



Aspirations of aboriginal children: What can we learn?

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Project description:

While Indigenous students have been designated in higher education policy as one of six official equity target groups, there has been little empirical research conducted into the aspirations of Australian Indigenous youth. The project specifically explored:

1. The proportion of Indigenous students who hold aspirations for higher education and the distribution of interest in particular careers;
2. The characteristics of Indigenous students (by year level, socioeconomic status, gender, location and prior achievement) who express interest in higher education and specific types of careers;
3. The reasons students give for those career interests;
4. Barriers identified by Indigenous students, and their teachers and parents, to achieving their aspirations; and
5. The understanding students convey about the path from school to higher education for their preferred career(s).

Conceptual and/or methodological framework:

This project drew on the surveys completed by students in the first three years of the Aspirations Longitudinal Study (2012-2014), looking specifically at Indigenous school students in Years 3 to 11 (n = 368), compared with non-Indigenous students (n = 5108). Transcripts of focus groups conducted with students, parents and teachers were also analysed. Analysis examined intersections with prior school achievement, gender, SES, age and location.

Key findings:

Three key issues emerged from the analysis:

- In relation to post-school educational aspirations, more Indigenous (21.3%) students expressed an interest in high school as their highest educational qualification than non-Indigenous students (12.5%), while fewer Indigenous students expressed an interest in university (39% compared with 51.4% of non-Indigenous students). Although significant differences were found between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, it is encouraging that 39% of the Indigenous students (n=141) aspired to attend university given that access to higher education for Indigenous people was so restricted prior to the 1980s.
- Aspirations for occupations requiring a university-level qualification followed traditional gendered patterns, such that gender appeared to be more influential than Indigeneity in the formation these aspirations; and
- While many Indigenous students were knowledgeable about navigating the path to university, focus group discussions revealed a number of perceived barriers in relation to higher education, including cost, access (primarily those from rural locations), employment opportunities, the school environment, and the interplay between familial background and schooling.

Implications for the future:

Through mapping the aspirations of Indigenous students, targeted strategies can be designed and implemented in order to help shape equity initiatives, and help foster a 'whole-of-university' approach to ensure optimal support for Indigenous students once they arrive at university. Rich qualitative studies that further explore the views and experiences of Indigenous school students and their families are needed to supplement the valuable quantitative analysis of this study. Of note, a 2016 HEPP funded project titled "Unlocking capacity and empowering choices": Indigenous students aspirations for higher education has been awarded to pursue this additional research, building on the findings reported here.