interviewees developed a positive sense of their Indigenous identity. For Indigenous people, their language is critical to maintaining, strengthening, and asserting their cultural identity (AusAnthrop, 2010). The three young women had attempted to learn an Indigenous language through home or educational institutions. It is evident that language acquisition is strongly linked with cultural identity. Educational approaches, such as Aboriginal studies, have embraced the value of indigeneity or Aboriginality (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education 1985, p. 27). The incorporation of Indigenous cultural knowledge and values into the school curriculum could help Indigenous students develop confidence and self-respect. In addition, it is the government's duty to maintain Aboriginal studies in the formal educational curriculum for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. However, the present study found that access to Aboriginal studies was not consistent. Hence, the government needs

to ensure the right of access to such studies. It should be recognized that there is a discrepancy between government policy and practice. The interviewed women appeared to believe in collective action and solidarity, and they wanted to bring about a positive change in their community (Mohanty, 2003).

Kabeer (1999) recognized the significance of access to resources but emphasized that the process of empowerment is completed with action. Moreover, Kabeer's point is relevant to the present study: the three women appeared to have the capacity to act within their communities as agents of change for community development. Educational opportunities empowered those women to analyse social issues and raise their motivation to help other Indigenous people improve their standard of living. That point echoes what Burgess (2016) and Bainbridge (2011) reported: Aboriginal values involve caring about other people, and it is related to the notion of development of one's empowerment in the Indigenous community in Australia.

Community identity involves solidarity around values' that bond members (Knight, 2010, p. 53). This point was evident in our three interviewed women's connection with the Indigenous community and their own Indigenous identity. Australian Indigenous cultures place great emphasis on kinship and relationships within families and other members of Indigenous communities (Christie, 1985; Long et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2000). The narratives of our interviewed women highlight that these relationships are strongly recognized in Australian Indigenous cultures (Christie, 1985; Long et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2000). Those cultures place low value on individual ownership of possessions (Thompson et al., 2000; Dockery, 2010). Cooperation with the social group is important for Indigenous people. Matee and Alinga received support from Indigenous relatives and AEAs to continue their learning and career design. Although Marlee had less official support for her learning, her high motivation for Aboriginal studies reflects the Indigenous right for self-determination. Network and kinship among Indigenous people had a positive impact on each of our interviewed women's decisions to continue education. Because of the support they received from Indigenous peers, the three women were passionate about working for their community. To be

sensitive to Indigenous issues observed in Australia, continuous dialogue and learning opportunities about Indigenous cultures are necessary. Haraway (1991) and Mohanty (2003) state that solidarity and shared values are helpful for marginalized women to bring about social changes. By becoming role models in their communities, the three interviewed women had the capacity to improve their communities.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study created a space for Australian Indigenous women to express their thoughts on identity and to relate their experience with education. The study highlights Indigenous women's self-affirmation as Indigenous people and their determination to provide assistance to their communities. Our findings indicate that education practitioners, service providers, and academics should adopt a more proactive position in this regard. The individual experiences of the interviewed women do not suggest a simple solution for how to improve Australia's education system and confront Aboriginal-related issues. But together, the people in Australia need to make a change for a more inclusive society.

Matee and Alinga made efforts to continue higher education, using the community network and government assistance, but Marlee sought a learning opportunity by herself. The lack of a community network and Aboriginal support made Marlee feel uncomfortable in continuing her studies in a non-Indigenous school. The principles underpinning the education programmes and support mechanism should concern family and community ties. There should be continuous, consistent training for Indigenous and non-Indigenous education supporters in Australia. Developing an educational curriculum that recognizes the diversity of Indigenous people and cultures in modern Australian society could help break stereotypes about such people. Understanding cultural differences needs to be at the heart of career guidance programmes.

The significance of communality for the lives of Indigenous people should be recognized and integrated into educational programmes. Drawing on cultural networks and identity as well as maintaining traditional kinship and connections, more AEAs should be

allocated at schools. AEAs can be understanding mentors for girls and young women in overcoming family and social issues towards continuing education. Community is still the core principle in Indigenous culture; thus, peer support can play a vital role in reducing school dropout rates and encouraging peers to continue on to higher education. Further, the present study suggests that educational opportunities for our interviewees were effective in building individual confidence and empowerment. Educated Indigenous women can play significant roles in community development through cooperation and solidarity. Moreover, the narratives of the interviewed women appeared to reflect collective empowerment rather than individual goal-oriented empowerment.

As White (2007) explained, the importance of role models in the community means that the three interviewees could be significant role models in educational attainment and career development for young women in their Indigenous communities. The Australian government and non-Indigenous people need to understand the importance of valued kinship bonds and the communality of Indigenous people. They could be agents of positive social change.

## References

- AIHW [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare]. (2011). *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People an Overview 2011*. Canberra: AIHW.
- Allen, A. (1998). Rethinking Power. *Hypatia*, 13(1), 21-40.
- Allen, A. (2008). Power and the Politics of Difference: Oppression, Empowerment and Transnational Justice. *Hypatia*, 23(3), 156-172.
- Alsop, R., and N Heinsohn. (2005). Measuring Empowerment in Practice: Structuring Analysis and Framing Indicators. *Policy Research Working Paper Series (WPS) 3510*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Aseron, J., S Wilde, A Miller, and S Kelly. (2013). Indigenous Student Participation in Higher Education: Emergent Themes and Linkages. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 6(4), 417-424.

- Atkinson, P. L. (1998). *The Life Story Interview*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- AusAnthrop (Organisation for anthropological research, resources and documentation on the Aborigines of Australia). (2010). *AusAnthrop Australian Aboriginal Tribal Database*. [http://www.ausanthrop.net/resources/ausanthrop\\_db/](http://www.ausanthrop.net/resources/ausanthrop_db/) (03/4/2010)
- Bainbridge, R. (2011). Becoming Empowered: A Grounded Theory Study of Aboriginal Women's Agency. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 19(1), 26-29.
- Bell, D. (2002). *Daughters of the Dreaming*. Victoria: Spinifex Press Pty Ltd.
- Bhopal, K. (2009). Identity, Empathy and "Otherness": Asian Women, Education and Dowries in the UK. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 12(1), 27-39.
- Biddle, N. (2010). *A Human Capital Approach to the Educational Marginalisation of Indigenous Australians*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, CAEPR Working Paper No. 67/2010. Canberra.
- Bierkerman, S. & Townsend Cross, M. (2008). Indigenous Pedagogy as a Force for Change. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37(Supplement), 146-154.
- Burgess, C. (2016). Having to say everyday ... I'm not black enough ... I'm not white enough. Discourses of Aboriginality in the Australian education context. *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 1-15.
- Centrelink. (2017). *Indigenous Australians*. Department of Human Services. <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/themes/Indigenous-australians?from=theme-bar>. (03/3/2017)
- Christie, M. (1985). *Aboriginal Perspectives on Experience and Learning: The Role of Language in Aboriginal Education*. Victoria: Deakin University Press.
- Costello, S. (2003). Families: Reconstructing Social Work Practices. In *Critical Social Work: An Introduction to Theories and Practices*, edited by Allan, Bob Pease and Linda Briskman, 139-154. NSW: Allen and Unwin.
- Dockery, A. M. (2010). Culture and Wellbeing: The Case of Indigenous Australians. *Social Indicators Research*, 99(2), 315-332.
- Doyle, L. and R Hill. (2012). *An Overview of Approaches for Philanthropic Investment in Aboriginal Women and Girls*. *The Best of Every Woman*. Sydney: AMP foundation.

- Young Indigenous Australian Women's Stories about Achieving Higher Education and Empowerment
- Dudgeon, P., H Milroy, and R Walker. (2014). *Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice*. Barton: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for Critical Consciousness*. London: Sheed and Ward.
- Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education. (1985). *Aboriginal Education*, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Hughes, H. and M Hughes. (2010). *Indigenous Employment, Unemployment and Labour Force Participation: Facts for Evidence Based Policies*. St Leonards NSW: The Centre for Independent Studies Limited.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435-464.
- Kabeer, N. (2000). Social Exclusion, Poverty and Discrimination: Towards an Analytical Framework. *IDS Bulletin*, 31(4), 83-97.
- Knight, N. (2010). Wrinkling complexity: Concepts of Identity and Affiliation in Humour, In *New Discourse on language: Functional Perspectives on Multimodality, Identity, and Affiliation*, edited by M. Bednarek and J. R. Martin, 35-58. London: Continuum.
- Long, S., P Memmott, and T Seelig. (2007). *An Audit and Review of Australian Indigenous Housing Research, Final report No. 102, for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute*. Queensland Research Centre, July.
- Lugones, M. (2010). Toward a Decolonial Feminism. *Hypetia*, 25(4), 742-759.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Parbury, N. (1999). Aboriginal Education: a history. *Teaching Aboriginal Studies*, edited by Rhonda Craven, 63-86. St Leonards: Allen and Unwin.
- Phillips, R. (2015). How 'Empowerment' May Miss its Mark: Gender Equality Policies and How They are Understood in Women's NGOs. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 26(4), 1122-1142.

- Same Kids Same Goals. (2007). What is an Indigenous Education Worker?  
<http://www.samekidssamegoals.org/what/> (14/4/2018)
- Sen, A. (1985). Well-being, Agency and Freedom: the Dewey Lectures 1984. *Journal of Philosophy*, 82, 169–221.
- Spivak, G. C. (1985). Can the Subaltern Speak?: Speculations on Widow Sacrifice. *Wedge*, 7/8 (Winter/Spring), 120–130.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* edited by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Spry, N. and T, Marchant. (2014). How a Personal Development Programme Enhances Social Connection and Mobilises Women in the Community. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 54(2), 32–53.
- Stewart, D. W. and P. N Shamdasani. (1990). *Focus Groups: Theory and Practices*. UK: Sage.
- Stromquist, N. P. (2014). Freire, Literacy and Emancipatory Gender Learning. *International Review of Education*, 60(4), 545–558.
- Takayanagi, T. (2016). Rethinking Women’s Learning and Empowerment in Kenya: Maasai Village Women Take Initiative. *International Review of Education. Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 62(6), 671–688.
- The University of Sydney. 2018. Courses\_Flexible study. Sydney. <https://sydney.edu.au/study/admissions/pathways-to-study/flexible-study.html> (24/4/2018)
- Thompson, S. J., S. M Gifford, and L Thorpe. (2000). The Social and Cultural Context of Risk and Prevention: Food and Physical Activity in an Urban Aboriginal Community. *Health Education and Behaviour*, 27(6), 725–743.
- Tsey, K., A Wilson, M Haswell-Elkins, M Whiteside, J McCalman, Y Cadet-James, and M Wenitong. (2007). Empowerment-based Research Methods: A 10-year Approach to Enhancing Indigenous Social and Emotional Wellbeing. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 15(1), 34–38.
- Varkey, P., S Qureshi, and T Lesnik. (2010). Empowerment of Women and Its Association



with the Health of the Community. *Journal of Women's Health*, 19(1), 71-76.

White, N. (2007). *Indigenous Women's Career Development: Voices that Challenge Educational Leadership*. Unpublished Professional Doctorate Thesis. Melbourne: Faculty of Education: Australian Catholic University.

Whiteside, M., K Tsey, and W Earles. (2011). Locating Empowerment in the Context of Indigenous Australia. *Australian Social Work*, 64(1), 113-129.

Young, I. M. (1997). Unruly Categories: A Critique of Nancy Fraser's Dual Systems Theory. *New Left Review*, 222, 147-160.