

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GROW UP? LESSONS FROM A WORLD-FIRST STUDY INTO STUDENT ASPIRATIONS

DR. SALLY PATFIELD AND DR. LEANNE FRAY.

In a world-first study Dr. Sally Patfield and Dr. Leanne Fray look at the importance of student aspirations and how they can be nurtured in public education...

While careers advice largely takes place in the later years of high school, young people begin to form ideas about their futures starting in the early years of primary school. How those aspirations take shape, what factors influence them, and what challenges they face in achieving their goals were some of the key questions at the heart of an Australian-first, decade-long study by us and our colleagues at the University of Newcastle.

When we first spoke to Dahlia* in 2016, she was a high achieving Year 11 student with aspirations to become a criminal psychologist. A young Aboriginal woman passionate about social justice, Dahlia had ambitions to create a different kind of future for First Nations people through reform of the criminal justice system.

However, the following year during Year 12, Dahlia suffered from severe mental ill health. Five years later, we spoke again with Dahlia who told us how the pressure of Year 12 had caused her to drop out of school:

It was just a burn out, like, I was just so overwhelmed. I felt like I was so pressured to do the best and I felt like I wasn't the best [...] then I'd get anxiety about not being as good as everyone thinks I am [...] that's why I really wanted to do this interview, because I wanted to put it out there that high school is not the be all, end all [...] getting that high [Year 12] mark isn't the be all, end all.

Dahlia's story is just one from the thousands of interviews we conducted as part of the [Aspirations Longitudinal Study](#), which began in 2012 and is continuing today, providing comprehensive insights into the factors which shape the career and educational aspirations of Australia's young people – and how these aspirations actually eventuate. The insights produced by this research have significant implications for teachers, schools and communities.

THE ASPIRATIONS LONGITUDINAL STUDY

The *Aspirations Longitudinal Study* began as an ARC (Aus-

tralian Research Council) Linkage Project in 2012, led by Laureate Professor Jenny Gore AM and the Teachers and Teaching Research Centre at the University of Newcastle.

The study sought to understand the way in which students from Years 3 to 12 think about the post-school options available to them, what factors shape their choices, how possibilities might be opened up or closed off, and the impact teachers, families and society can have on the pursuit of their goals.

In the first year of the study, students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 from 64 government schools in various locations across NSW undertook a survey about their career and educational aspirations. The students repeated the survey over four consecutive years which enabled us to follow students throughout their schooling, providing a range of views from Years 3 to 12, matched with NAPLAN data and other socio-educational data. We also undertook interviews and focus groups with students, teachers, parents, and community members.

In total, the study collected more than 12,000 survey responses and 1,000 interview and focus group transcripts and paved the way for ten additional studies which looked at everything from the aspirations of Indigenous students and students from regional and remote Australia, implications for the VET and Higher Education sectors, to the impact of bushfires, floods, and COVID-19 on the formation and pursuit of young people's aspirations.

This year, we have returned to several of the schools involved in the original study to conduct a follow up study to understand how student aspirations might have changed over the decade since we first began collecting this data.

KEY INSIGHTS

Analysis of this data produced [a number of important insights](#) that are extremely relevant to teachers, school leaders and careers advisers, as well as education system

leaders, policymakers, tertiary and higher education providers, and university staff developing community outreach programs.

Some of our findings are intuitive – we still see [stubborn and highly gendered aspirations](#) among young people. Males are more likely to aspire to careers such as Engineering, Defence, Sports, and STEM disciplines. Female students are more likely to aspire to careers such as Nursing, Teaching, Social Work and the Arts.

But many of the findings really challenge common assumptions about how students decide what they want or don't want to pursue after school.

For instance, we found that [Indigenous students have very similar career aspirations](#) to their non-Indigenous peers, however teachers often perceive a difference. Interestingly, where the aspirations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students really diverge is among the highest achieving students – where [Indigenous students are significantly less likely to aspire](#) to a university education career path than their non-Indigenous peers. For Indigenous students, the path to higher education often involves navigating complex intersections of racial, socioeconomic, and cultural barriers—challenges that are typically not experienced by non-Indigenous young people.

We also found that aspirations for university among [students in regional and remote communities](#) are often shaped by the presence or proximity of university to their community. While governments and universities often emphasise scholarships and other financial incentives for rural and remote students, cost is just one factor impacting young people's desire to pursue higher education. Distance, job opportunities closer to home and emotional attachment to their communities are often of greater concern.

Starkly, another key finding of our research was that [young people who don't have parents who have been to university](#) often discount the possibility of future study at a very young age when compared to their peers with university-educated parents. Those students without university-educated parents who go on to higher education are often referred to as 'first in family' students. [These students sometimes fall into multiple equity categories](#) – more likely to be Indigenous, live in a regional or remote area, and attend a relatively disadvantaged school – but

they also face the unique challenge of navigating towards a new and alien environment. Our research calls for specific policies and supports for these students.

TRANSLATING THESE FINDINGS INTO PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY

In 2018, following the completion of the major arm of the *Aspirations Longitudinal Study*, the Australian Government commissioned the development of a professional development course to translate these research findings into practice.

[Aspirations: Supporting Students' Futures](#) is a free, online self-paced course for teachers that unpacks the evidence-base produced during the longitudinal study. It provides a framework and practical strategies for teachers to understand how aspirations form and the role they can play in nurturing the aspirations of students from diverse backgrounds, with applications both within and outside the classroom.

On the back of the positive reception to this course, we also developed a second course, [When I Grow Up: Supporting Children's Aspirations](#), which is a free online course designed specifically for parents, carers and community members. Like the first course, it also provides evidence-based approaches for nurturing the educational and career aspirations of young people, with a particular focus on life outside of the classroom.

THE PATH TRAVELLED

Thankfully, [Dahlia's story](#), which we began this article with, is a happy one. After leaving high school before the HSC, Dahlia took up a series of retail and hospitality jobs in her local community. But when she came across an advertisement for an Aboriginal traineeship at a local Indigenous pre-school, her passion to work with First Nations Australians was reignited. She completed her traineeship before entering university to study a combined degree in primary and early childhood teaching.

While her original career aspirations changed, the underpinning desire to create systematic change remains a driving force for Dahlia:

There's such a push now for formal schooling to start early. But those first five years, just being able to be a kid and

enjoy your childhood is just so important. I really want to give our Goori kids a chance to do that... I'm very passionate about culture so I do a lot of language and songs and dance in my practice so that these kids have culture in their lives and feel connected before they start school.

Dahlia's story – like those of the many other young people we've spoken to over the course of the past 10 years – emphasises the need for all of us to understand how young people's aspirations form, what values and beliefs drive them, and what supports – both at an individual and systemic level – we need to provide to enable them to achieve their goals.

**Names have been changed*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Sally Patfield is a lecturer in the School of Education and member of the Teachers and Teaching Research Centre at the University of Newcastle. Her research focusses on issues of equity and social justice across formal schooling and higher education, particularly in relation to educational and social inequities connected to social class, rurality, first-in-family status, race, and the changing nature of the education system.



Dr Leanne Fray is a senior lecturer in the School of Education and member of the Teachers and Teaching Research Centre at the University of Newcastle. Leanne's research focuses on improving educational outcomes for students from complex backgrounds. Her work is centred on the impact of professional development in specialised school contexts, the effects of COVID-19 on teachers and students, and student education and career aspirations. Leanne leads the Primary Literacy team at the University of Newcastle.

