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*An attitude problem or the problem with “attitude”? The impact of family beliefs on transition to higher education for young people from low socio-economic backgrounds.*

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Despite two decades of Federal policy rhetoric and funding practice promoting equity in higher education, marked inequities persist. The causes of these inequities are multiple and complex, however family attitudes have often been blamed. This paper addresses the problematic nature of the construct of ‘attitudes’ in terms of the lack of definition and in terms of the negative connotations associated with its use. It asks: what are the apparent beliefs about higher education as held by parents of low socio-economic status? and explores the impact of these ‘attitudes’ on young people’s beliefs about the relevance and accessibility of university. This exploration takes place within the context of a study of the construction of the career and study plans of a group of young people from targeted schools in Sydney’s outer west. The study employed in-depth interviews of nineteen school students and four university students. Data was analysed using Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) three-stage approach to analysis. The findings debunk any notions of a deficit in parental attitudes towards higher education. They demonstrate, however, that parental occupation and education play a key role in shaping young people’s knowledge of and beliefs about university.

*For the first few years of my life, my family lived in rented houses and this meant that we moved on a fairly regular basis – about once a year. When I was six years old we moved into our first “home”. I have very clear memories of asking “Dad, how long are we going to live in this house?” to which he replied, without hesitating, “until all you kids have grown up and finished school and university”.*

### **Introduction**

Decades of research and educational/sociological theory have consistently demonstrated strong links between participation in higher education and social class. Despite various efforts to address the imbalance, currently in Australia only around 15 per cent of the undergraduate student population comes from low socio-economic backgrounds (DETYA 2001), well short of the 25 per cent target (Department of Employment, Education and Training: National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1990). Causes of this inequity are diverse and complex, and include financial and geographical barriers, school educational disadvantage and lower aspirations.

Numerous studies (eg., Long, Carpenter, Hayden 1999) have indicated that parental levels of education are the strongest predictor of whether a young person will make the

transition to university. From this it has been inferred that family ‘attitudes’ to education are the prime cause. The use of the term ‘attitudes’ is, however, problematic and laden with negative connotations, such that its use ought to be reconsidered. This paper explores the construction of young people’s aspirations for higher education and examines the impact of parental ‘attitudes’ on the development of their beliefs and goals. The study found no evidence to support the notion that families of low socio-economic status do not value education, or that they hold ‘attitudes’ which deter young people from going to university.

### *Equality of educational opportunity*

Australia’s first universities were traditionally elitist institutions, wherein access was based on merit. That such “merit” was concentrated in the dominant classes was rarely questioned. Recognition of social imbalance in university populations first appeared in the Murray Report in 1957 (Commonwealth of Australia, 1957). There followed a period of dramatic expansion that transformed a once elite system into the new “binary” system that would bring tertiary education to the masses. It was assumed that the combination of massification with the provision of scholarships provided equal access for all.

During the 1970s in a further attempt to remove some of the barriers to entry, the Whitlam government abolished tuition fees and introduced a system of financial assistance. The test of how successful these measures would then be “*that those going on to higher education were drawn from all groups in the same proportion as each group was represented in the population*” (Karmel, 1973). However, it is now evident that they did not bring about such a redistribution of places. Rather, existing inequities were translated onto a larger scale (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

The tabling of *A Fair Chance For All* in 1990 once again placed equity squarely on the political agenda. Policy aimed to improve the participation rates of people from six disadvantaged groups. Institutions were made accountable for equity and HEEP funds were allocated according to a performance-based formula to ensure that institutions remained focused on improving outcomes for equity groups. This policy was reinforced in 2003 in *Our Universities: Backing Australia’s Future* (Nelson 2003 p34).

The success of the targeting approach was reviewed in 1996 in *Equality, Diversity and Excellence: Advancing the National Framework* (NBEET, 1996). This report found that little progress had been made in access for people from low SE backgrounds. Despite decades of massification, financial measures and institutional accountability, participation rates among those from low socio-economic backgrounds remains relatively unchanged.

The question now arises: what is it that causes this persistent inequity? Recent research findings indicate that parental education levels are the most accurate predictor of whether a young person will make the transition to university (Long, M., Carpenter, P. & Hayden, M., 1999). From this, it has often been inferred that it is family attitudes towards education that make the difference. Higher education equity policy for the past decade and a half has taken up this theme, in recommending and funding projects aimed at affecting young people’s attitudes.

This research asks the following questions:

1. What are the apparent beliefs about higher education, held by the parents, as perceived by their children? and
2. What are the effects of these perceived beliefs on the beliefs and aspirations of these young people?

### **Another story**

*When I first become a mother, back in 2001, I joined a New Parents' group in my local area as I was keen to meet people and, hopefully, to make some friends near home who also had young children. At one of our first informal morning teas, we met at one woman's house. It was a large house, recently decorated and well fitted out. From the living room we looked out on an expansive lawn that sloped gently down to the bush reserve, with glorious views to the mountains in the distance.*

*The conversation turned to the many gifts our babies had received. As first-time parents, many of us expressed surprise at the sheer number of gifts and at people's generosity. Someone mentioned that their baby had received gifts of money and I told how my in-laws had opened a bank account in Oliver's name. I remember joking that, at three months old, he had more money in his account than his parents did.*

*Then I then remarked, in what seemed to me a natural follow-on in the conversation, that we had better start saving as by the time our children finished school we could expect that they could not rely on any government financial assistance to go to university and they would probably have to pay full fees..*

*The room fell silent.*

*After what seemed an eternity, one woman finally responded.*

*"Oh well, my Jack can be a brickie like his Dad. That will be good enough for him."*

### **Families, education and social reproduction**

It would seem from these two anecdotes that parents can hold quite different views about the relevance and value of a higher education for their children. It is not difficult to imagine how these views might shape the perceptions of their children and thus ultimately affect their career and study choices. This section will now explore various theoretical explanations of this phenomenon.

#### *Cultural deprivation ('deficit' theory)*

By the 1960s and 1970s, the meritocratic model had been called into question as the close correlation between social background and educational outcomes became firmly established. Attention turned to characteristics in the individuals' background, from their material circumstances to the extent to which education is valued and promoted in the home. The family environment came to be seen to be 'deficit' in terms of economic stability and access to cultural values and motivation (Germov 2004). A danger with this approach is that it can become 'victim-blaming' wherein the student is constructed as the 'problem', rather than the education system or the processes of schooling.

The cultural deprivation view too came under attack and several studies dispelled the myth of working-class apathy. Connell and colleagues, for example, found that most working-class parents valued education and wanted their children to do well, and that they often “*strongly desire to see their children receive more education than they received themselves*” (Connell, White & Johnstone, 1991). Coleman (1988) also noted that it is not the regard for education that is unevenly distributed, but the means to make such regard ‘work’.

### *Cultural Capital*

According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), schooling contributes to social reproduction “*by enabling the possessors of the prerequisite cultural capital to continue to monopolise that capital*” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977 p47). The concept of cultural capital, defined as “*the cultural goods transmitted by the family pedagogic actions*”, originates in the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). These cultural differences include language and other symbolic aspects such as knowledge of high art, possession of credentials, or dispositions and attitudes. Initial advantages in cultural capital, linked to a person’s social class, are rewarded by schools such that those who already possess some of the cultural capital that is valued by schools are most often those who are successful. While economic factors have an impact on a person’s educational outcomes, it is cultural factors which are seen as the “*most determinant educational investment*” (Bourdieu 1986 p244).

Bourdieu distinguished between three forms cultural capital. Firstly, it can be present in the *objectified* state, which entails possession of material cultural goods such as pictures, books and instruments. Secondly, it can exist in the *institutionalised* state, the objectification of cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications. Institutionalised cultural capital can be converted to economic capital by providing access to the more prestigious professions. Finally, cultural capital can exist in the *embodied* state, defined as long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body.

A crucial aspect of a family’s cultural capital is that of durable dispositions (eg., towards learning) which become embodied – an integral part of the person – in what Bourdieu referred to as ‘habitus’. Embodied cultural capital “*cannot be transmitted instantaneously*” (Bourdieu, 1986 p245). Through the primary pedagogic work of the family, the acquisition of embodied cultural capital starts early in a person’s life and requires an investment of time, effort and, directly or indirectly, economic capital.

Cultural capital in its embodied form is of most interest to this research. The ultimate goal of federal policy is to help disadvantaged young people to accumulate institutionalised cultural capital i.e., to increase their access to higher educational qualifications. The thesis here is that this will most effectively be altered by indirect means, through affecting their entrenched beliefs surrounding higher education – their embodied cultural capital. Given the primacy of the pedagogic work of the family, altering these dispositions will likely require a significant investment of time, which suggests that beginning as early as possible in a young person’s education will be necessary.

In their *Longitudinal studies of Australian Youth*, Long and colleagues (Long, Carpenter, Hayden 1999) found a strong relationship between socio-economic status and educational participation, with young people from wealthy families participating in higher education at around double the rate of young people from poorer families. The studies showed that, while family wealth, postcode were both associated with participation in higher education, it was levels of parental education which were the best predictor of whether or not a young person went to university. Thus, “*the predominant effects appear to be psychological or psycho-social factors associated with the perceived relevance of higher education*” (Long et al. 1999 p76). However, they had not investigated these psycho-social factors but rather inferred from the statistical correlation.

In his study of school students’ aspirations and expectations, James (2002) found that in fact there was little or no difference in attitudes towards schooling across the socio-economic groups. What he did find, however, was “*appreciable social stratification in the opinions of senior secondary students about the relevance and attainability of a university education*” (James 2002, pix). Among the thousands of students in the study, 90 per cent expressed desire to do some kind of tertiary education and close to two thirds expressed a preference for university. However, when asked if they felt they were “likely to go to university”, 70 per cent of those from high socioeconomic backgrounds felt they would, compared to only 42 per cent from low socio-economic backgrounds. 16 per cent from low socio-economic backgrounds felt that they “would not be able” to go to university. It appears that it is not a deficit view of education but other social factors which are at play.

What then, are these factors? Collins and Thompson (1997), argue that, rather than possessing a more positive ‘attitude’ or valuing education more, upper middle-class families are more likely to have the time, money and status with which to effectively assist their children with their schooling. It is not a deficit of ‘attitude’ in working class families, but a lack of lack these attributes. They are more likely to feel intimidated by the education system and are also less informed about standards and inter-school differences and how to work these to their children’s advantage.

In their study of ‘first generation’ university students, Levine & Nideffer (1996, as cited in Maclean) found that a common factor in getting to university was “*intervention by one person at a critical time in the person’s life. Sometimes the mentor was a loving relative, at other times it was someone paid to offer expert advice. In either case it was the human contact that made the difference*” (Levine & Nideffer, 1996 p.65). This suggests that students who know someone who has been to university, whether parents, siblings or friends or extended family, are at a great advantage when making decisions about post-school options. These mentors provide:

- Practical information on course choice, university type, subject options and a realistic estimate of costs;
- A sense that ‘people like me go to university’;
- Motivation and encouragement to see university as an achievable option; and
- A realistic sense of what university is like, the sorts of courses that are available and the sort of life to expect.

Similarly, in her study of university students of Mexican descent, Fernandez Kelly (2002) found that “*Decisive in the constellation of factors that determined their educational success was the active presence of persons mediating between themselves and institutionally structured opportunities*”. It appears that having access to a mentor can make all the difference.

Clearly, there are many factors within the family and social world of young people which have an effect on their participation in higher education. Labelling these attributes as ‘attitudes’ is, however, problematic. The very word ‘attitudes’ is often ill-defined and heavily laden with negative connotations. Positing low transition rates as an issue of ‘attitude’ risks being construed as a deficit within the families of the young people experiencing the disadvantage. If they would just lift their attitudes, the problem would go away! This approach serves to deflect attention away from cultural and structural barriers that have been established for centuries. It removes the burden of responsibility from education systems – who hold the power and possibility to change – to the least empowered members of society.

In this light, this research uses the terms ‘beliefs’, ‘perceptions’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘understandings’. These together might otherwise be defined as *habitus*: embodied dispositions, regarding beliefs about the relevance and attainability of a university education, understandings of what it means to study at university, and knowledge of what is required to successfully make the transition. It seeks to ascertain what are the beliefs about higher education, held by parents, as perceived by the participants? It then explores the impact of this habitus on the dispositions – beliefs and aspirations – of their children.

### **Research Methods:**

Ascertaining *how* a young person’s beliefs are constructed necessitates a more in-depth view than the broad brush-strokes of a survey could provide. For this reason, this study took a qualitative approach. In-depth biographical interviews of approximately 30 to 40 minutes were conducted with twenty three students to provide a detailed picture of how their career plans were constructed and what role their parents played in this process. Where possible, a follow-up interview was conducted approximately six to nine months later to observe any changes over time.

Predominantly open-ended questions were employed to allow the participants to introduce perspectives that the researcher may not have considered. The initial interview question asked participants to share their career aspirations and the story of how these were formed. Respondents were then encouraged to identify the people, events and issues that are/were significant in shaping their plans.

### *Sampling*

Four students from each of Years 8, 9, 10 and 11 were interviewed, plus three Year 12 students and four university students – a total of twenty three participants. The school students came from two schools – one a 7-10 and one an 11-12 school in Sydney’s outer west. Class teachers were asked to suggest students who might have the potential to make it to university, regardless of what their current aspirations might be. Participation was

voluntary and required written parental consent. This resulted in all of the Year 8, Year 9 and Year 12 students being female. University students were selected on the basis of having gone to school in a similar area.

### *Credibility and Dependability*

The methods of collecting and analysing the data incorporated a number of procedures to promote the credibility and dependability of the study's findings. These included:

- Collecting data on a confidential basis;
- The use of open-ended questions to minimise researcher influence;
- Application of a systematic approach to analysing all the data;
- Transparency in reporting how the themes were derived;
- Reference to the theoretical literature to support themes; and
- Using data (quotes) to support analytical claims.

### **A Grounded Theory Approach to Data Analysis**

As the study is not so much exploratory as confirmatory, the use of grounded theory as a research method in its entirety is not wholly applicable. Nonetheless, the approach to data analysis developed by Strauss and Corbin in 1990 provides a transparent and systematic approach which may be applied to test as well as to discover theory. For these reasons, the data was analysed using this model. QSR NVivo was employed to code the data and to cross-check between participants, their attributes, and the themes that emerged.

Building upon their Glaser and Strauss's original constant comparative method, Strauss and Corbin advocated a three-stage process comprising open, axial and selective coding. In this model, during the first step – *open coding* – the data is “*broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences*” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998 p102). The next step – *axial coding* – is to group these codes into categories that reflect commonalities and to relate categories to subcategories in terms of their properties. Patterns in the data are sought and the process of generating hypotheses about relationships between phenomena begins (Priest, Roberts & Woods, 2003 p34).

The final stage – *selective coding* – involves identifying one or two central explanatory concepts to which all categories are related and to develop a conceptual framework from which to develop a theory. Finally, the theory is validated by comparing it to the raw data and referring back to the literature. It is this process which is followed in this study.

### **Stage One and Two – Open and Axial Coding**

The transcripts were initially read by the researcher to locate the ‘open’ codes or discrete points that were made. These codes were then compared within each case and across the cases for similarities and differences. For example, of the 23 participants, only five had one or more parents who had gone to university in Australia. This led to the development of the code *Parent as Role Model*. Similarly, almost all of the participants identified their parents as an important source of support. Hence, the notion of *Personal Support* emerged as a code. Throughout this phase, QSR NVivo 7 was utilised to code the data. Parent occupation and highest levels of education were recorded as attributes to facilitate queries at later stages.

A key task in the second stage was to focus on the research question – that is, to what extent have parental beliefs affected the beliefs of the young people involved? Hence, within almost every category a new facet appeared – that of the impact of the characteristic on the young peoples’ beliefs and aspirations. In reporting the findings, codes and their effects are reported together to provide greater clarity.

The codes which emerged are:

- Attributes
  - Parental Occupation
  - Parental Education
- Parental Support
  - personal support
  - practical assistance
  - information
  - financial support
  - pressure
- Parents as Role Models
  - positive role models
  - “don’t do what I did”

### **Results and discussion**

Of 23 participants, 46 parents are reported upon. (One father is deceased but both he and the new step-father are included. The whereabouts and history of one father was unknown to the participant).

#### *Parental Occupation*

The young people in this sample are largely from low socio-economic backgrounds as measured by parental occupation. Of the 46 parents, only four of the mothers and two of the fathers are working in professional fields. Of the rest, approximately half are employed in skilled and/or clerical occupations, and the remainder are bus drivers, warehouse packers, cleaners, retail assistants and homemakers. Interestingly, not one was reported as being unemployed and only six of the mothers (about one quarter) were predominantly homemakers.

Parental occupation, in this sample at least, appears to have had little or no impact upon the aspirations of their children, or on the aspirations of parents for their children. All but one of the participants were or are hoping to go to university. This immediately brings into question the notion that family attitudes are linked to socio-economic status as measured by parental occupation.

#### *Parental education*

Again, the students in this sample are predominately from low socio-economic backgrounds as measured by their parents’ highest levels of education. Of the parents in the sample, only five were reported as having attained a university degree in Australia. Of these, only one was reported as having gone to university immediately after completing high school. Three had completed a degree as mature-age students

and one was currently studying towards her first degree. Two had completed a post-graduate qualification. A further three were reported to have commenced but not completed university studies.

The figures look quite different, however, when overseas qualifications are included. A total of 12 are believed to have attained a university qualification overseas before migrating to Australia. (This figure is approximate as many of the participants were vague on the subject of their parents' levels of education). Six of these were from the Philippines, two from each of India and Lebanon, and one each from Vietnam and Hungary. Two further were reported as having commenced but not completed a university degree – one each in Taiwan and the Philippines.

In total, of the 23 participants, 12 reported either or both parents having a university qualification. It should be noted, however, that as the education system is markedly different in some of the countries where the education took place, it is not possible to exactly equate these to an Australian qualification. 10 participants had one or two parents who had studied at TAFE (14 parents). For six of these, a TAFE qualification was the highest level of education in their family. 16 parents had undertaken no further education beyond secondary school. Of these, nine had not completed Year 12. Six of the participants had both parents who had completed no further education. (Refer to Appendix 1 – Parental Occupation and Education History). Table 1 (below) summarises these results.

*Table 1: Parents' Highest Levels of Education*

	1 or 2 parents have an Australian university degree	1 or 2 parents have an overseas university degree	1 or 2 parents have a TAFE qualification	Neither parent completed any further education	Neither parent completed Year 12
Number of Participants (N = 23)	5	7	5	1	5

#### *Parental encouragement*

Regardless of either their occupation or their educational experiences, every single participant rated their parents as one of the most important sources of support and encouragement to them as they made plans for their futures. In the majority of cases, parents were rated as “*number one*”. In the few instances where parents did not rate number one, they came second behind the young people’s own characteristics. Their support took many forms, including emotional support and practical assistance.

#### *Personal support*

Parental encouragement most commonly took the form of comments such as “*we’ll support you in whatever you’re doing*”. Parents were also a source of motivation to some, someone to “*push me to stay on and keep going*” and “*keep me to my studies, to not give up on it*”. In some cases they boosted the young people’s confidence in

their abilities, saying such things as “*she thinks I’d be good at it too*” and “*they think that I have the potential*”.

#### *Practical intervention*

Among parents with a higher education, their encouragement often took a more practical form. Many students reported that their parents kept them on track with homework and assignments, and sometimes helped with homework as well. Here, there appears to be a direct link between parental education and the amount of help students receive with homework. Those who had a parent with a university education reported that Mum or Dad might “*proof-read an assignment*”, or that they are “*good at English*” or “*good with the computer*”. Two students said that their parents arranged tutoring to improve their grades. Maria, a university student, felt this showed “*how persistent they were for me to get into uni*”. Both these students had parents with a university education.

Among those whose parents did not have a university education, some said that they did “*not really*” receive much help, in one case because “*they are a little bit tired*”. However, some of these students reported that their parents “*ask if I have assignments due, make sure I’m doing it, homework done and stuff*”. This would seem to indicate that the parents are supportive of their children’s education, but that those with higher education possess the time, money, skills and/or confidence to assist as well as monitor and encourage them.

In a few cases this practical assistance went as far as taking their son or daughter to their place of work, and/or taking them to visit universities on open days. One Year 8 student, Lisa, hopes to become a lawyer. Her father is a company CEO and has a Law degree and Masters in Finance, Her father had twice taken her to Open Days the University of Western Sydney and they had even sat in on the Moot Court. She relates the experience:

*“I practically know my way around the campus. And um, I went into the book store. I started having a look at all the law textbooks and stuff. And my Dad has a lot of law textbooks and stuff like that cause he studied Law when he went to university. So, yeah I’ve been to open days and chosen electives like...”*

These experiences have clearly helped Lisa to feel comfortable and secure in the university environment, which appears to be having a motivating effect.

#### *Parents as a source of information*

While parental occupation and education appear to have little or no impact upon the career aspirations of the young people in this sample, they do appear to affect their knowledge of what the options are and what is required to make it into university. Parents are often the first port-of-call when students are seeking information about career and study options. The young people generally seek two types of information. Firstly, they want to know what their alternatives are, and what is necessary to gain entry. Secondly, they are interested in developing an understanding of what the experience of attending university is like. Not surprisingly, the parents’ ability to provide accurate information directly reflects their own experience of education.

The young people who had a parent with an Australian university education were much better informed about what their post-secondary options are, particularly with regard to what courses are on offer at different universities. They also had a much better understanding of what the entry requirements are and, importantly, a more realistic view of their own chances of meeting those requirements. For example, one Year 8 student, Lisa, was able to say what subjects she needed, what the entry cut-offs are: “*I have to get a UAI of over 85*” and correctly named three universities which offer Law degrees. She rated her academic performance as “*pretty good*” and said she came “*top or second in nearly every test*”. Having a parent with personal experience of going to university seems to be helping her to develop an accurate view not only of study options and university life but of her own academic abilities.

In contrast, a Year 10 student (Deborah) whose parents had not completed secondary school, was convinced that she was going to become a doctor. Unlike Lisa, she had no idea of what subjects she needed to take in the Higher School Certificate, which universities offer appropriate degrees, nor the different pathways available. When quizzed about her ability and current results at school, Deborah placed herself “*somewhere in the middle*” of her class. She felt that her parents were “*proud*” of her encouraging her to “*go for it*”. They do not appear to have the skills and knowledge that may be needed to counsel their daughter to consider other options in the event that she did not meet the entry requirements for a medical degree.

In several cases the parents’ experience was not relevant to the Australian context. In these cases, the young people often expressed awareness that they were not able to provide the information they need, one saying “*they are not really up to date with all the university stuff*”. Another reported that her parents were “*not at all*” able to give her the information she needed, as “*they don’t know the syllabus and structure of universities in Australia*”. This is particularly true when it comes to issues of the costs involved. In many cases, the young people were ignorant of the payment arrangements in Australia, or have misconceptions regarding the costs. For these students, financial constraints and the perceived costs of going to university were a concern.

Parents with a higher education, particularly an Australian degree, were well placed to help their sons and daughters develop an understanding of what it is like to be at university. Participants related conversations between themselves and their parents in which they talked about the learning experience, the workload, and other aspects of university life, particularly the social aspects. The rest were reliant on school teachers and, most often, American television shows and movies, for their impressions of what a university might be like. Consequently, many of them felt that universities were “*huge*” and “*daunting*” places where learning was a case of sitting in an auditorium and taking notes, and a student’s life was nothing but study.

### *Pressure*

Beyond an understanding that their parents want them to do their best and to follow the path that will be best for them, few of the participants report experiencing any pressure from their parents to go on to university. Only two students felt that going to

university was an expectation. One said that, where her parents were concerned, *“there was no way I wasn’t going to go to university”*. Another felt that if she didn’t make it she would be a *“disappointment”* to her parents. Both had one or more parents who had been to university themselves. Both participants felt that this pressure had not altered their aspirations as their own goals matched those of their parents.

#### *Parents as positive role models*

Parental education is also closely linked to the young people’s beliefs about what it means to be studying at university. The most powerful influence on the young people’s beliefs appears to be whether or not at least one parent has a university education. Having a positive role model in the immediate family appears to help the young people to envisage themselves as university students and, ultimately, as professionals themselves.

At one point, Lisa describes going to work with her father and feeling comfortable at his place of work:

*Jo*

*You say that your father’s working in finance and law? (Yeah). Have you ever been to his place of work?*

*Lisa*

*Yes, it’s a massive building. They have a cool lunch room (I bet). It’s got one of those massive wide-screen TVs so when Dad comes in you know like he has to pick up some paperwork or whatever we just sit in the lunchroom and then he’d be like “OK Lisa we’re ready to go” I go “No. I’m watching TV, come back later” (Laughs).*

Later, she talks about how she sees herself in the future. Her belief in herself and her ability to envisage herself as a lawyer are evident in the following exchange:

*Jo*

*Do you think you’d be good at being a lawyer?*

*Lisa*

*Yes (laughs).*

*Jo*

*Do you sometimes imagine yourself being a lawyer?*

*Lisa*

*Yes, I do. Often. (Laughs).*

*Jo*

*You don’t have any difficulty picturing yourself?*

*Lisa*

*Not at all! (Laughs).*

#### *Parents as “Don’t do what I did” models*

Three of the participants reported their parents explicitly encouraging them not to *“end up like them”* or *“Don’t end up doing things where you are just like a pawn... have a career, not a job”*. For two of these students, both parents had not completed their secondary schooling. They speak of their working lives in terms of *“hard labour working”* and *“explained it to me how hard the work would be if I did drop out”*. One young man’s parents said that *“if they had their time again they would go on and give themselves better options”*.

A less explicit (but nonetheless powerful) message comes from the three parents who went to university as mature-age students. In these cases, the young people had witnessed their parents studying and doing assignments, and struggling to balance family, work and study commitments. These parents described their experience of university study mostly in terms of being “*hard work*” and “*stressful*” and encouraged their children to go to university straight from school.

In all of these cases, not making the same mistakes as their parents appears to be a strong motivator to the young people. Even among parents with the lowest educational outcomes themselves, a higher education for their children is highly valued. It appears that, when the parents have little direct experience with higher education, they have a keen appreciation of its potential to alter their son’s or daughter’s lives.

### **Stage Three – Selective Coding: Towards a theory of construction of beliefs**

At this stage in the analytical process the researcher looks for relationships between the phenomena – for central explanatory concepts to which all categories are related. Each category having been explored individually in relation to its impact upon the young people’s beliefs, the next step is to develop a more holistic overview. The theoretical framework provided by social capital and cultural capital theories was applied to the broader picture, such that the role of parents was examined in terms of its observed impact on the bridging social capital and embodied cultural capital of the participants.

A very clear message here is that there is no evidence in this sample to suggest that the working class parents in any way held negative or deficit ‘attitudes’ towards education. None were discouraging their children from aspiring to go to university. As Connell and his colleagues found (Connell White and Johnstone, 1991, as cited in MacLean), all seemed to desire a successful educational future for their sons and daughters, were encouraging them to aim high, and urging them to work hard to achieve their goals. Nonetheless, there is a strong relationship evident between parental education and a young person’s beliefs about and understandings of higher education. While there are social differences between families of different socio-economic circumstances, it is neither accurate nor helpful to characterize these differences as attitudinal.

These findings support Collins’s and Thompson’s (1997) findings that parents from the upper middle classes have more time and money with which to assist their children with their schooling. In addition, they indicate the importance of having a close family member who has successfully completed a university education. Building on the work of Levine and Neideffer, parents with a university degree support their children in a numbers of ways, including:

- providing timely and accurate information about career and study alternatives;
- sharing their experience of university;
- helping students gain experience of the world of work and/or university;
- offering personal encouragement to aim high and to work towards their goals;
- providing practical assistance such as tutoring or help with homework; and
- acting as role model to show what is possible.

## **Conclusions**

Despite decades of equity initiatives, people from low socio-economic backgrounds remain significantly under-represented in higher education. Various theories have been put forward to explain the imbalance, with the notion of family ‘attitudes’ often suggested as the prime cause. Through an in-depth qualitative study of twenty three school and university students from low socio-economic backgrounds, this paper has demonstrated that working class parents do not hold negative values about education. Rather, they hold education in high regard and often aspire to a university education for their children, whose own aspirations for university exist irrespective of their parents’ educational history. Nonetheless, a parent’s own educational experiences do impact on the young people’s knowledge of and beliefs about university.

These findings have implications for schools, universities and policy-makers intent on improving equity of access to higher education for those from low socio-economic backgrounds. Where existing measures have failed to make a real difference, new strategies should take into account the social factors which appear to be at play. Where there is an absence of role models in the family, future equity initiatives might consider firstly, finding avenues to provide accurate information around career and study alternatives and to correct misconceptions around, eg, costs and the realities of university life. Secondly, they might explore ways to provide young people with access to role models who are “someone like me” in order to demonstrate what is possible for them. Finally, they could provide young people with opportunities to experience the world of university. In these ways, it may be possible to alter pre-existing beliefs and understandings and, ultimately, to increase their rates of participation in higher education.

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## Appendix 1: Parental Occupation and Education History

School Year	Participant	Mother		Father	
		Education	Occupation	Education	Occupation
8	<b>Katie</b>	TAFE (Sewing)	Bar Attendant + homemaker.	School only. Stepfather – TAFE (tech drawing/ boiler-making?)	Council Refuse Collector (now deceased). Stepfather – scaffolder
8	<b>Lisa</b>	TAFE (medications)	Enrolled Nurse. Formerly bank + cleaning.	University as mature-age – Law + Masters in Finance	CEO of mortgage finance company
8	<b>Martha</b>	3 attempts at teaching. Children stopped her completing	Homemaker	Year 10 (?)	State Rail SSO (?) Admin work
8	<b>Tina</b>	University – Computing	Homemaker	TAFE (?)	Mechanic and Panel-beater
9	<b>Amanda</b>	University – Accountancy then Management (Philippines)	TAB	Not sure (probably not university)	Courier
9	<b>Anna</b>	University (Unknown field) Vietnam	Librarian at the University of Sydney	Started University in Taiwan but didn't finish	Bus driver (Police force in Taiwan)
9	<b>Jennifer</b>	TAFE. Currently doing Counselling at UWS	DOCS: Escort in Child Protection	Unknown	Unknown (“not around”)
9	<b>Patricia</b>	TAFE – Interpreting	Interpreter	TAFE – Interpreting	Interpreter
10	<b>Deborah</b>	Didn't finish high school	Homemaker	Didn't finish high school	Cleaner (retired)
10	<b>John</b>	TAFE (Commercial Cookery) University in Philippines (Vet Science?) Didn't complete.	Warehouse Packer	School only	Warehouse Packer
10	<b>Margaret</b>	TAFE – Beautician, Computers	Homemaker. Formerly retail assistant	TAFE	Builder
10	<b>Albert</b>	University – Nursing (?) (Hungary) + TAFE – Real Estate	Runs a cleaning business. Also Latin Dance teacher	TAFE	Mechanical Engineer/ Factory Supervisor

<b>11</b>	<b>Catherine</b>	Possibly university (India)	Secretary to the Manager in an insurance company	University (Engineering) India	Working in Sales at David Jones but qualified Engineer specialising in OH&S
<b>11</b>	<b>Elijah</b>	“Dropped out” in Year 9.	Warehouse packer	“Dropped out” in Year 8. On-the-job carpentry training	Carpenter
<b>11</b>	<b>Michael</b>	“Dropped out” after Year 10	Retail Manager	“Dropped out” after Year 10. Carpentry and Chef at TAFE	Carpenter (Was a chef)
<b>11</b>	<b>Sean</b>	University – Accounting (Lebanon)	Office Administration	University – Engineering (Lebanon)	Machine Operator
<b>12</b>	<b>Lucy</b>	University as mature-age – Nursing	Registered Nurse	Year 12	Enrolled Nurse (office work)
<b>12</b>	<b>Nancy</b>	Year 10 (?)	Homemaker	Year 10 (?)	Musician
<b>12</b>	<b>Sarah</b>	University – Zoology, then IT (Philippines)	IT support	University – IT (Philippines)	Service and Maintenance Manager in an alarm system company
<b>Uni</b>	<b>Carly</b>	Unknown – possibly TAFE. Not university	Homemaker. Just begun a secretarial job in a school	TAFE.	Payroll Accounts officer (Sydney CEO)
<b>Uni</b>	<b>Maria</b>	University – Chemical Engineering (Philippines)	Project Manager for Mission Australia (Administration)	University – Business (Philippines)	Driving Instructor. Formerly forklift driver
<b>Uni</b>	<b>Tracy</b>	Year 11 Currently doing Animal Welfare – Correspondence(?)	Delivers mail	Year 11 then TAFE Uni as mature age	Financial Director / Chartered Accountant
<b>Uni</b>	<b>Paolo</b>	School Only	QANTAS safety maintenance	2 years of University (Unknown field) – Philippines	Machine Operator/ Weekend Singer