ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS IN THE MIDDLE YEARS OF SCHOOLING

NSW GOVERNMENT Education & Communities

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ABSTRACT

Strategies designed to increase the participation of youth from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds in higher education in Australia have had little impact. In order to investigate social influences on the emerging aspirations of students in the middle years, we use a 'composite capital construct' utilizing the theories of Bourdieu (1986) and Becker and Tomes (1986) to theoretically frame the investigation. This longitudinal study (2012-2015) is gathering data from students, teachers and parents from diverse backgrounds in order to understand processes in the formation of educational and career aspirations and inform what schools and school systems might productively do to intervene for greater equity. Our data demonstrate both the early solidification of students' aspirations and the significant, but complex, impact of socio-economic and other differences.

AIMS

Current government policy in Australia is directed toward increased participation in higher education particularly for traditionally underrepresented groups (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Meeting this policy goal will depend on understanding the educational and career aspirations of school students as they progress toward post-secondary school destinations. Knowledge of when and how students' aspirations form is limited, given that the majority of empirical studies in this field have centred on the later years of school education (Bowden & Doughney, 2010; Curtis & McMillan, 2008; Hillman, 2005; Marks, 2008).

Funded by the Australian Research Council and the NSW Department of Education and Communities, this longitudinal study engages with more than 80 public schools (primary and secondary), spread across diverse social, cultural and geographic regions, yielding a sample of more than 6000 students in the middle years of schooling, and their parents and teachers. Cross-sectional data from the first two years of the study are presented here, in order to illuminate the ways in which educational and career aspirations are shaped, especially in relation to socio-economic status.
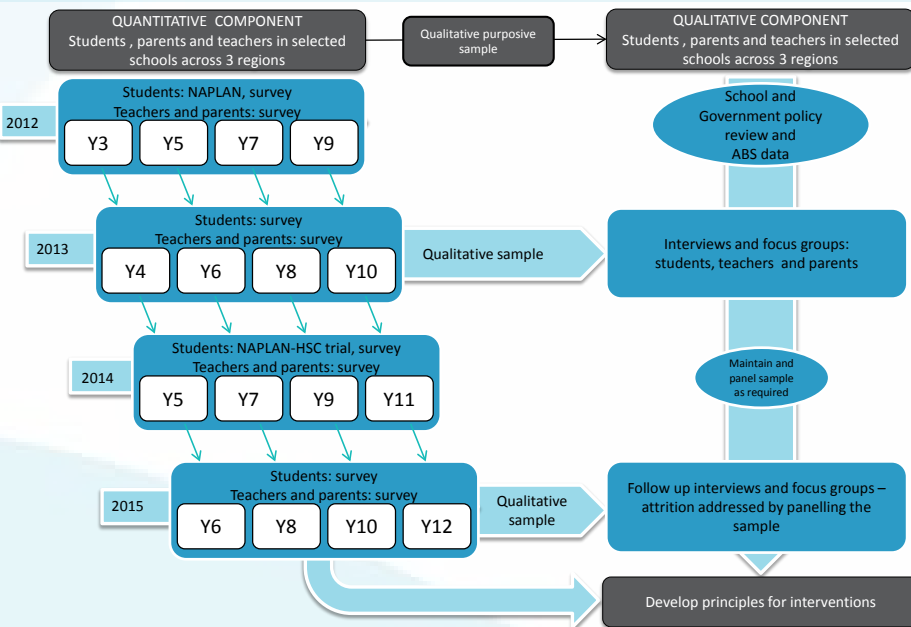
METHODOLOGY

The study employs a sequential mixed method approach, utilising complementary qualitative and quantitative components, as depicted in Figure 1, over a four year period. Quantitative data include:
- annual on-line surveys of students (appropriately framed for varying age groups);
- annual on-line surveys of parents (with options for paper copy and structured interviews where situational, technological and/or language/literacy situations dictate);
- annual on-line surveys of teachers;
- linkage to education department demographic data and student achievement data;
- school documents and plans; and
- other publicly available data.

Qualitative data are collected through focus group interviews with students and parents, and interviews with teachers in the second and fourth years of the study.

Cohorts of students are being followed starting in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 over the four-year period of the study. Although the project is focussed on understanding aspirations in the middle years, one cohort is being followed from Year 9 through to Year 12 in order to provide a comparative analysis with previous studies that have focused on the later years of schooling.

The quantitative data are analysed cross-sectionally and longitudinally. Structural equation modelling (SEM) will be used to examine the complex interactions between the student and school level variables; and between dimensions of capital (social, cultural, economic and human) as they relate to student educational and career aspirations. Using this modelling we examine the relative influence of each of the four capitals in relation to student aspirations and will elaborate on the interplay *between* the capitals and the key variables *within* each capital.

These analyses will allow us to develop principles for how and when to optimally intervene in the process of educational and career aspiration formation, with the goal of increasing equity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
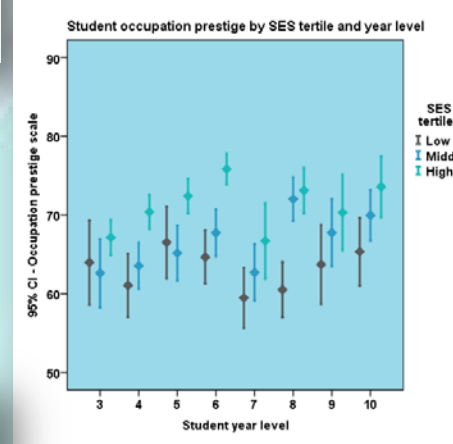
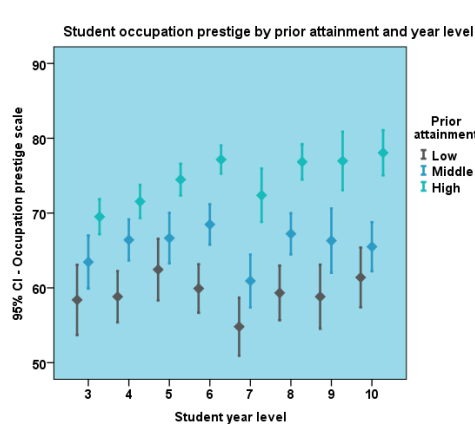## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS: CAREER ASPIRATIONS
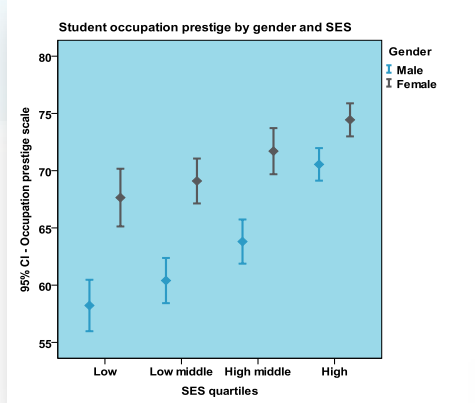
Female aspirations are higher but males converge across the SES profile
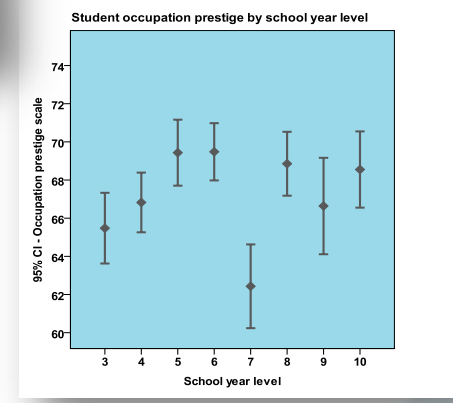

Patterns in aspirations for the low, medium and high SES groups across year levels

More distinct differences in aspirations between attainment groups across year levels

Significant drop in mean aspirations as students enter high school

CONCLUSION

Baseline data from the Aspirations Longitudinal Study enable exploration by year group (and student age), socio-economic status, geographic location, cultural background and gender. Evidence indicates that students' career aspirations begin to form early in their schooling and complex influences hold students in patterns that are socio-economically based. From other analyses of our whole sample data, students have limited understanding of vocational and technical education options when compared to university study. Like career aspirations, educational aspirations have a direct relationship with SES with the majority of students from lower SES backgrounds planning to leave education after compulsory schooling and the majority of students from higher SES backgrounds planning to study at university and not even considering vocational and technical education. Students who see themselves as 'average', as measured by self-perception of ability, tend not to aspire to attend university and are more likely to see themselves leaving formal education at the earliest opportunity.

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PARTICIPANTS

Year level	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
n =	611	822	697	918	578	820	423	583