Moorn (Black)? Djardak (White)? How come I don’t fit in Mum? Exploring the racial identity of Australian Aboriginal children and youth

ABSTRACT

This study explored the racial identity of Indigenous children and youth who attended urban, state and private primary and secondary schools in the Noongar region of urban Perth in Western Australia. Thirty five Australian Indigenous children aged 8–12 were interviewed and 120 youth aged 13–17 participated in focus groups. Transcripts were analysed and common themes were identified by extracting relevant responses and their meanings. The components of racial identity for children aged 7–12 and youth were very similar such that culture, family, language and appearance featured. The most reported element of racial identity for young children was culture which comprised of eight sub-elements. Young people however, reported that a strong sense of self was the most important contributor to their racial identity and it comprised of ten sub-elements. Indigenous youth perceived that their racial identity is exposed to others’ attitudes, values and behaviours because according to them ‘identity is about what you look like and how others see you’.

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Introduction

Racial identity is one of many components that comprise a sense of self (Umaña-Taylor et al 2002; Umaña-Taylor and Fine 2004) and it is ‘… this single component [that] is consistently positively related to individual’s self-esteem’ (Umaña-Taylor and Fine 2004:139).

In Australia, there is little empirical research of the racial identity of Indigenous children and youth and the majority of the current literature focuses on the adult population. Where the literature on children exists, it narrowly focuses on children, youth identity and related concepts within the academic context (Bodkin-Andrews and Craven 2006b; Britton 2000; Craven and Marsh 2004, 2005; Dudgeon et al 1990; Foley 2000; Kickett-Tucker 2005a; Onsman 2000; Pedersen and Dudgeon 2003; Purdie et al 2000; Purdie 2002; Purdie and McCrindle 2004). The majority of the current Australian literature on adults explores the Aboriginal sense of self, of which racial identity is a component. In fact, racial identity has been an area of interest within a number of contexts including sport (Coram 1999; Kickett-Tucker 1997,
architecture (Mallie 2006), law (Lofgren 1995), politics (Taylor 2003), art (Stuurman 2004), religion (Mol 1982) and of course mental (Bodkin-Andrews and Craven 2006a; Paradies 2006a) and physical health (Briscoe 2003; Larson et al 2007). There are a number of concerns relating to the Australian literature. In the first instance, numerous terms are used to label racial identity and these include cultural identity, group identity, collective identity, ethnic identity and self-concept; yet little attention has been paid to defining or appraising racial identity. Second, since the current literature about the identity of Indigenous children and youth is derived mostly from the academic context, we know how children think and feel about their racial identity in a specific context and setting; but do not have knowledge about children’s racial identity in broader contexts, nor do we have a good understanding of how racial identity develops over time, including the protective factors of racial identity.

Research completed in other countries however, provides some knowledge of the racial identity of Indigenous children and youth. For instance, studies conducted predominantly with North American populations, particularly native Canadian youth (Chandler and Lolande 1998; Chandler et al 2003; Lalonde 2006; Riecken et al 2006), native American teens (Bryant and LaFromboise 2005; Markstrom and Iborra 2003; Whitesell et al 2006), as well as emerging research from northern Scandinavian regions with Sami adolescents (Kvernmo and Heyerdahl 1996, 2003, 2004; Kvernmo 1998; Silviken and Kvernmo 2007) have explored the connection between racial identity and the health and well-being of Indigenous young people. Research by Chandler and Lolande (1998) and Chandler et al (2003), Lalonde (2006) and Silviken and Kvernmo (2007) have demonstrated that identity continuity is a protective factor against youth suicide of native Canadian and Sami youth.

In Australia, the federal government’s National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has broadened its definition of health for Indigenous Australians to encompass identity, culture and community as critical elements (Council 2004). In fact, these factors are considered critical precursors to improved health for Indigenous Australians. A social issue that cuts across identity, culture and community is racism (Mellor 2003). According to Harris et al (2006), racism has far reaching consequences for the health of those who experience its many forms. In fact, it affects mental health because it generates stresses for the individual and then affects their mental well-being, often leading to ‘full blown personal self-hatred’ (Rollock and Gordon 2000:6). Australian studies have shown that Indigenous people suffer from widespread prejudice at all levels of daily life (Dunn et al 2004; Mellor 2003; Paradies 2006a; 2006b; Pedersen and Walker 1997; Van Den Berg 2002) and only recently has racism been highlighted as a major contributor to the ill health of Indigenous Australians (Cass et al 2004; Gallaher et al 2007; Hall et al 2007; Larson et al 2007; Paradies 2006a; 2006b; Zubrick et al 2005). Paradies (2006a; 2006b) has shown that racism causes stress and depression which contributes to the poor mental health of Indigenous Australians.

In education however, Australian studies have shown that positive racial identity combined with positive student identity of Indigenous students increases the chances of successful school outcomes such as attendance, retention and academic grades (Purdie et al 2000) for Indigenous children and youth. Furthermore, Kickett-Tucker (1997, 1999a; 1999b, 2008) found that the school sport setting afforded Indigenous students opportunities to affirm their racial identity in positive ways. For instance, Indigenous students expressed positive collective Aboriginal identity when playing together in a team sport. In this way, school sport afforded them the opportunity to socialise with fellow Indigenous peers, compete together in a team and speak an Aboriginal language amongst each other. Other researchers however, have found that indigenous students, particularly youth, have a difficult time in adjusting to the school setting and often experience confusion and conflict in regard to their racial identity. As a consequence they experience low or unfavourable self-esteem about being Aboriginal (Dudgeon and Oxenham 1989; Partington and McCudden 1992).
Despite the emerging literature, we still know very little about the development of Indigenous Australian children and young people’s racial identity and how this may impact on their health and well-being (e.g., Li et al. 2008; Campbell et al. 2007; Tanner et al. 2005; Morrissey 2003; Anderson 2001). It is important to examine how racial identity develops, including the contexts and factors that protect or hinder the health and well-being of children and youth, because children as young as six months old have been shown to recognize physical differences in others even before they develop language (Katz and Barrett 1997). Others have found that preschool children are distinctly aware of racial differences and can effectively communicate these to each other (Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996). A developmental model proposed by Quintana and Vera (1999) suggests that children as young as three to six years of age think about their racial differences in terms of physical appearance (skin colour). Children from six to 12 years of age interpret racial identity based on the customs and practices (such as language, dress, food and ceremonies) common to their racial group. From ages 10–14 years, children begin to make the link between their racial identity and social class. It is also at this age range when racial socialisation practices have a distinct influence upon the identity of children. Older children and teens’ understandings of racial identity are affected by external others such as the media, police, teachers as well as their own cultural group experiences. It is in early adolescence, however, that adult identities begin to develop (Erikson 1994) and therefore this is the critical time when older children, and particularly youth, begin to interpret their social worlds. They do this in order to bring meaning to their sense of belonging and to maintain their well-being. This is why racial identity must be studied in the early years of life because a healthy start to life is a determinant of adult well-being (Council 2004). More importantly, racial identity is a central element of an individual’s sense of self and it is the most critical component of self-esteem (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2002; Umaña-Taylor and Fine 2004).

Previous research has not explored the racial identity of urban Indigenous Australian children and youth and it is important to do so because at a very young age, urban Indigenous Australian children are aware of the differences that exist between them and non-Indigenous people (Partington and McCudden 1992). Awareness of Indigenous children’s racial identity begins and figures prominently when they enter predominantly Anglo schools and as they grow older, they become more aware of their racial identity (Coolwell 1993). Other studies have shown that Indigenous Australian children exhibit social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (Kickett-Tucker 2005a; Kickett-Tucker and Partington 2000; Zubrick et al. 2005) and that these issues may be linked to negative or unfavourable racial identity and related low self-esteem. Consequently, Zubrick et al. (2005) suggest that Indigenous children and youth living in urban regions are considered to be more at risk for developing problems with their social and emotional well-being than those living in remote and rural towns.

This study will fill a void in the literature by exploring the elements that comprise the racial identity of urban, Aboriginal children 8–12 years old and youth aged 13–17 years. This study will also discuss how racial identity plays an important role in the mental health and well-being of Indigenous Australian children and youth. For the purposes of this study, racial identity is a social construct that is shaped and determined by the interactions individuals share with others and with social structures. Racial identity refers to an individuals’ acknowledgment of sameness with a group of people who share commonalities (Chavez and Guido-DiBrito 1999; Johnson 2002). Furthermore, the term Indigenous refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are Indigenous to Australia (Affairs 2008). In this study, children and youth commonly referred to themselves as Aboriginal and hence the term ‘Aboriginal’ will be used in the remainder of this paper.
Method

Design
The study method is qualitative and the researcher employed ethnographic methodology in a naturalistic setting using an interpretive paradigm. Data was collected from in-depth personal interviews and focus group workshops. In-depth personal interviews were conducted with upper and lower primary school children in the Perth metropolitan region of Western Australia. This region is geographically part of Noongar country. Six focus group sessions were employed with Aboriginal adolescents in a workshop environment conducted during Reconciliation Week in 2007. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all participants and will be used throughout the remainder of this paper.

Participants
To facilitate participant selection, the Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEO) at each school prepared a list of potential participants. Children who were identified on the school records as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander were selected for personal interviews. Thirty-four Aboriginal school children aged 8–12 years were recruited, of whom 18 were female and 17 male. Participants attended one of five co-educational state primary schools in metropolitan Perth and were enrolled in year’s three to seven.

For the focus group sessions, both state and private high schools in metropolitan Perth were invited to attend a Reconciliation Week workshop managed by the Western Australian Department of Indigenous Affairs. Approximately 10 high schools were represented at the sessions, with 120 students participating throughout the day-long event. Workshop attendees were aged from 13–17 years and a gender balance was attained.

Research instruments
In-depth personal interviews were conducted to collect information on the experiences and perceptions of child participants. All interviews were recorded using hand-held digital recorders and conducted by trained Aboriginal researchers. With consent, the audiotapes were transcribed to present a verbatim account of the interviewees’ experiences, feelings, opinions and perceptions. The interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed shared space (between researcher and child participant) within the grounds of the participant’s school. An interview guide was used and topics were employed in a conversational manner. For Indigenous children, a general interview guide was used and it contained the following sample questions:

- What does the word Aboriginal\(^2\) mean?
- Tell me what its like for you to be an Aboriginal kid
- Is it good to be Aboriginal?
- What’s good about being Aboriginal?
- What’s not good about being Aboriginal?
- Are Aboriginal kids different to wedjula\(^3\) (non-Aboriginal) kids?
- If yes, in what ways are Aboriginal kids different?
- Do people/kids say anything to you about being Aboriginal?

The interview guide was employed in a conversational style and is the most appropriate format for eliciting information from children since it: (a) allows them to feel as though what they are saying is important; (b) is a familiar form of communication that is common to daily interaction; and (c) allows them to respond in their own words and determine the priority of issues about their racial identity (Kickett-Tucker 1999b, 2005b, 2007). More importantly, Aboriginal children and youth in general prefer: (a) a personalised approach; (b) to be treated equally in status; (c) indirect questioning; and (d) courtesy (Kickett-Tucker 2007). In this study, 34 personal interviews were conducted lasting on average one and half hours.

Focus groups were conducted at a central location organised by the event coordinators of Reconciliation Week 2007. Indigenous high school students were organised into one of four sessions. Each session comprised of four groups with eight participants in each group. Each session lasted approximately one hour with four sessions being conducted during the course of the day. Groups were arranged on round tables and each nominated a scriber who recorded...
Their groups’ experiences, perceptions and opinions on a poster. Themes conversed with youth were:

- What is identity?
- What are some of the things that make up identity?
- How do you get identity?
- How do you know if you have your identity?
- How do others know if you have your identity?

At the end of group workshops a nominated speaker reported to the rest of the participants. At the completion of Reconciliation Week youth workshops, 15 posters were collected and collated for further analysis.

Data analysis

Personal interview transcriptions and group workshop posters were read twice to understand the participants’ complete story. On the second reading, annotations were made in the margins to highlight participants’ significant responses that related to the study questions. Data reduction was then undertaken in a third reading, wherein common themes were extracted, which included: (a) memorable events or phrases; (b) a summation of events and/or people; (c) examples of any emerging themes; (d) any negative responses or ones that contradict the researcher’s ideas; and (e) a variation of any emerging themes (Riley 1990). Further analysis revealed meanings which were then linked to the responses as per Colaizzi’s (1978) method of thematic analysis. Themes were then re-read and checked against transcripts and posters. A description of each grouped theme was developed and a summation of the phenomena prepared.

Results

As is consistent with qualitative methodology, results are generally descriptive in nature. However, by using Colaizzi’s (1978) analysis methods, descriptions were analysed into common themes. In the next section, the elements that comprise racial identity for children and youth as well as their experiences of being Indigenous will be described.

Racial identity

The elements that comprise the racial identity for children and youth were very similar in that culture, family, language and appearance were consistently important for both age groups. For young children, culture was the most commonly reported element of their racial identity and is presented in Figure 1. In comparison, young people reported that having a strong, secure sense of self was the most important characteristic of their racial identity and is presented in Figure 2.

In both Figures 1 and 2, racial identity is considered the hub which is influenced by values, morals, attitudes and beliefs. The collection of smaller circles contains elements that comprise the Indigenous identity for Indigenous Australian children and youth. The footprints between these circles represent the progressive journey that children and youth take between each of the elements. This is represented as such because over time, racial identity is considered a dynamic process whereby it is influenced by different contexts, structures and individuals within these contexts (Purdie 2002).

Sense of self: ‘Respect, love and respect… yourself’

Elements that comprised sense of self were reported highly by both young children (aged 8–12) and youth. For instance, children reported eight items in this category including: (a) respect; (b) difference; (c) Indigenous; (d) Australian; (e) happiness; (f) pride; (g) feeling special and; (h) Aboriginal flag. For young children, these items were reported the second most important category out of seven:

Being respectful of culture and gaining respect from others were important to the identity of young children:

I like being Aboriginal because I meet like all different people and they all respect me

(Child 9).

... And respect your culture

(Child 29).

For some young children, identity meant that they were different to others and this made them feel special:
It’s good to be Aboriginal] because you are different to everyone else and you’re not the same

I’m different to everyone else. It makes me feel special

Identity for older children aged 11–12 years, meant that they were recognised as the first people of Australia:

Aboriginal means] to be Indigenous to Australia

I’m original to Australia

Aboriginal]… means an Indigenous person. It’s really special

For the younger children (8–10 years) however, identity was described as being the same as other Australians and feeling ‘normal’:

Being Aboriginal] … makes me a little bit feeling happy … because I’m Australian and I just feel like being a normal person

People don’t say anything to me about being Aboriginal] because they don’t know I am one … I only told one, two friends. They said ‘its fine’. It makes me feel good … I don’t care
Exploring the racial identity of Australian Aboriginal children and youth

Many younger children felt positively toward their Indigenous identity and described feeling happy, special and proud of their identity:

[My family say] ... it’s good to be Aboriginal ... [It makes me feel] happy

(Child 26).

[Being Aboriginal] means a lot to me ... very special. Like very special because you’re getting loved

(Child 20).

The Aboriginal flag was important to others’ identity because it signified group cohesion:

Aboriginal flag ... Aboriginal people ... I’m not alone ... I’m not like Chinese people or anyone else. I’m just Aboriginal

(Child 35).

For youth, they recognised having a sense of self as the most important contributor to their racial identity:

Figure 2: Elements of Indigenous identity for Indigenous Australian youth aged 12–17 years

To be proud of where you come from. [It’s] really good [to be Aboriginal]. I just like being Aboriginal

(Child 34).
To have an identity gives a person a good sense of self (who they are)
(Focus Group 11 [FG11]).

'It [identity] feels empowering. It feels good’
(FG11).

Young people’s racial identity was influenced by a sense of self which comprised ten items including: (a) pride about self; (b) shame – ‘having no shame’ to be yourself’ (FG10); (c) appraisals from others – ‘how people see you’ (FG4, FG5), ‘how you live’ (FG5), ‘how others perceive you’ (FG11); (d) security and safety – ‘you feel secure’ (FG4), ‘you feel safe and part of the community’ (FG15); (e) confidence and strength – ‘show others strength’ (FG15), '[be] self-confident’ (FG11); (f) comfort – ‘being comfortable with it [racial identity]’ (FG6); (g) self-esteem – ‘show others self-esteem [about identity]’ (FG15); (h) cooperation – ‘teamwork’ (FG12); (i) self-expression (FG10); and (j) integrity – ‘you are who you say you are’ (FG10).

Family: ‘You have lots of family that care about us. We have big families’
Young children reported family as the fifth most important contributor to their racial identity. Youth however described family as the second most important contributor to their racial identity because ‘[you find] your background from belonging [to family] and this is how you find your identity’ (FG15).

Youth accounted for five items relating to family which encompassed ‘knowing about your whole family’ (FG12) including: (a) knowledge of the family tree and history; (b) being influenced by family – ‘[family] is what you were born with’ (FG13); (c) family surname; and (d) participation in family activities. Young children however, pointed out that family is also important to their racial identity because they provided security and care. Importantly, young children indicated there were many members who cared for them. This care was considered a very positive element of their identities:

‘It’s alright to be an Aboriginal kid because you have a lot of family members that are from different places’
(Child 33).

‘[We have] lots of family … care about us’
(Child 3).

Families are important for a child’s identity because many members of a child’s family help teach Aboriginal culture:

... My sister well she goes to Bayley and that’s where my Dad went ... they’ve got these little houses they called mia mias and like she [my sister] taught me about that and my Aunty and my Dad taught me about that and everything. And my sister’s only seven and like she knows all the dances and stuff
(Child 20).

Language: ‘We have different languages to them [non-Indigenous children]’
Language was reported by children as the fourth most valued component of racial identity and for youth it was ranked third:

It’s okay [to be an Aboriginal kid] because we get to learn words ... I’ve learnt dardy, coonyie, yonga and cuttacutta
(Child 10).

It’s good to be Aboriginal [because] you know different languages
(Child 26).

[It’s good to be Aboriginal because] like you can go into the bush and learn Aboriginal language ... with my Pop and my other Pop
(Child 7).

Young children said conversing ‘in language’ was important to them because it distinguished them from others:

... Well most kids they speak English ... but some of them can speak different languages like Italian and all that and we speak our language
(Child 33).

... They [wedjula] talk English and we talk Noongar
(Child 10).
Yet language was also a mechanism that children used to detect differences between themselves and other Aboriginal children. For example, another child said that he was different from ‘other’ Aboriginal kids ‘... cos we don’t speak none of their language. Its [language] not the same’ (Child 14).

Youth said speaking ‘Aboriginal English’ was part of their identity, while other youth connected ‘cultural language’ to their identity. Accent and ‘voice’ are other characteristics of language highlighted by youth which contribute to their identity. Only one young child said that accent also differentiated between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children because:

… They don’t speak the same as wedjulas and they’ve got like a different accent. They speak a little bit different

(Child 20).

Culture: ‘Go into the bush and learn
Aboriginal language … hunting kangaroos … goanna, emu’

For young children, culture was the most valued item of their Indigenous identity. However, for youth, culture was the fourth most reported item to contribute to their racial identity. Culture, for young children consisted of traditional foods, music, stories, traditional way of life, art, dance, fire, NAIDOC Celebrations and respect for culture. Of particular importance to young children were traditional ways of life as these appeared more regularly than other items. Traditional ways of life included going bush, hunting, preparing and consuming traditional foods such as kangaroo meat, goanna, emu and damper:

[My aunty] teaches me … to cook the kangaroo meat. She … digs a hole in the back yard and gets the hot coals and puts the damper mix and that into the pot and cooks it with the hot coals

(Child 19).

Learning traditional music, especially with the didjeridoo, was important to young males:

I like the music. I listen to the didjeridoo and I play the didjeridoo

(Child 14).

The art of storytelling and stories, particularly of the Rainbow Serpent, were familiar to young children:

All I know is, well I was told that like the land was all dry and everything until the Rainbow Serpent came along and made the trees grow tall and the rivers get big fish and everything

(Child 14).

Aboriginal week celebrations also featured well in the identity of children, particularly those children who attended schools where NAIDOC celebrations were part of the events calendar:

You get to do lots of cool stuff. Like we got NAIDOC week and some celebrations like that for the Aboriginal Day and ... Islander people

(Child 4).

When asked what was good about being Aboriginal, a young child replied:

You get to do dot painting and play didjeridoos, eat kangaroo and cook it

(Child 21).

In comparison, the youth reported that knowledge and experience of traditions stories and customs as well as knowledge of Aboriginal heritage, and country were components of identity. The most reported cultural item was knowing and experiencing Aboriginal traditions.

Appearance: ‘They’re white and we’re black … brown’

Children and youth deemed physical appearance important in recognising racial differences between themselves and non-Indigenous people. It was reported the third most contributor to children’s racial identity and the fifth most reported item for youth:

We’re both people and that. All the Aboriginals have that are different is skins darker. Well some are and we talk different language to Australians

(Child 19).
I like the skin colour (Child 30).

Skin colour was the predominant item in this category for both youth and children as it overtly reflected their racial identity. When asked what the term Aboriginal means, children responded with the following:

[Aboriginal means] black people (Child 11).

It means that you got different colour than the other people… [but its good being Aboriginal] because you’ve got darker skin (Child 32).

My skin colour is brown …[wedjula kids would ask Aboriginal kids] why are they brown? (Child 5).

… They’re [wedjula] white and I’m black (Child 10).

In some cases however, children recognised that not all Aboriginal children were black or brown:

Researcher: Do you think you are the same as other Aboriginal kids?

Child 15: No.

Researcher: No? So what ways do you reckon you’re different?

Child 15: Some Aboriginal kids could be white and some could be brown.

This is an important finding because although most young children recognised colour as a racial difference, the majority of them (19 out of 34) also reported that having dark skin didn’t matter to them:

It doesn’t really matter if you’re light or dark.
It just that you are an Aboriginal in different ways (Child 33).

However, for the youngest interviewee, who was eight years of age, the skin colour of Aboriginal children was not black or dark but white:

I’m the same as other Aboriginal kids because I’ve got white skin instead of dark (Child 13).

The amount of ‘Aboriginal blood’ in a person determined their racial identity according to young children:

Researcher: What does Aboriginal mean?

Child 8: They are fully.

Researcher: What does that mean?

Child 8: They have heaps of Aboriginal blood.

Researcher: How do you know if someone’s got heaps of Aboriginal blood?

Child 8: Language that they speak.

In the next quote, the young child is completely confused about the ‘blood issue’ and asks for confirmation from the researcher:

Like wedjulas [have] like different bloods and Noongars have got like … different blood to like Maoris and that. Is that true? (Child 6).

The notion of ‘blood content’ was not shared by youth, they however, reported external physical characteristics such as eyes, nose, lips and ‘skinny’ legs (FG3) as determinants of racial identity. Other youth reported ‘the way you look’ (FG6) and ‘what you look like’ (FG11) signifies to others about identity. Young children did not report any other external physical characteristics as reported by youth.

Inheritance

Only youth reported inheritance as a contributor to their identity. Young children did not. It was the sixth most reported category for youth and it comprised six items including: (a) birth right; (b) country; (c) parentage; and (d) genes. This category refers to being born with an inheritance such as birth rights, being born to ‘country’ and inheriting genes from parents. These are items that are bestowed to youth at birth and which impact on their racial identity. The discussion of parentage, particularly the issue of ‘mixed
parentage’ was a very important emergent theme in the study. In some families, only one parent is Indigenous. Unfortunately for the youth concerned, this creates potential barriers for them to be accepted and to fit in with others, particularly Indigenous peer groups. In addition, it may also affect their cultural code or appropriate behaviours as suggested in the following:

When I am with my Noongar family, I act like a Noongar. When I am with my wedjula family, I act like a wedjula. I have to act like two different persons

(FG1).

Friends: ‘We get along well and we do a lot of stuff together’

Young children said playing and socialising with friends (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) was the sixth most valued contributor to their racial identity. For young children, friends were important to share their culture with:

If you had different friends you could tell them about your culture and other stuff. And show them pictures like you have at your house and … about the old people and days and videos you have at home about your culture

(Child 33).

Friends were also important for the personal happiness of younger children, as suggested in the following:

[I’m] very happy ... because I’ve got lots of friends. We play rugby and football. [I have] a bit of both [Aboriginal and wedjula friends]

(Child 2).

Youth reported ‘identity is made up of knowledge of who you are, your background, family and friends’ (FG15) and was the seventh reported category.

In some cases play was limited to Aboriginal friends. This was specific to older children:

Researcher: Do you play with wedjula kids?

Child 3: Nuh.

Researcher: No? Is there a reason why you don’t play with wedjula kids?

Child 3: No. I just don’t play with them.

And similarly,

Oh it’s good [to be Aboriginal] because like I hang and mix around with Noongars ... at home and at school. I play and we like walk around and talk. We go to my aunty’s house and I got my cousins there and I like play with them and walk around and talk with them

(Child 6).

In some cases however, Indigenous children only play with wedjula children at school because of the small numbers of Indigenous school children. This consequently impacts on their opportunities to socialise with other Indigenous children:

[I don’t play with Aboriginal kids] because I don’t have any many friends that are Noongars but I do have a cousin but he plays with his other friends but sometimes I play with him

(Child 10).

Further investigation revealed that the youngest child above was the only Aboriginal in her class. In another case, some Indigenous children reported having little or no Indigenous friends:

Researcher: Do you hang out with Aboriginal kids at school?

Child 35: No.

Researcher: How come?

Child 35: Cause I don’t have no friends. [I’ve got] only two [wedjula friends].

Researcher: Are the other Aboriginal kids friendly to you?

Child C35: Kind of.

A theme emerging in children’s self-descriptions was the concept of having ‘normal friends’:

Researcher: Do you play with Aboriginal kids?

Child 33: Yes sometimes I do and sometimes I just play with my normal friends. [When I play
with Aboriginal kids] … we get along well and we do a lot of stuff together. Like we play different games compared to the other games that I play with my other friends.

Discussion
According to young children and youth, a strong sense of self, connection to family and kin, Aboriginal language, Aboriginal culture, inheritance, appearance and friends are important contributors to their racial identity. Attached to these contributors is a myriad of skills, knowledge, attributes, emotions, judgements and expectations about being Indigenous. A strong racial identity and related self-esteem is like a hub of a wheel because without the hub, the wheel can go nowhere. Like the hub, racial identity is the centre of a child’s and youth’s well-being… it is their spirit and without it they can be steered by outside forces which determine how fast to go and which direction to travel. Continual negative forces such as racism have systematically undermined Indigenous children and young people’s racial identity. If racism is unchecked in the community, it may have a long lasting impact upon their racial identity, which subsequently impacts their mental health and well-being. How children assess the context of a particular racial experience or event determines the selection of an appropriate racial coping strategy. The capacity to assess a situation may advance or limit the strategies available to children. Johnson (2005) makes the point that limited racial coping strategies are indicative of low self-esteem.

In the current study, Indigenous youth felt they had to continually prove and demonstrate their racial identity in order for their identity to be accepted by the wider community. They also felt they had to prove their racial identity to Aboriginal peers at school. Indigenous youth’s racial identity comprised of the perceptions and appraisals from others, particularly other non-Aboriginal youth, but also consisted of feedback from Aboriginal youth as well. Corenblum (1996) proposes that if the majority do not value the minority’s group, then their identity may be threatened and it is at this critical phase in youth development that young people are more vulnerable to discrimination (Wu et al 2003) and suicide (Chandler and Lolande 1998; Chandler et al 2003). Racial identity begins to develop and crystallise by the age of ten and thereby it is vital that it is examined in the early years of pre-adolescents and even earlier (Rotheram and Phinney 1988).

It has been shown that strong racial identity protects Indigenous children and youth from serious mental harm such as suicide (Chandler and Lolande 1998; Chandler et al 2003; Lalonde 2006; Silviken and Kvernmo 2007). A strong, cultural racial identity is vitally important to the sense of self of Indigenous children and youth because it equips them to manage adversity and maximise their own well-being and positively influence their self-esteem (Umaña-Taylor et al 2002; Umaña-Taylor and Fine 2004; see also Senior and Chenhall 2007). Similarly, others have found that a strong racial identity helps protect against life stresses (Jackson and Sellers 1996; Niles 1999).

Perhaps the most distressing theme emerging from this study relates to the elements Indigenous children and youth used to determine not only their racial identity, but the identity of other Indigenous children and youth. What this means is that vulnerable children and youth have accepted the wider community’s negative perceptions of what it means to be an Indigenous Australian such that these ideas have become part of their own ideas of being Indigenous. For example, this study found that young Indigenous children aged 8–10 years and youth 12–17 years with mixed parentage, ‘determined’ racial identity in relation to physical features and appearance, particularly the amount of ‘Aboriginal blood’ and colour or darkness of an individual’s skin. That is, the more Indigenous a person is, the more Indigenous blood he/she has and the more black or dark their skin is. It is interesting to note that prior to the 1967 Referendum, the Australian government’s definition of an Indigenous Australian was based on physical features, such as skin colour and therefore, terms such as ‘mixtures’ and ‘castes’ were used to identify Indigenous people. In the 1980s, the definition was amended to encompass three elements of...
which decent was still included. For instance, a person is an Indigenous Australian if he/she: (i) is of an Indigenous decent; (ii) identifies as being Indigenous and; (iii) is accepted by the Indigenous community in which he/she lives (Affairs 2009).

In this study, the over-emphasis on the physical appearance of an Indigenous person when defining the Indigenous identity can foster racial stereotyping and discrimination and the use of this method for determining Indigenous identity was typical in incidents involving intra-racial racism and when youth were trying to make sense of their mixed-race parentage. Other researchers have found that stress from intra-racial racism is linked to high blood pressure more so than inter-racial racism (Din-Dzietham et al 2004).

It is important to consider the impact of racism upon the racial identity of Indigenous children and youth because studies have found that racism causes stress and low self-esteem which then plague the general emotional state of individuals (Johnson 2005; Rollock and Gordon 2000). Other researchers warn that depression and anxiety are the result (Krieger 2000; Miliora 2000) and high blood pressure is the physical response to the chain of emotional responses to racism (Din-Dzietham et al 2004). Thus, like a wheel, our children and young people’s spirits must be intact, made with a strong central hub and supported with solid spokes: because without it, they may wander aimlessly and be forever reactive to external forces. A strong racial identity gives our children and youth hope for a future, to be proud of who they are and where they belong, to be connected to something bigger than themselves, to be connected to a circle of strength, love and support. A strong racial identity is important for cultural security and safety and provides a base for positive self-esteem as well as practical skills of coping with racial prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination. Phinney and Alipuria (1990) support this recommendation such that a strong racial identity may act as a buffer against the impact of racism.

It is imperative that future research explores the development of racial identity for Indigenous children and youth, and examines the factors such as racism that influence it, because racial identity is linked to Indigenous mental health (Chandler and Lolande 1998; Chandler et al 2003) and well-being (Council 2004).

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Endnotes
1 Noongar can be spelled in a number of ways and this paper has adopted the above spelling. Noongar is a collective term that denotes Aboriginal people of the south-west of Western Australia (Palmer and Collard 1993).
2 The term Indigenous refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Affairs 2008). However, we have used the term Aboriginal as it is more commonly spoken among children and youth who participated in this study.
3 Wedjula is a common Noongar term meaning non-Aboriginal people (Kickett-Tucker 1999b).
4 Shame is a common Noongar term meaning to not feel bad or sad in public about something or someone or yourself (Kickett-Tucker 1999b).
5 Bayley is a fictional name and is used to protect the identity of respondents.
6 Naidoc stands for National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration and refers to the week long national activities that celebrate the life, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Naidoc 2008).

References


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