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## Expanding opportunity? Class, ethnicity and educational aspiration

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines educational aspiration among working-class migrants and the mismatch that often occurs between their definitions of success and those of the mainstream education system. It explores the educational aspirations and practices of Lebanese-Australian families in a disadvantaged area of Western Sydney, Australia. Despite their large numbers within Sydney schools, Lebanese-Australian students are dramatically under-represented in high achieving schools. They, along with other Western Sydney communities, are a key target of a new initiative of the state government to increase the number of students from disadvantaged communities in academically selective schools and classes. The initiative is designed to raise aspirations and encourage disadvantaged students and parents to consider applying for a selective place. This paper examines whether there is a 'lack' of aspiration among disadvantaged migrants, why they are under-represented in high achieving schools in Sydney, and how the education system can better recognise and cater for diverse aspirations.

### KEYWORDS

Education; schooling; migrants; class; inequality; aspiration

## Introduction

The under-representation of disadvantaged students in high achieving schools is well documented, including in Australia (Ho 2020; Kenway 2013; OECD 2019; Tham 2021). Academically selective schools, and those that dominate exam result leaderboards, typically enroll very few, if any, students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This under-representation has sometimes been explained in terms of a lack of educational aspiration among disadvantaged families (Harwood et al. 2015; Gale and Parker 2015; Sellar 2013; Spohrer 2011; Zipin et al. 2015). This paper builds on the existing Australian research on school segregation and socio-economic inequality, adding a consideration of migrant and ethnic identity, which is inseparable from social class, but has been recently under-explored in the Australian context (Butler, Ang and Ho 2026).

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This paper focuses on the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW), an educational jurisdiction featuring a large number of academically selective schools that sit at the apex of a particularly hierarchical schooling structure. This structure also includes a large range of non-government schools, from exclusive, high fee independent schools to low fee private schools associated with the Catholic Church and other religious denominations. Within the public system, where schools charge minimal fees, there are 47 fully or partially selective high schools and 87 primary schools with opportunity classes (OCs) in grades 5 and 6. Grades 5 and 6 are the two final years of primary school, meaning that OCs are typically seen as ‘feeders’ into selective high schools. Selective schools and opportunity classes cater for high potential and gifted students, grouping students together with similar abilities and providing them with accelerated and more in-depth curricula. Selective high schools are routinely among the highest performing schools in the state, as measured by standardised tests such as the Higher School Certificate (HSC). Admission is based on a highly competitive test, with only one quarter of applicants securing a place in a selective high school each year, and only one in eight in OCs (NSW DOE 2023).

While the test is open to all students, disadvantaged students are dramatically under-represented in selective schools, comprising an average of only 2 per cent<sup>1</sup> of students in fully selective high schools (Ho 2020; Ho and Bonnor 2018). A recent government review found that 64 per cent of students in selective schools are of a high socio-economic status (NSW Government 2020). The government acknowledged that a review of the admissions process was warranted, to ensure that entry to selective schools is ‘based on ability, not background’ (NSW Government 2020).

As such, in 2022 the NSW Government instituted an Equity Placement Model designed to expand access to OCs and selective high schools for under-represented groups, including students from low socio-educational advantage backgrounds (NSW DOE 2023). Although up to 20 per cent of places within these schools are now held for students from equity groups, this quota has so far not nearly been met for selective high schools (Carroll 2023), with disadvantaged families not applying to these schools, for reasons discussed below. The equity placement programme has therefore also featured a community outreach programme designed to provide more information to such families. This outreach programme is similar to other ‘widening participation’ programmes internationally where university ambassadors, mentors and tutors have visited disadvantaged schools to support students and their families to aspire to higher education (Harrison and Waller 2018).

Providing more information to parents about selective schools is a basic first step in raising awareness among under-represented groups. Typically, schools provide communications about the selective school test in the form of letters and notices in school newsletters. One letter includes a section to be completed by parents and returned to the school in order to register interest in applying. However, there is minimal official information provided to parents about how selective schools operate, the potential benefits of attending one, or how to prepare for the admissions test. Nor do teachers generally provide explanations to their students in class, and there is typically no assistance from schools, either in class or in extra preparation sessions, for students who would like to apply. The provision of extra information and support in disadvantaged schools is crucial for expanding participation.

The key targets of the outreach programme in NSW are communities in low-income suburbs of Western Sydney, many of which have high concentrations of migrant groups. At the time of writing, the programme focuses on 17 schools classified as having low levels of socio-educational advantage, and the emphasis is on informing families about selective schools and classes and encouraging them to consider applying and sitting the entry test. The programme aims to shift parents' perspectives on education, and to support them to consider including selective schools and classes within their educational aspirations for their children. The limited scope of the outreach programme raises questions about its effectiveness, especially given that disadvantaged students may need more extensive support to gain a competitive place in a selective school. This will be explored further below.

More generally, the Equity Placement Model raises a multitude of questions relating to class, ethnicity and aspiration, including: Do low-income migrant families suffer from a 'lack' of educational aspiration? Why are low-income migrant students under-represented in high achieving schools? How can education systems better support low-income migrant families' aspirations for their children?

This paper draws on research from an Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded project titled *Schooling, Parenting and Ethnicity*<sup>2</sup>, that compares the education cultures of families from different cultural backgrounds located in Sydney. Sydney was chosen given its concentration of selective schools and classes, and the large numbers of migrant communities. The ARC project examines educational aspirations and educational practices within the home, and how families engage with schools. Between 2020 and 2022, we undertook a survey of almost 600 parents from six Sydney primary schools, as well as conducting interviews, observations and focus groups with parents, students and teachers within these schools. The schools were chosen for their high levels of cultural diversity, but also to provide a comparison based on socio-economic status. Three schools were in a high-income area in Sydney's north, while the other three were in a low-income area in Sydney's west.

This paper reports on survey results from across all six schools, but focuses in more detail on the qualitative data from the Western Sydney schools, particularly the experiences of Lebanese-Australian participants, and teachers' perceptions of these families' approaches to education. These families are based in one small area within Western Sydney, and are not necessarily representative of all Lebanese-Australians. However, the communities in this area are targeted by the NSW Equity Placement Model's community outreach programme, and analysing their education cultures helps us understand the challenges faced by policy makers as well as enabling a critical examination of the assumptions underpinning the program's goals.

## Educational aspiration

The NSW Equity Placement Model's community programme is the latest incarnation of a long-standing public policy agenda in Australia, the UK and elsewhere to 'raise aspirations' within disadvantaged communities. These communities tend to be seen as 'insufficiently' aspirational in relation to education, for example, in their lack of interest in higher education. In the 'raising aspirations' discourse, low aspirations are often viewed in a deficit framework, associated with 'laziness' or 'uncaring' families

(Harwood et al. 2015, 218; see also Gale and Parker 2015; Sellar 2013; Spohrer 2011; Zipin et al. 2015).

In contrast to the deficit approach to understanding 'low' aspirations, social scientists have emphasised that people's aspirations reflect what they perceive to be feasible, based on the social contexts to which they have been exposed. As Bourdieu (1984, 471) argues, people develop 'a sense of limits' acquired by experience, a 'sense of one's place' which 'leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded' (1984, 471). Swartz (1997, 106) argues that individuals' habitus involves 'an unconscious calculation of what is possible, impossible, and probable for individuals in their specific locations in a stratified social order'.

As such, individuals' aspirations reflect their place within an unequal society (Appadurai 2004; Kenway and Hickey-Moody 2011; Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2011). People from advantaged backgrounds are socialised to aspire to elite schools and professions, and have access to the resources and knowledge that enable them to realise their goals. This is what Appadurai calls the 'capacity to aspire' or a 'navigational capacity' (2004, 69), namely, a detailed map of pathways to desired locations. Gale and Parker (2015, 148) characterise this as 'map knowledge', denoting a familiarity with the social terrain and 'an appreciation of the whole route they need to take to reach their destination from their point of origin'. In the case of gaining entry to a selective school, this would involve knowledge about the admissions process, including preparing for the entry test and strategically nominating preferred schools to maximise one's chances of success.

In contrast, those from disadvantaged backgrounds have less exposure to elite educational and professional settings, and less capacity to expand their aspirations, because of their 'weaker sense of the pathways from concrete wants to intermediate contexts to general norms and back again' (Appadurai 2004, 69). Even if parents from disadvantaged backgrounds wish for their children to be educationally successful, they may not have the resources and knowledge to prepare their children to be successful in gaining a place in a selective school, for example, paying for the private tutoring that many successful applicants complete. Over time, families within disadvantaged communities may develop aspirations that do not include goals that experience tells them are unrealistic. Rather than being an individual failing, low aspirations reflect 'what is unavailable to people, as opposed to what is lacking within them' (Harwood et al. 2015, 218).

However, despite the barriers they face, some international research shows that disadvantaged students actually embrace the dominant achievement ideology, with high aspirations in relation to careers and higher education, and a belief that education leads to socioeconomic mobility (Archer, DeWitt, and Wong 2014; Baker et al. 2014; Carter 2005; Harrison and Waller 2018; St Clair, Kintrea, and Houston 2013). This research challenges the assertion that educational achievement gaps between privileged and disadvantaged students are caused by a lack of aspiration on the part of the latter (see also Watkins 2026). As Welner and Carter (2013) write, achievement gaps are caused by opportunity gaps reflecting societal inequalities that create barriers to success for disadvantaged students. As such, many researchers argue that the emphasis on raising aspirations is unwarranted and unlikely to boost educational attainment (Baker et al. 2014; Cummings et al. 2012; Gorard and See 2013).

In NSW, disadvantaged students and their families appear not to be attracted to selective schools, as evidenced by the failure of the Equity Placement Model to fill the 20 per cent of places in selective schools set aside for equity students. The discussion below explores some of the reasons for this disengagement with selective schools, and questions whether policies aimed at shifting aspirations are the best approach for catering for disadvantaged students.

### **Educational aspiration among Lebanese migrants in western Sydney**

Lebanese-Australians in Western Sydney are part of the disadvantaged communities targeted by the NSW Equity Placement Model. Lebanese migrants to Australia began arriving in large numbers in the wake of Lebanon's civil war from the 1970s and 80s (ABS 2024). Lebanese migration to Australia is distinguished by its 'village chain' nature, with 'extended families and sometimes almost whole villages migrating together' (Suliman and McInerney 2006, 245). This has contributed to the tight networks among Lebanese migrants, discussed further below. The first large group of Lebanese migrants settled in inner-city Redfern in Sydney in the 1950s, with later and larger waves of migrants settling in western and south-western Sydney (Collins 2005, 188).

Lebanese-Australians tend to have lower levels of education compared to the national average. According to the 2021 Census, of those born in Lebanon, only 14 per cent had a university degree, compared to 23 per cent of those born in Australia, and 38 per cent of those born overseas (ABS 2024). In our survey of parents in our six target schools in Sydney ( $n = 590$ ), 83 per cent of respondents from a Lebanese background were classified as having a low Socio-Economic Status (SES)<sup>3</sup>, compared to only a third (33 per cent) of the total sample. Among Lebanese respondents, 17 per cent had completed a university degree, and 44 per cent had only completed high school or less. They tended to be long-term residents of Australia. Over half the respondents from a Lebanese background (58 per cent) were born in Australia, and of the rest, all had lived in Australia for 10 years or more.

In addition to their comparatively low education and income levels, Lebanese-Australians are also disadvantaged by the stereotypes and political demonisation of their cultural identity. All of these factors influence Lebanese-Australians' aspirations in relation to education and employment. Tabar, Noble, and Poynting (2010) argue that Lebanese-Australians' aspirations have been shaped by the social construction of Lebanese ethnicity in Australia, whether in relation to unemployment in the 1980s, crime and violence in the 1990s or terrorism in the 2000s. Over several decades, Lebanese-Australians, and particularly young Muslim-Lebanese Australian males, have been the subject of recurring moral panics in relation to 'ethnic gangs', Islamist radicalisation, misogyny and rape, leading to the 'criminalisation' of Lebanese identity in Australia (Poynting et al. 2004). Media reports have highlighted schools as sites vulnerable to infiltration and corruption by Lebanese 'thugs' and 'gangs' (Mansouri and Wood 2008). These social constructions, supported by actions of the state, political leaders and media campaigns, have reshaped the structure of expectations and aspirations among Lebanese-Australians 'in a way which helped in the reproduction of their marginal position in Australian society' (Tabar, Noble, and Poynting 2010, 18). Indeed, based on their research with Arab and Muslim students in Australia, Mansouri and

Wood (2008) express particular concern at the level of awareness among these students of political debates about terrorism, border security and identity politics.

It should be noted that the Lebanese-Australian community is internally diverse, with religion presenting an important marker of difference. According to the 2021 Census, 45.1 per cent of Lebanese-born Australians were Muslim, compared to 40.9 per cent who were Catholic or Eastern Orthodox (ABS 2024). As noted, since the 2000s, Muslim-Lebanese Australians have been particularly negatively affected by the moral panics around Islam, terrorism and extremism (Poynting et al. 2004). In our study, the majority of Lebanese-Australian participants were Muslim, and, as explained below, part of a tight knit and localised community. Given the importance of local family and community ties in the lives of our Lebanese-Australian participants, we cannot generalise their experiences to all Lebanese-Australians.

Regardless, existing research shows that Lebanese-Australians' engagement with schooling has often been problematic. Mansouri and Trembath (2005) found that although Arab-Australian students generally felt positive about their interactions with other students in school, they were typically disengaged with learning at school. They attributed this to their perceptions of teachers being disinterested in them as individuals and as Arab-Australians, being sometimes racist, and holding low expectations of them as students. In a later study, Mansouri and Wood (2008) found that Arab and Muslim students were more likely than other students to express distrust towards teachers, because of a perceived lack of cultural understanding.

The comparatively poor educational outcomes of Lebanese-Australian students have been documented over many decades. Earlier research explained these outcomes in terms of poor English proficiency and problems with transitioning to Australian education on the part of recently arrived students (Young, Faulkner, and Petty 1980). However, as Mansouri and Wood (2008) point out, low educational achievement has continued into the second and third generations of Arab migrants in Australia, in contrast to the upward educational mobility experienced by other migrant groups. As long settled migrants, Lebanese-Australians' aspirations have come to resemble other long-term residents of working-class communities, in contrast to more recent arrivals. As international research has shown, longer-term working-class residents are more likely to hold what they consider to be 'realistic' aspirations, while the aspirations of newer residents reflect an 'anticipatory socialisation' (MacLeod 2018; Strand and Winston 2008). Lebanese-Australians' aspirations likely reflect their understanding and experience of the inequalities of opportunity in Australian society. In contrast, newer migrants, for example, from Asian countries, may have higher educational aspirations for their children in hopeful 'anticipation' of their integration into middle-class Australia.

### **Findings: Lebanese-Australian families' approaches to education and school choice**

Lebanese-Australian students are dramatically under-represented in selective schools in NSW, as discussed above. This partly reflects the preferences of many Lebanese-Australian parents, who prioritise other factors when it comes to choosing a school for their children. Our survey of parents across our six target schools covered several questions about school choice, including whether their child would apply for a place in a selective

high school. In response, 17 per cent of Lebanese background respondents said yes. This contrasted dramatically with our largest Asian background cohorts. Among Indian background parents, 79 per cent said their child would be applying for a selective school, as did 69 per cent of Chinese background respondents.

When asked what high school they would like their child to attend, the most common response (30 per cent) among Lebanese background respondents was 'local comprehensive public school', in other words, the closest government (no fee) school to their home. In contrast, 'fully selective public school' was the most common response among Indian (54 per cent) and Chinese (55 per cent) background respondents. When asked why participants chose their child's current school, 'Good academic results' was selected by only a quarter (25 per cent) of Lebanese background respondents, compared to 52 per cent of Indian and 36 per cent of Chinese background respondents.

It should be noted, however, that these patterns are not simply about ethnic differences. Apart from being newer arrivals in Australia, Indian and Chinese background respondents tended to arrive as skilled migrants, with high levels of education and professional qualifications. These class differences underscore the importance of avoiding a purely 'ethnic' interpretation of research findings. Nor should these findings be seen as representative of all Indian or Chinese migrants in Australia. Given that two of our target schools included Opportunity Classes that over-represent Asian-Australian students aiming for a selective high school (as explained below), our survey results may be skewed by this sample.

More in-depth reasoning for parental preferences was uncovered in our qualitative research. In one focus group in a primary school dominated by Arabic-speaking families, a school we call Acacia Public (all school names are pseudonyms), parents said they did not plan to apply for their children to attend a selective school or class because they didn't want to put 'pressure' on their children and have them 'struggle' with extra work. In the words of one mother:

Some kids studying, and some kids you can't, I know with my son, I cannot put that pressure on him because he'll just – but he's an intelligent kid, as long as he's doing well and he knows what he wants to do, and he focuses, I'm happy with him being in mainstream.

Others said they were not aware of when to apply and the process of sitting the entrance tests. As explained above, while schools notify families about OCs and selective schools and call for expressions of interest from families wanting to apply, there is generally no further information provided about the test or the advantages of attending a selective school or opportunity class.

Despite not always being well informed about the process of applying for selective schools, our parent respondents from Acacia Public generally understood that it was arduous and required extensive preparation. This was a significant disincentive for them. The theme of not wanting to 'push' or 'pressure' children arose repeatedly among our Arabic-speaking parent participants across multiple schools. Parents often stated that although education was important to them, they did not expect their child to be a high achiever or 'top of the class'.

Many participants of the focus group at Acacia Public commented on the 'relaxed' approach to education taken by many parents at the school. For example:

... you have the parents that is like, there for the education, and the parents that are there just because they need to send their kids to school. That's, I'm not, I hope I'm not offending anyone. But that's just what I see.

... not all parents are education focused, it can be for many different reasons ... You know, their focus is just to get the kids through school ...

One Lebanese-Australian parent participant, at nearby Beechvale Public School, argued that primary schools should prioritise building a sense of community over just focusing on academic standards. For example, she was upset that NAPLAN tests (standardised tests conducted over several days for students in Years 3 and 5 in primary school across Australia) occurred during Ramadan and Eid, and her child's school chose not to reschedule the tests. She said her daughter found it hard to complete the first two days of the tests while fasting, and she withdrew her from the third day of testing in order to attend a community Eid celebration.

At Acacia Public School, some parents explained that they did not prioritise their children's homework because of their already busy schedules. In the words of one mother:

... the fact is that kids do stuff after school. Like, you know, we do activities, we got to get him out, we try to do lots of sport, and they're already locked in class for like, five hours, five to six hours a day. So, they need a break.

Another parent explained that her family had 'a very active social life' with friends and relatives – 'there's so much on in our lives'. And even at home, rather than taking 'over an hour' trying to get her children to focus on homework, she would rather see her children playing or watching TV as a family.

I don't want them to sit for like, two hours just doing homework. I feel like we need the family time. We might want to go get an ice cream ... we might have a hangout ... just do family things.

Other parents said they thought homework was important but that it was hard to get their children to complete it because the school did not make it mandatory, and the teachers did not mark the work. Without this structure, they were not always successful in convincing their children to do homework and sometimes tried to replace it with other activities such as watching educational videos or reading. Generally, they felt their children did not do enough home-based study but were unable or unwilling to push them to work harder.

Mansouri and Trembath (2005) also found frustration among Arab-Australian parents in relation to their difficulties in supporting their children's studies. Limitations in terms of language skills and educational background hampered their capacity to actively assist their children, and yet parents felt teachers did not understand the family barriers constraining students' ability to complete homework or undertake successful study at home.

One of our Arabic-speaking parent participants contrasted the very different approaches to education followed by 'Asians' and 'Arabs':

Asians are focused on getting their kids to achieve. I don't know, if it's because they've got less kids than, let's say for our, for example, Arabs. We have got, you know, so many kids ... my kids have got a lot of Asian friends, and I see what they do, and hear what they do after school. And they're very focused on education, even the children, you know, my daughter

just wants to, you know, walk around and play and she's in Year 6, whereas her best friends are so focused. They're doing three years above the year they're currently in ... whereas, you know, looking at, say Arabs, for example. There is no focus on that ... not many parents do focus on education. They just want to get through the day.

The perceived contrast between Arabic speaking and Asian migrants' approaches to education emerged repeatedly in our interviews and will be discussed further below.

### A focus on family and localism

If we see aspirations as reflecting individuals' social context, the importance of family and local community becomes particularly pronounced for many Lebanese-Australians living in Western Sydney. Mansouri and Wood (2008) explain that 'bonding social capital' is central in Arab and Muslim migrant communities, seen for example, in their tendency to live within close proximity to each other. They argue that high levels of social cohesion within communities can be an important source of resilience and mutual aid. However, strong internal cohesion can also be associated with lower levels of 'bridging social capital', or engagement with members of the wider society. This can be particularly problematic during times when groups such as Lebanese-Australians face greater stigmatisation, as this scrutiny can lead to a narrowing of social networks, exacerbating social exclusion and educational inequality. These tight social networks were evident among our participants. As we saw above, the comments of some of our Lebanese-Australian participants point to the importance of family and spending time with family members on a regular basis (see also Suliman and McInerney 2006).

In our target schools we also observed that many Lebanese Australian families in Western Sydney had large families, with four, five or six children not uncommon. They prioritised staying local and close to family members. One of our Lebanese-Australian parent participants explained that she was one of nine children and all siblings lived within ten minutes of each other: 'the furthest away is probably ten minutes'. She said, 'Even when we got married, everyone was close to their parents or to their in-laws. No one travelled out of the area'. Another Lebanese-Australian participant described her weekly family gatherings of 'about 75'. She explained, '... for another family that would be a massive party. But that's not for us. That's just immediate family getting together'.

Our interviewees sometimes described how their children attended the same school as many of their cousins and that they and other family members had also attended the same school in previous generations (see also Watkins 2026). Some had even been taught by the same teachers. The Arabic-speaking community liaison officer at Acacia Public described the tight knit and localised nature of the school community:

... we're all multicultural, we all come from the same area. So, we will see each other regularly, even ... we bump into [each other at] the Woolworths or the shopping centre. And so, we are all similar ... our kids might know someone from their children or their family, or my parents might know their family. We're all sort of small worlds ... So, we all feel like we have like-minded beliefs and the way we would raise our children and what we expect from them growing up and learning education.

A teacher at nearby Chesterton Public School, which also had a large number of Lebanese background families, explained that 'we have a lot of big family groups at this school ...

So often those kids tend to hang out with each other, because they're all cousins, or they know each other from outside of school.'

This helps explain preferences for sending children to local public schools rather than schools further away that might have a higher academic standard, such as primary schools with OC streams or selective high schools. The large size of many Lebanese Australian families also plays into this, as it is difficult enough for parents to supervise homework for multiple children, let alone strategise and potentially pay for one or more children to prepare for demanding tests such as the OC or selective schools entry tests.

This aligns with research into working class cultures of 'staying local' (Archer et al. 2010; Coleman 2022; Pugsley 1998). Like Pugsley (1998), Archer et al. (2010, 92) found that working-class young people did not have a desire to 'escape' but rather wanted to stay within their local area, even when they described it in negative terms. They did not want to move away from 'family and mates'. There is a sense of responsibility, duty and inter-dependency that contrasts with individualised discourses of meritocracy. While this strategy offers emotional security and access to social capital, it also limits educational and employment options.

International research has also noted the importance of 'hot' interpersonal knowledge for educational decision making within disadvantaged communities (Ball and Vincent 1998). Those from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to rely more on their own experiences and those of family, friends and community members, and less on teachers or other school personnel. Hot knowledge is seen as more 'real' because it is grounded in life experiences, and more reliable, because personal contacts are viewed as having less of an agenda than institutions. Relying on hot knowledge also allows young people to take advantage of their social capital (Archer et al. 2010, 93). This skews options towards the 'known' (Archer et al. 2010, 93). Meanwhile, a lack of engagement with official 'cold' knowledge may make it more difficult for young people to navigate systems in order to achieve aspirations (Archer et al. 2010, 88).

This reluctance to trust official institutional advice underscores the challenges faced by initiatives such as the NSW Equity Placement Model. Teachers in our study commented on the difficulties they had with trying to persuade parents to consider alternative options for their children's schooling, such as selective high schools. This will be explored further in the next section. However, from our parent respondents' perspectives, schools had not successfully convinced them of the value of pursuing selective schools for their children, and their immediate familial and social contexts reproduced school choice decisions that prioritised staying local and with familiar schools and communities.

In contrast to the localism of our Lebanese-Australian participants, our Asian-Australian participants appeared to be much less connected to a locality and less reliant on local social capital. They were more than willing to send their children to far away schools in order to benefit from higher academic standards. In one of our target schools, virtually all of our participants from Asian backgrounds (primarily Chinese and Indian) were successful in gaining a place in a top ranked selective high school. None of these schools were in the local area and most were an hour's commute away by public transport. It should be noted that this school had an Opportunity Class, and the majority of OC students were from Asian migrant backgrounds, in contrast to the mainstream classes in the school, where the most common native language of students was Arabic.

Chinese and Indian-Australians are also more likely to make residential choices for the sake of a school compared to other groups. In our parent survey, we asked participants, ‘To what extent is the quality of the school a reason you live in this suburb?’ Half (50 per cent) of the participants from a Lebanese background responded, ‘A great extent’, compared with 74 per cent of Indian and 61 per cent of Chinese background respondents.

These Asian-Australian families appeared to be more mobile than Lebanese-Australians, in terms of being willing to move to an area with a perceived good school, and being willing to have their children commute to a desirable school. In our study Asian-Australians were less likely to have large numbers of family members living nearby and did not seem to prioritise living within close proximity to relatives. Partly this is because they were newer migrants so did not have the same extended family networks as second or third generation Lebanese migrants. They also tended to have smaller families, with none having more than three children. But it also reflects a more expanded outlook, perhaps more geared towards assimilation into mainstream middle-class culture. Moreover, as discussed above, Asian migrants were more likely to have arrived as skilled migrants, with greater economic resources to invest in strategic residential choices.

In this sense, Asian-Australian families’ approaches to education align more with the values of the mainstream education system, which historically reflect Anglo-Australian middle-class values. Lebanese-Australians typically took a less instrumental, less strategic approach to education, with other priorities competing for time and resources. Markose and Hellstén (2009) reported similar findings in their comparison of the approaches of Chinese and Lebanese migrant families in Australia. The former espoused an instrumentalist approach, emphasising the importance of hard work and academic success for future life opportunities. However, for the latter, social mobility was not an important goal, and for Lebanese Muslim families in particular, mainstream education was less important than Islamic education and studying Arabic, as the key priority was for children to become ‘good Muslims’. Similarly, Meade (1983, 58) argued that Lebanese migrant parents valued schooling for socialisation rather than accreditation. In other words, ‘the job of the school is to turn migrant children into Australians’, rather than to enable social mobility.

Among our Muslim participants, many stated that it was important for their children to learn Arabic and follow Islamic practices such as fasting during Ramadan, even if it jeopardised their performance in school, as we saw in the parent comment mentioned above in relation to withdrawing from NAPLAN tests. They valued schools’ efforts to build community and belonging, which to some, were as important, if not more important, than academic standards. When asked what they most liked about their children’s school, many described the sense of belonging they felt, as migrants, within school communities that were culturally diverse. However, as discussed below, many teachers in disadvantaged schools, while reportedly valuing diversity, sought to challenge local cultures that they perceived as inadequately aspirational.

### **‘Lack’ of educational aspiration? What educators say about Lebanese-Australian families**

Educators in Australia have often viewed Arabic speaking students and families as problematic in relation to schooling. Suliman (2001) found that schools with concentrations

of Lebanese-Australian students often expressed concerns about these students' low achievement and motivation, and apparent lack of support from parents. In Mansouri and Kamp's research on Arab-Australian students (2007), more than half of their teacher participants said that 'parents and the community' were the key challenge in working in a culturally diverse setting, while a third reported that 'student indifference' was the key challenge. Cruickshank (2006) shows that teachers often negatively judge parents as not sufficiently valuing education if they do not facilitate home-based learning, for example, by providing reading materials to their children. However, Cruickshank argues that teachers unreasonably assume that school pedagogies can be reproduced in all homes.

In our interviews with teachers and principals in our target schools, some commented that Lebanese-Australians were not strongly oriented towards educational achievement, but rather had a focus on their sons becoming tradespeople within family businesses, and their daughters becoming mothers and focusing on family life. Research in the 1990s by Collins et al. (1997) found that most Lebanese-owned businesses in Australia were indeed family businesses, as Lebanese-born entrepreneurs were significantly more likely to recruit from their family or community compared to other ethnic minority entrepreneurs. As the Arabic-speaking community liaison officer at Acacia Public explained:

There is a specific target group in our area, which is Lebanese from North Lebanon, who will focus predominantly on trade and businesses. So, what you will find, a lot of our young people go into trades ... to start earning money ... They marry young, they have a lot of children.

One of our Lebanese-Australian parent participants at Acacia, a mother of four boys, said that her sons role-modelled themselves on their father and uncles, all of whom were tradespeople, and none of whom had attended university. She described her three brothers as 'very successful – but successful builders'. Indeed, I interviewed her in her large, brand-new home purchased through the income of her tiler husband. Although this parent considered education to be important, she taught her children, 'you don't have to be the best to come out something'.

This means that it can be difficult for teachers to convince parents to extend their children educationally, or of the value of higher education. As one teacher at Acacia Public commented:

There's been quite a few conversations that I've had, where I've spoken to the parents about their child's potential and, and really striving to achieve their potential. And the parent has looked at me and said, 'Oh ... my son is going to grow up to be a labourer. All my family work in construction, and we do bricklaying, and we do the concrete, formwork and stuff like that. And so we know what our child's going to be.'

Going to university is 'not something that they think is part of who they are', this teacher explained. 'You can't be what you can't see'.

This teacher said she had 'difficult' conversations with parents where she tried to tell them, 'your child is capable of great things' but needs support to reach their potential. These conversations were difficult 'because you don't want the parent to feel like they're less than what the child needs.' Pushing students to work harder was sometimes met with complaints from parents: 'you're triggering anxiety in my child, I need you to

stop'. Even conversations with parents about reading to children at night could be difficult because:

... the response I get is ... do you know how many kids I've got? And I said, 'Yeah, I know you've got six kids', I said, 'just tuck them all on the couch or on your bed and read. Pick a book, that they they're all going to love.' And they just say, 'I've got no time for that.' So, you know, it's about the values that ... and for those sorts of families, the time that they value, is, 'I'm cooking for my family. So I'm feeding my family, I'm cleaning and doing the laundry' and those sorts of things.

Nevertheless, this teacher said she was committed to providing parents with the knowledge and tools to 'steer their children into university or TAFE'.<sup>4</sup> She explained:

... one of the things that I'm really quite passionate about is making sure that just because your family has a set of expectations for you, then education needs to, should broaden those horizons for you. And we have to bring parents on board to see that.

Implicit in such comments is an assumption that pursuing higher education is an inherently desirable aspiration, and superior to aiming for blue-collar employment or full-time parenting. While many families in our target schools had built a successful livelihood from trades, this was not always acknowledged as 'success' by our teacher participants.

As such, Lebanese-Australian parents' lack of interest in applying for selective schools was seen as a failing by many of our teacher participants. One such teacher, who was from a Lebanese background herself, stated that parents did not understand the educational options open to their children, or 'the types of opportunities that would arise' from attending an opportunity class or selective school. She explained, 'I don't know anyone within our [Lebanese-Australian] community that is preparing them for the selective test or preparing them for that kind of, you know, that kind of learning.' She said that while many parents in her community stated that they valued education and had high hopes for their children, 'How many of those actually put in strategies to try and push their kids to achieve what they think they might achieve?'

These comments from our teacher participants mirror those encountered by Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011, 84), who interviewed teachers in a working-class area in the UK. In response to a question about the challenges facing children, many teachers nominated 'low aspirations' and 'lack of emphasis on the importance of education', linking this with social and economic deprivation. When parents were asked about their aspirations for their children, they often stated that they wanted their children to be happy and attend school. They discussed post-school employment rather than pursuing higher education. This was viewed by teachers as being insufficiently aspirational, because, according to Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011, 85), these aspirations 'do not valorise behaviour and ambitions which underpin middle-class lifestyles'. These parents were criticised by teachers for not giving their children exposure to experiences and norms outside of their local community. This was implicit in some of our teacher interviews, with comments like, 'they don't associate outside' their local family networks.

However, as per our discussion above, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011, 86) argue that teachers fail to recognise that 'these aspirations might well be based on realistic expectations, because these low-income pupils will have poorer educational opportunities and less access to professional employment' than their middle-class counterparts. Even when teachers recognise structural barriers faced by disadvantaged families, they

‘seek to reshape parents, rather than the circumstances in which they parent, in order to challenge the disjuncture between home and school environments’ (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011, 90). This is understandable given that the structural barriers of socio-economic inequality are beyond what an individual school can feasibly address. In the case of Lebanese-Australians, whose disadvantage stems from decades of socio-economic deprivation and socio-political demonisation and racism, there is very little that schools can do to dismantle the societal inequality that shapes the aspirations and outcomes of students and parents. Schools and teachers are limited to working at the level of individuals and families.

Moreover, even if teachers’ comments can be interpreted as judgmental, teachers are operating with a moral imperative to help their students because they ‘think their pupils deserve better’ (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011, 86) and want to give them a chance at a better future. For teachers, being successful is defined in terms of higher education and upward social mobility, and they want their disadvantaged students to have these opportunities, even if this is not what is most desired by students’ families. There is an ‘uneasy co-existence of middle-class power to define what constitutes an appropriate aspiration, and a progressive politics seeking to enhance social mobility’ (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011, 86).

In our study, teacher participants’ comments could be read as seeking to ‘improve’ Lebanese-Australian families’ attitudes and behaviour, which could be interpreted as insensitive or patronising by these families. At the same time, their motivations were first and foremost to expand educational opportunity for their students, and they saw their Lebanese-Australian students as among those most in need of greater educational opportunities. Their comments showed that they operated with a deep understanding of the attitudes within their school community and the family lives of their Lebanese-Australian students. However, there is a profound tension between their desire to, in their eyes, enhance their students’ educational trajectories, and their negative judgement of families who reject such opportunities.

Ultimately, these teachers are stymied by the education system they work within, that defines achievement and aspiration in such narrow terms. This can have particularly damaging consequences when their students are already disadvantaged and demonised as educational failures. Applying essentially middle-class definitions of ‘success’, and failing to acknowledge the assets their communities possess, simply because they do not include university education and professional careers, ultimately fails to cater for the students they are trying so hard to support.

### **How can the education system respect ‘other’ aspirations?**

This paper has shown that Australia’s education system in many ways reflects middle-class definitions of success, with the pinnacle of educational success embodied in acceptance into a high-achieving school and further education. Aspirations to enter the trades are often viewed as inadequate, especially when students are judged as capable of ‘more’. However, as discussed above, aspirations reflect individuals’ experiential knowledge of what is feasible for ‘people like them’, and for Lebanese-Australians, entering the trades is a known pathway to a secure livelihood. Indeed, as one of our teacher participants acknowledged, ‘most of our families have done quite well out of those sorts of

trades.’ Schools therefore need to valorise aspirations to go into the trades as much as aspirations to go into the professions. There needs to be a ‘parity of esteem’ (Price 2025) between a vocational pathway and a university degree.

This shift requires a change in what is valued in relation to students’ attributes and behaviour. While most of our teacher participants who taught Lebanese-Australian students compared them unfavourably with higher-achieving students, some teachers expressed their respect for other positive attributes of their Arabic-speaking students, such as practical skills and self-assuredness. As one teacher from Chesterton Public told us:

... you never know what skills people have. And so I found that with a number of Arabic kids who have surprised me in there, like a kindergarten student I taught will just turn around with all this knowledge about recipes and how to cook ... because that’s what they do.

Others noted that some of the high-achieving students from Asian backgrounds were lacking in social skills in the playground and in group work, as well as the self-confidence to take risks in class. This was largely because they were ‘scared of mistakes’ and not willing to say anything unless they knew ‘100 per cent that this is correct’, according to a teacher at Acacia Public. In contrast, less ‘scholarly’ students from disadvantaged backgrounds were sometimes more able to think creatively and participate in activities because they were not as preoccupied with always getting the answers correct.

If teachers are able to recognise these abilities within more disadvantaged students, the education system should be able to value them more in its definition of educational achievement. However, ‘getting the answers correct’ is still overwhelmingly the definition of success in schooling. With educational success increasingly defined via results in standardised tests such as NAPLAN, there is insufficient scope for schools to valorise abilities associated with, for example, creativity, life skills, risk taking, or leadership. This is directly linked to the narrowness in the valorisation of traditional middle-class aspirations that depend on achievement in terms of test scores.

So how can the education system value ‘other’ aspirations? It’s important to underscore that there are some essential skills that schools rightly emphasise, such as literacy and numeracy. All students also need to develop an ability to concentrate, and some level of awareness of social issues. All students need to develop these skills and master them to a certain level in order to have life options and to participate in society. These skills are entirely compatible with ‘working class’ aspirations, for example, becoming a tradesperson. Schools in disadvantaged areas need to be able to convince all families of the importance of education – not in order to go to university – but because the skills gained in schooling are crucial no matter what the future may entail, including entering the trades. However, beyond the essential skills, how schools conceive of achievement needs to radically expand. Aspiring to opportunity classes, selective schools and higher education should not be seen as a superior aspiration to all others.

Nevertheless, it is appropriate for schools to inform parents about more advanced opportunities for their children, even if parents assume such opportunities are not relevant for their families. Stories like the one below underscore the importance of this. One of our focus group parents shared her surprise at how her son’s educational journey unfolded:

I really didn't encourage much. I was working. I didn't have the time to focus on him. And I always thought, yeah, you're just average. Until he actually made it into high school ... He is so intelligent. I did not realise intelligence on the child until he got to high school. And he got into an enrichment class ... And the teachers put so much focus on him, very lucky that that happened, because, you know, he got into university, he's doing a degree.

Teachers should be applauded for their efforts to expand the educational horizons of students from disadvantaged families. However, informing families about expanded opportunities needs to be approached very carefully. Selective schools and opportunity classes need to be presented as different, not better, alternatives. There needs to be clearer communication about which students might benefit from such alternatives, and an acknowledgement that they may not be a meaningful aspiration for all students to have. And for those students whom teachers feel might genuinely benefit from attending a selective school or opportunity class, there needs to be more than just information offered. There needs to be more material support, for example, in the form of extra study sessions to adequately prepare students for the selective test.

In relation to the NSW Government's Equity Placement Model, this programme needs to be part of a much more holistic effort by the education system to communicate to families the value of education. Families in disadvantaged areas need to see the value of education not just in relation to achieving high scores and going to university, but as a crucial foundation for all life and employment options. Educational achievement needs to be recognised in a much more expanded manner than test results, and this achievement needs to be enabled in all schools. Communication to families should explain that a certain type of achievement may be possible through a selective school, but that all schools enable achievement and the development of crucial skills and knowledge.

## Conclusion

The NSW Government's Equity Placement Model for expanding enrolments of disadvantaged students in selective schools and opportunity classes is still in its infancy. The government's community outreach programme is designed to encourage disadvantaged families to consider applying to these programmes. However, this paper has shown the powerful barriers that prevent disadvantaged students from participating, focusing on Lebanese-Australians in Western Sydney, who are dramatically under-represented in selective schools and opportunity classes. Lebanese-Australians' understanding of the meaning of education, and their definitions of educational success, are often in stark contrast to the mainstream education system, modelled in the image of middle-class values.

These divergent understandings raise profound questions about how the education system can cater for the diverse range of its constituents. For many of the Lebanese-Australian families in our study, the mainstream education system does not always align with their aspirations and priorities, whether this is the difficulty of accommodating home-based study into busy family lives, school activities clashing with religious or community events, or the assumption that students' achievement can only be measured through test scores. Many Lebanese-Australian families value family and community life as much as they do academic achievement. They assume their children will follow in the footsteps of

family and community members in relation to blue-collar employment and domestic life, and see academic excellence as unnecessary or unachievable, or both. It is therefore unsurprising that such families are less likely to apply for selective schooling and opportunity classes.

Equity programmes need to operate with this understanding of the social context of disadvantaged families. They need to acknowledge that selective schooling may not be seen as relevant by disadvantaged families and respect the reasons for families' disengagement. However, for those who may be open to considering new options for their children, public initiatives need to provide appropriately designed communication and practical support for applicants. For example, disadvantaged families need to hear from 'people like them' about the value of selective schooling, rather than just education professionals. Video testimonials from Lebanese-Australian students or parents, for example, are likely to be more persuasive than a talk from a teacher or principal. Practical support in the form of test preparation workshops, provided free of charge, would then be useful to boost students' chances of gaining entry into a selective school, once their families had opted in.

Overall though, selective schooling will only ever be an option for a small minority of students. For the vast majority of students, including the majority of high potential and gifted students, it is the public comprehensive education system that needs to provide the opportunities that they and all students need and deserve. All schools need to be supported to enable all students to reach their potential. And reaching one's potential should not be exclusively defined in narrow terms, such as via test scores.

This paper has shown that selective schooling is not fit for purpose for many high potential and gifted students, and that mainstream education as a whole is failing to recognise the skills and attributes that fall outside of narrowly conceived definitions of success. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are often particularly negatively impacted by this narrowness of thinking, meaning that our school system may be inadvertently exacerbating existing social inequalities. While there may always be a gap between how disadvantaged families view education compared to the perceptions of middle-class education professionals, the education system can reduce the significance of this gap by diversifying its definitions of achievement, success, and 'valid' aspirations. Initiatives like the NSW Equity Placement Model, then, need to be implemented together with other programmes that enable the development of other skills and attributes, ones that transcend test scores and 'getting all the answers correct'.

## Notes

1. This statistic is based on the number of students in lowest quartile of socio-educational advantage, a measure based on parental education and occupation, among other indicators of advantage (ACARA 2015).
2. The research team included Megan Watkins, Greg Noble, Alexandra Wong and myself.
3. SES was calculated based on participants' reported occupation, household income, educational qualifications and suburb of residence.
4. Technical and Further Education (TAFE) offers post-school vocational education, providing qualifications from certificates to degrees. The most popular course areas in NSW include Business and Marketing, Building and Construction Trades, Accounting and Finance and Information and Communications Technology (TAFE NSW 2025).

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