Developing conceptual understandings of the capacity to aspire for higher education

Samuel Prodonovich, Laura B. Perry and Andrew Taggart
Murdoch University

This paper reviews research and theory relating to aspirations for higher education as a cultural capacity. Understanding the social and cultural dimensions of aspirations for higher education is important as they are increasingly becoming part of social commentary and more recently educational policy, research and practice. This paper synthesises the empirical literature, conceptual understandings and theory relating to aspirations as a capacity in a way that will be useful to others who are engaged in practical initiatives and research targeting educational equity. We focus on recent and current developments regarding the capacity to aspire as a conceptual framework, analyse studies that evaluate programs based on the capacity to aspire, and consider what evidence and lessons can be used in current and future equity initiatives. This paper draws on the authors' current research about the educational and career aspirations of students from under-represented backgrounds in higher education.

Introduction

Positive attitudes towards the future may indeed be contagious. (Bernard & Taffesse (2014, p. 189)

Raising student aspirations for higher education – particularly for those students from low socio-economic-status (SES) backgrounds – is now firmly entrenched in educational policy, institutional responses and research directions in many developed countries (Smith, 2011; Gale, 2012). In Australia, this is a response to the under-representation in higher education of young people from the lowest SES quartile, which has stagnated at around 16% of total domestic enrolments since the late 1980s (Sellar & Gale, 2011). The higher education landscape in Australia after 2008 has seen an expansion of equity initiatives primed by the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008), many of which target students' educational aspirations as a means of changing "the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole" (Dawkins, 1990, cited by Naylor, Baik & James, 2013, p. 11). It is therefore timely to examine what we mean when we talk about educational aspirations, particularly in a Western Australian context where fewer than 50% of Year 12 students are on a pathway to university (March 2013 personal communication, S. Hoath, Executive Office, TISC WA, based on Policy and Analysis Branch, Higher Education Division, DIISRTE, *Applications, Offers and Acceptances Report 2012*).

The aim of this paper is to provide the reader with a clear understanding of the capacity to aspire and its use in the field to support practical measures designed to both broaden participation in higher education for those who aspire to it, and to support alternative strategies to build educational aspirations, particularly for students who attend low SES secondary schools.

Appadurai (2004) conceives aspirations as:

> a navigational capacity which is nurtured by the possibility of real-world conjectures and refutations (and)… thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture and refutation (p. 69).

Important in Appadurai's framing of aspirations as a navigational capacity is the understanding that everyone aspires, but that circumstances can enhance or diminish the capacity to navigate from where we are to where we would like to be. Aspirations do not just deliver us from a start point to an end point, rather they require an understanding of how to navigate the "dense combination of nodes and pathways" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69) that lie between the present and an imagined future. The more we get to practise and explore our aspirational maps, the more robust and realistic is our capacity to navigate the future. Those who have less opportunity to develop their capacity to aspire – such as marginalised and disadvantaged students – have "a more brittle horizon of aspirations" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69) that can tend towards the ideal rather than the realistic (St. Clair, Kintrea & Houston, 2013). This approach invalidates deficit notions that see a lack of aspirations as an individual failing, or that in order to aspire and achieve it is simply a case of pulling up one's bootstraps as illustrated in the quote below from UK Prime Minister David Cameron.

> You've got to get out there and find people, win them over, get them to raise aspirations and get them to think that they can get all the way to the top. [http://www.bloomberg. com/news/2013-11-14/cameron-says-poor-minorities-must-raise-aspirations.html]

Bernard & Taffesse (2014) provide us with a good starting definition of aspirations for elaborating an understanding of aspirations as a capacity. Aspirations are "some aim or target and a preference or wish to attain it … [suggesting] rather implicitly that some effort must be exerted to realise the desired aim or target" (p. 198). When we apply Appadurai's concept of aspirations as a cultural capacity to this definition, we discover two important concepts. Firstly, that the preferences are never merely individual, but rather they are culturally located, formed in the "thick of social life" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 67). Secondly, if the resources that support the capacity to aspire are not, as argued by Appadurai (2004), evenly distributed, so too the effort required in reaching the desired aim will also be unevenly distributed. Illustrating this, Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002) suggested that for youth from advantaged backgrounds to aspire to higher education is to move as a fish through water, whereas for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the same process involves doubts, ambivalence and very deliberate decision-making processes. As argued by Gale, Parker, Rodd, Stratton and Sealey (2013), it is more difficult to navigate to higher education when those pathways are not well worn or within the experience of one's socio-cultural group.

We are interested in aspirations for two reasons. Firstly, because the literature sees them as a clear indicator of future behaviours and enrolments in higher education (Eccles, Vida & Barber, 2004; Khoo & Ainley, 2005; Lee, Hill & Hawkins, 2012; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Walkey, McClure, Meyer & Wei, 2013), and as a "probabilistic indication of a young person's future occupation" (Archer, DeWitt & Wong, 2013, p. 58). Secondly, education

policy grounded in reports such as the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008) positions the raising of aspirations – specifically those of low-SES students – as a central plank for widening participation in higher education to meet projected, future workforce demand. This issue of participation is particularly acute in Western Australia, where less than 50% of Year 12 students are on a pathway to university. This is below the national average of 65.9% and well behind Queensland (78%), a state with an economic profile similar to Western Australia's ((March 2013 personal communication, S. Hoath, Executive Office, TISC WA, based on Policy and Analysis Branch, Higher Education Division, DIISRTE, *Applications, Offers and Acceptances Report 2012*). Although we are committed to increasing the participation of Western Australian students in higher education, we believe that equity initiatives should support rather than raise aspirations. When talking about raising aspirations, we are in danger of drifting to "potentially deficit understandings, which frame it (aspirations) as a homogenous resource that people have in 'high' or 'low' supply" (Sellar, Gale & Parker, 2009, p. 2).

Context

National

Equity initiatives to increase participation in higher education are becoming an increasingly fixed part of the education landscape in Australia. These initiatives are in response to Federal targets set in 2008 (Bradley, et al., 2008) which aimed for 20% of domestic university enrolments to be made up of students from the lowest SES quartile by 2020. The result of a recent, Federally commissioned review by Kemp and Norton (2014) recommending that these targets be removed is yet to be felt; however the review does acknowledge that a Federally funded equity program is "theoretically plausible" (2014, p. 39). Most Australian universities run initiatives designed to support students' aspirations to engage with higher education and central to this is "outreach to schools and communities" (Naylor, Baik & James, 2013, p. 13). The initiatives target regions in Australia that are under-represented in higher education and include the areas of Greater Western Sydney (http://www.bridges.nsw.edu.au), Corio in Victoria (http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/efi/) and the south-west corridor of Perth, Western Australia.

Local

The *Murdoch University Aspirations and Pathways for University* (MAP4U) project is an Australian Government equity initiative designed to increase participation in higher education by students from the south-west corridor of metropolitan Perth, Western Australia. The proportion of secondary students in pathways leading to higher education is relatively low in these communities. Few public secondary schools in the corridor offer the core academic curriculum at the highest level (Perry & Southwell, 2013) and Year 12 destination data (see Table 1) reflects local schools' emphasis on vocational education.

Census data also shows that university attainment rates for the entire population are substantially lower in the southwest corridor than elsewhere in Perth. The percentage of 25-34 year olds with a bachelor's degree is approximately 15%, less than half of the

average for Western Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). When looking at the Statistical Area Level One's (SA1: sub-suburban areas containing on average 120 to 350 households) for this region, one local government area has 41 SA1s with less than 8.7% of the population reporting to have a university qualification. A second area has 99 SA1s with less than 7.3% of the population reporting to have a university degree. To put this in perspective, one of the middle to high-SES local government areas in Perth has a total of four SA1s with less than 13.4% of the population reporting to have a university degree (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011b).

Table 1: Partial destination data for Year 12 students attending public high schools
in the south west corridor of Perth, Western Australia: 2014 (2013 cohort)

School	% of Year 12 students whose destination is "University"	% of Year 12 students whose destination is "TAFE"	% of Year 12 students whose destination is "Employment"	% of Year 12 students whose destination is "Employment assistance"
A	22%	58%	13%	5%
B	18%	51%	9%	11%
C	21%	52%	20%	6%
D	16%	54%	17%	11%
E	15%	69%	10%	4%
F	29%	24%	21%	10%
G	0%	27%	17%	30%
H	26%	26%	27%	17%
I	14%	73%	1%	7%

TAFE: Technical and Further Education. These are institutes providing certificate and diploma level training (Australian Qualifications Framework levels 1-6).
Source: WA Department of Education [http://www.det.wa.edu.au/schoolsonline]

Unemployment for the region is around 6% of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011) with one of the local government areas in the south west corridor of Perth reporting 25 SA1s with unemployment of between 12.5 and 22.6% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011b). There are youth unemployment 'hotspots' in the region with rates as high as 17.3% (Brotherhood of Saint Laurence, 2014, p. 4).

MAP4U participates in several outreach initiatives in partnership with government and non-government high schools in the southwest corridor to increase participation in higher education by supporting student aspirations. The socioeconomic composition of these schools is lower than the national average as measured by the Index of Community Socio-Education Advantage (ICSEA). Values for the schools that work with MAP4U initiatives range from 897 to 1019 with a mean of 979. The median value for Australian schools is 1000 [http://www.myschool.edu.au]. Initiatives supported by MAP4U include mentorship initiatives, academic academies, information services and planning, and collaboration between schools, universities and industry professionals in the curriculum related areas of Robotics and the Creative Arts. Just how an understanding of the capacity to aspire directs these strategies is explored later in the paper.

The capacity to aspire: A conceptual framework

Appadurai's notion of aspiration as a cultural capacity has informed writers in fields ranging from economics (Ray, 2006; Chiapa, Garrido & Prina, 2012) to poverty alleviation (Powell, 2012) and education (Smith, 2011; Bok, 2010; Gale, et al., 2013). As a framework, it responds to concerns that "constructions of aspirations in policy are far too simplistic" (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan & Gale, 2013, p. 5) and that within policy, there may be a "continuous and powerful assumption regarding the centrality of aspirations" (St. Clair, Kintrea & Houston, 2013, p. 720).

In terms of the initial concern, Appadurai's framework adds nuance to our concept of aspirations. To aspire is presented not as a dichotomous variable that one either has or does not have, but rather as a capacity that is a site of "interplay between agency and social structures" (Archer, DeWitt & Wong, 2013, p. 59). This acknowledges that there are many social factors – including friends, schools, family, and the local environment (Wilks & Wilson, 2012) – that influence young people's aspirations and how robust or connected to reality these aspirations are. The capacity to aspire is less for the poor and the disadvantaged as the social resources and networks that they have access to may be fewer in number and less likely to be connected to aspirations such as university attainment (Parker, Stratton, Gale, Rodd & Sealey, 2013). As such, they

> … have a smaller stock of meaningful experiences relating aspirations to commodities. Moreover, they have fewer opportunities to experience how a choice of a commodity influences their fundamental well-being. As a result, the poor's navigational map consists of very few combinations of nodes and pathways from aspirations to commodities. (Heifetz & Minelli, 2006, p. 2)

For people seeking to promote equity in education, this understanding provides points of involvement (friends, schools, families, communities) beyond the individual when addressing how we can support student aspirations for higher education.

In terms of the second concern, Appadurai suggests that aspirations generated by any group or individual regarding what the 'good life' looks like are legitimate whether or not they correspond with dominant, institutional or national aspirations. The key points here are that for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, the capacity to aspire is truncated by circumstances and structures (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013), and that aspirations are influenced by community norms and values. This can generate incorrect assumptions that people from low-SES backgrounds harbour aspirations short of a national yardstick (Raco, 2009). A consequence of this understanding is that efforts to encourage more participation in higher education from low-SES students may well focus on changing structures and providing resources that allow students to strengthen and connect their aspirations. This point leads us to the key question of 'aspirations for what?'

Aspirations for what?

For Appadurai and others (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013; Walker, 2003) people aspire to different things, as aspirations are formed and developed in interaction with one's cultural

milieu and access to an "archive of concrete experiences with the good life" (2004, p. 69). The people around us help to define exactly what it is that is meaningful to aspire to. Therefore, recognition of aspirations is recognition of culture. Appadurai draws on the work of Charles Taylor in advocating that that we have an 'ethical obligation' (2004, p. 62) to recognise that others have different world views. Taylor's concept of *terms of recognition* describes how people are viewed by both others (socially and politically) and by themselves (personally and culturally) (Conradie, 2013). According to Blum, understanding how we are viewed by ourselves and others identifies "the human need for a recognition of distinctness, apart from its connection to social, political and economic equality" (1998, p. 51).

Understanding terms of recognition is important when working with students' aspirations. This is because acknowledging different views on aspirations can rub against broad policies, often from a conservative position that seek to 'raise' a common or centralised set of aspirations to fulfil national agendas and labour market predictions. People working in equity initiatives may well find themselves in an interesting position where program performance indicators and aspirations on the ground do not always align. Concerns regarding the 'standardisation' of what it means to aspire have led some authors to caution against the use of aspirations as subscription (Smith, 2011; Sellar & Gale, 2011) or a national duty (Morley, 2012). Any policy or conversation which fails to recognise alternate and varied aspirations is therefore "an unfair social enterprise" (Archer, DeWitt & Wong, 2013, p. 77), which advocates "individual solutions to social problems" (Bauman as cited in Giroux, 2014, para. 9). Such an approach prescribes a certain, or particular future (Walker, 2003) and is both fertile ground for deficit thinking and encouragement for the disadvantaged to subscribe to customs whose "social effect is to further diminish their dignity (and) exacerbate their inequality" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 61). In contrast, policy and practice that validates and supports "low-SES young people … (to) imagine alternative kinds of 'good lives' for their futures" (Zipin, et al. 2013, p. 4) nurtures both the capacity to aspire and "the capacity to debate, contest, inquire and participate critically" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 70).

The capacity to aspire: In the field

An emerging body of research is using Appadurai's conceptual framework to examine students' aspirations for their future and to investigate the impact of equity initiatives. The clear themes emerging from the literature are:

- that the disadvantaged aspire to education attainment levels similar to any other sections of the population (Archer et al., 2013; Gale, Parker, Rodd, Stratton & Sealey, 2013), and;
- that the disadvantaged may not be allowed to develop their aspirations due to constraints such as structural hurdles and uneven access to the resources and information that support the capacity to aspire (Tafere, 2014).

Distribution of aspirations

There is some research arguing that "socially disadvantaged groups … tend to have low aspirations for themselves and for their children" (Gutman & Akerman, 2008, p. i), but there is concern that a cultural deficit logic may be at work here (Carter, 2002) and that the aspirations of these groups are just different rather than 'lower'. For research and theory incorporating the capacity to aspire as a framework, aspirations are generally reported to be similar across different socio economic quartiles (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013), with "little evidence of a poverty of aspirations" (Archer et al., 2013, p. 66) and around 70% of low-SES students aspiring to a university degree (Gale, et al., 2013). Table 2 below compares low SES student aspirations for a university degree from studies in Australia and abroad.

Table 2: Comparative data showing the number of students who responded that they aspire to a university study or a university degree

Study	Year	Number of participants	Year levels	SES context	Students reporting university aspirations
1. Central Queensland (Gale et al.)	2013	258	5-11	Low-SES	67%
2. Corio, Victoria (Parker et al.)	2013	71	9	Low-SES	70%
3. Canada (Looker & Thiessen)	2004	29,687	10	mixed	69%
4. United Kingdom (Rampino & Taylor)	2013	5,203	8-10	mixed	75%

Note: Studies 1-3 reported the responses for students agreeing that they would like to achieve a university degree. Study 4 asked students if they would like to study at a university or college.

Research in the United States (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006) and Australia (Curtis, Hammond, Halsey & Lawson, 2012; James, 2002; Naylor, Baik & James, 2013) showed that aspirations for higher education are similar across SES groups but actual participation rates are substantially lower for disadvantaged groups. This supports Appadurai's argument that connections between aspirations and the likelihood of reaching them are more tenuous for young people from lower SES groups than from middle and upper SES groups. As argued by St. Clair et al. (2013), the disadvantaged aspire at similar levels to other SES groups, but their knowledge and resources for making their aspirations reality are limited.

The disparity between aspiration and participation for disadvantaged groups has been attributed to the constraining of aspirations by factors leading to 'adaptive' rather than 'pure' choices (Sarojini Hart, 2013, Parker, et al, 2013). As far back as 1964, Bennett Jr. and Gist (1964, p. 167) found that although aspirations were consistent across social class, there were differences along class lines with regard to responses to "what they (students) realistically expected to achieve". Walkey, et al. (2013) drew on Azjen's Theory of Planned Behaviour to suggest this disconnect between aspirations and reality may be due to

whether an individual values the aspiration, whether there is social pressure to achieve or not achieve that aspiration, and whether the individual feel they have control over achieving the aspiration. To borrow from Smyth & Wrigley (2013, p. 120), aspirations "grow or shrink partly in response to the perceived possibilities of a successful outcome".

Constraints

> … the practical constraints of making a more just world – it has to be fashioned from
> the one that already exists. (Walker, 2003, p. 184)

Structural, social and access issues are significant constraints on the capacity to aspire. Constraints can manifest in a number of forms including poverty (Appadurai, 2004), financial and performance factors (Looker & Thiessen, 2004; Eccles, Vida & Barber, 2004), inadequate academic preparation (Conradie, 2013) and adverse terms of recognition, which is often evident in the incongruence between individual (or specific group) aspirations and state or institutional aspirations. Constraints such as those generated by poverty result in a "diminishing of the circumstances" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69) in which aspiring can develop.

Constraints to aspirations can occur in schools. In Perth, Western Australia, only 9% (2 out of 23) of low-SES government secondary schools in the greater Perth metropolitan area, including the south-west corridor, offer all five of the core academic curriculum subjects (mathematics, mathematics specialist, chemistry, physics and English literature) at the highest stage (Perry & Southwell, 2013). If we accept the argument by Appadurai and others (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013; Chiapa, Garrido & Prina, 2012) that structural and institutional factors constrain or grow educational aspirations (and consequently participation in higher education), then school settings that place less emphasis on 'academic press' (Palardy, 2013) and provide students limited access to the academic curriculum would only further constrain aspirations and direct "choices to less ambitious options" (Conradie, 2013, p. 194).

Constraints on the capacity to aspire can also be more subtle than access to academic curriculum. Rather, these constraints operate surreptitiously and are linked to the "adverse terms of recognition" (Conradie, 2013, p. 216) under which the disadvantaged operate. For example, Jones and Vagle (2013) found that the academic performance of middle class students is more likely to be viewed by teachers as movable and that of low-SES students is more likely to be viewed as "increasingly fixed and less worthy of attention" (2013, p. 135). This finding is supported by the personal experience of the authors working with low SES schools in Australia in situations where the poor results of low SES students have on occasions been prefaced by comments such as, "you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear". This is an example of what Carter calls "the cooling out process" (2002, p. 147) or, the decreasing of aspirations over time, due to exposure to socialising agents such as curriculum, staff, pedagogy and the hidden curriculum.

Time and money are recurring themes when discussing constraints on aspirations. Naylor, et al. (2013) found that in Australia "a major deterrent for low SES students is the perceived cost of higher education, which includes fees, relocation costs, travel costs and

other costs associated with travel" (2013, p. 16). For families in these situations, "it is not their unwillingness to invest but their inability to overcome the hurdles they face with the scarce resources they have" (Tafere, 2014, p. 19). Both the Naylor et al. report (2013) and the Tafere (2014) study showed that young people from low SES backgrounds have high levels of aspirations, but lack the resources and support required to repeatedly connect those aspirations with reality.

Bernard and Taffesse (2014) suggested that aspirations require an investment of time (along with effort and money) to be achieved. Time use is influenced by class position (Lareau, 2002) with financial constraints often dictating the need to work at the expense of developing connections with institutional values (Bergerson, 2007) and practising "the use of this navigational capacity (aspiring)" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69). Spare time is required to "increase both economic and cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 258), however, disadvantage puts greater emphasis on the allocation of time to the provision of necessity (Appadurai, 2004; Tafere, 2014).

Lessons for practice

In looking at research on the capacity to aspire, we are asking what lessons we can bring back to equity projects such as MAP4U. People working in the field of student equity can be placed in a tricky position between supporting individual and group aspirations that may be unique to the local context, and serving the aspirations mandated by the funding they are operating under. Therefore, an understanding of how aspirations work as a capacity can assist people working in equity projects to navigate the issue of non-aligned aspirations and provide a theoretical basis for project design and evaluation. There are two clear ideas to emerge from the literature that have an impact for practitioners and researchers in the field of educational equity. The first is that the disadvantaged aspire as much as other SES groups – and these aspirations may be in line with a dominant or centralised understanding of aspiration or they may be local, immediate, important aspirations (Appaduari, 2004). The second is that the disadvantaged have a larger aspirations gap (Ray, 2006) than more privileged SES groups. The aspirations gap is the distance between where an individual or group is currently situated and what it is they are aspiring to. This gap is not caused by a deficiency on the part of those under-represented in higher education, but by limited access to the knowledge and resources required to make their aspirations reality.

Since aspirations are influenced by a cumulative effect of factors (Naylor, Baik & James, 2013), programs should be designed to improve resources not just for students as a discrete target population, but to support schools, families and communities with information and direct, relevant experiences with higher education in regular, sustained ways. Most current initiatives are one-off outreach events designed to give students a taste of university (Gale, 2012). Appadurai's concept of aspirations as a capacity suggests, however, that sustained approaches that give students the opportunity to regularly and repeatedly connect their experiences with the information and resources required to support their aspirations are necessary. Projects should also be grounded in the interests and aspirations of the participants as an acknowledgment of the validity of their

aspirations and interests. For this reason, we agree with the use of grounded methodologies (Ibrahim, 2011) where the intervention is a result of inquiry rather than being an off-the-shelf 'solution'. Such approaches may include task-centred outreach initiatives where tasks are generated by student interest with information, resourcing and support available to connect students' interests and aspirations with further points on their aspirational maps.

For equity project designers and evaluators, understanding the importance of different aspirations and perspectives is critical in responding to arguments that the inclusion of more disadvantaged students may be problematic for higher education. For Sellar and Gale (2011), recognising, valuing and then supporting the aspirations of under-represented groups, and individuals, improves the level of engagement in equity initiatives and helps to prevent higher education remaining "a process of social reproduction" (2011, p. 127). It is important for practitioners to understand that increased participation by under-represented groups can improve the overall quality of higher education (Willis & Josko, 2012). Indeed there is little evidence that increased participation by under-represented groups causes a fall in academic standards (Naylor, Baik & James, 2013).

Although there is research and support to assist the design and development of equity measures (Gale, et al., 2013; Naylor, et al., 2013), initiatives are still largely guided by good intentions due to "the relative dearth of publically available, peer reviewed research or evaluation, conducted with rigorous methodologies on the effect of equity initiatives" (Naylor, et al., 2013, p. 7). Viewing aspirations as a cultural capacity can help program designers and researchers develop measures that focus on recognising aspirations at the local level. It can also offer insights about opportunities for students to practise, explore and connect their aspirations with the community around them.

Practical measures, alternative strategies

The following four sub-headings outline the range of programs and strategies currently in place in the south-west corridor of Perth, Australia, that are designed to connect students' aspirations with the archives of experience (Appadurai, 2004) required to realise them.

Building academic aspirations and achievement

These programs work in a variety of ways to "target student, family and community aspirations building" (Murdoch University, 2014) and include academic enrichment programs, pathway planning systems, and programs designed to engage parents as career support people. All three approaches are designed to strengthen support around the student for their aspirations. Academic enrichment programs aim to do this by creating a space within schools with a heavy vocational leaning for students to collaboratively pursue an academic path. This action taps into the concept that

> high school students are particularly impressionable by their peers' attitudes and
> behaviours during the time they are typically making decisions about transitioning out of
> high school and about postsecondary options. (Palardy, 2013, p. 742)

Pathway planning systems provide organised opportunities for students to engage in more regular and authentic conversations about their futures with school staff, family members and peers. These systems are now embedded within the strategic plans for some high schools in the region and the uptake of these measures in these schools is linked to school improvement. Programs such as *Parents as Careers Transition Support Training* (PACTS) support parents with the 'cold knowledge' (Smith, 2011) required to provide their students with information that is current and accurate (Youth Connect, 2014). This approach aligns with research showing that "transition specific parent-child interactions can help young people to find a career direction and foster more adaptive outcomes" (Schoon, Martin & Ross, 2007, p. 91).

Innovative curriculum and pedagogy

These initiatives are substantial, task centred outreach programs that connect students with university and career mentors. These programs focus on tasks such as film making and building robots and include the use of university students and industry professionals as mentors to produce an end product that is displayed to the wider community. In the case of film making (the *Creative Arts Initiative*), films are made by the students over a six month collaboration that includes workshops, planning and technical sessions, and weekend and after school work. This culminates in a public screening at the university open day to over 600 people, many of whom are visiting a university campus for the first time. The robotics program operates in a range of schools as either after school clubs or as part of the school timetable. This program involves university engineering and robotics students working with high school students to produce entries for robotics competitions and to display their work at public events. Mentors from three different Western Australian universities are now working with robotics classes and clubs in two major public high schools and one independent high school within the region. Both the CAI and the robotics program provide the space and resources to link students' interests with the people, resources and information that can support aspirations to be more robust and achievable.

Big Picture academies

Big Picture academies [http://www.bigpicture.org.au] are schools within schools that focus learning around student interests, with the support of an advisory teacher. Student interest is then developed through connection with family and experts from the relevant industry and eventually exhibited. The involvement of the family and community in student learning develops a "strong network for advice and support" (Big Picture, 2013). As such, Big Picture learning aligns with Appadurai's concept of aspirations as a cultural capacity in that student interest and aspirations are acknowledged as being authentic and the starting point for learning, and these aspirations are then developed through the establishment of robust archives. Big Picture academies are expanding in the region, currently operating in five high schools in the south-west corridor of Perth.

University enabling programs

University enabling programs (UEPs) are designed to create non-traditional pathways into university. Students who are not enrolled or successful in the academic stream in high school are able to attend UEPs at their local university with a view to further bridging courses or direct entry into most university undergraduate degrees. One of these UEPs operates at Murdoch University's regional campus in the south-west corridor and accommodates over 100 students each year in a nine month, after school program designed to introduce Year 12 high school students to the expectations, facilities and experiences associated with university education. Students moving from this program onto university undergraduate degrees are demonstrating retention rates in line with the rest of the domestic student body (personal communication, T. Goggin, August, 2014, Centre for Teaching and Learning, Murdoch University).

Conclusion

Appadurai's framework for aspirations provides a robust theoretical platform for a wide range of existing studies and for future programs and research that target educational equity. Supporting this theoretical framework are anecdotal and lay understandings as well as studies demonstrating that all people aspire. What is now required is the further development of detailed and systematic/programmatic studies that evaluate the impact on the capacity to aspire of interventions and outreach programs that build profound relationships and task centred activities designed to include teachers, peers, family and social groups as well as individuals (Gale, et al., 2013). As discussed, developing the capacity to aspire requires acknowledging the aspirations of participants. It means providing space for people to express their aspirations and desires in a forum where the next step towards them can be seen, explained, practiced, supported and achieved. It is this development of the capacity to aspire that allows people in the field of student equity to support students from under-represented groups to align their aspirations with information, resources and people and move from "wishful thinking" to "thoughtful wishing" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 82).

Acknowledgement

References

Appadurai, A. (2004). The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition. In Y. Rao & M. Walton (Eds.), *Culture and public action* (pp. 59-84). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011). *Census of population and housing, 2011.*

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011b). *Census of population and housing, 2011.* [also at http://atlas.id.com.au/]

Archer, L., DeWitt, J. & Wong, B. (2013). Spheres of influence: What shapes young people's aspirations at age 12/13 and what are the implications for education policy? *Journal of Education Policy, 29*(1), 58-85. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2013.790079

Ball, S. J., Davies, J., David, M. & Reay, D. (2002). 'Classification' and 'judgement': Social class and the 'cognitive structures' of choice of higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 23*(1), 51-72. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01425690120102854

Bennett Jr, W. S. & Gist, N. P. (1964). Class and family influence on student aspirations. *Social Forces, 43*(2), 167-173.

Bergerson, A. A. (2007). Exploring the impact of social class on adjustment to college: Anna's story. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 20*(1), 99-119. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518390600923610

Bernard, T. & Taffesse, A. S. (2014). Aspirations: An approach to measurement with validation using Ethiopian data. *Journal of African Economies.* http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jae/ejt030

Big Picture Education (2013). *One student at a time* [Brochure]. News South Wales: Big Picture Education.

Blum, L. (1998). Recognition, value, and equality: A critique of Charles Taylor's and Nancy Fraser's accounts of multiculturalism. *Constellations, 5*(1), 51-68. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.00074

Bok, J. (2010). The capacity to aspire to higher education: 'It's like making them do a play without a script'. *Critical Studies in Education, 51*(2), 163-178. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17508481003731042

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson, (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp.241-258). New York: Greenwood.

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H. & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian higher education: Final report.* Canberra, ACT: DEEWR. http://www.industry.gov.au/highereducation/ResourcesAndPublications/ReviewOfAustralian HigherEducation/Pages/ReviewOfAustralianHigherEducationReport.aspx

Brotherhood of St Laurence (2014). *Australian Youth Unemployment 2014: Snapshot.* Fitzroy, Victoria: Brotherhood of Saint Laurence. http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/ MyChanceOurFuture_Youth_unemployment_snapshot_Feb2014.pdf

Carter, D. F. (2002). College students' degree aspirations: A theoretical model and literature review with a focus on African American and Latino students. In M. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 129-171). Netherlands: Springer.

Chiapa, C., Garrido, J. L. & Prina, S. (2012). The effect of social programs and exposure to professionals on the educational aspirations of the poor. *Economics of Education Review, 31*(5), 778-798. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2012.05.006

Conradie, I. (2013). Can deliberate efforts to realise aspirations increase capabilities? A South African case study. *Oxford Development Studies, 41*(2), 189-219. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2013.790949

Curtis, D. D., Drummond, A., Halsey, J. & Lawson, M. J. (2012). *Peer-mentoring of students in rural and low socioeconomic status schools: Increasing aspiration for higher education.* Adelaide: NCVER. http://www.ncver.edu.au/wps/wcm/connect/90690d90-55a3-413a-b5b7-b5fe2f06ecf9/Peer-mentoring-2562.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=90690d90-55a3-413a-b5b7-b5fe2f06ecf9

Eccles, J. S., Vida, M. N. & Barber, B. (2004). The relation of early adolescents' college plans and both academic ability and task-value beliefs to subsequent college enrolment. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, *24*(1), 63-77. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0272431603260919

Gale, T. (2012, April). Desire and possibility in higher education: What do expanded systems have to offer the masses? Keynote lecture at the Open University Widening Participation Conference. Northamptonshire, UK. http://www.open.ac.uk/about/inclusion-and-curriculum/research-and-scholarship-community-practice/wp-conference-2012-discourses-inclusion/keynote-professo

Gale, T., Parker, S., Rodd, P., Stratton, G. & Sealey, T. (2013). *Student aspirations for higher education in Central Queensland.* Melbourne: CREFI. http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/efi/pubs/Student%20Aspirations%20for%20Higher%20Education%20in%20Central%20Queensnland.pdf

Giroux, H., A. (2014). Neoliberalism and the machinery of disposability. *Truthout*, 8 April. http://truth-out.org/opinion/item/22958-neoliberalism-and-the-machinery-of-disposability

Gutman, L., M. & Akerman, R. (2008). *Determinants of aspirations.* Institute of Education, University of London. http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/2052/1/Gutman2008Determinants.pdf

Heifetz, A. & Minelli, E. (2006). *Aspiration traps.* (Discussion Paper 0610). http://www.openu.ac.il/Personal_sites/Aviad-Heifetz/Aspiration-Traps.pdf

Ibrahim, S. (2011). *Poverty, aspirations and wellbeing: Afraid to aspire and unable to reach a better life – voices from Egypt.* Working Paper No. 141, Brooks World Poverty Institute. http://www.bwpi.manchester.ac.uk/medialibrary/publications/working_papers/bwpi-wp-14111.pdf

James, R. (2002). *Socioeconomic background and higher education participation: An analysis of school students' aspirations and expectations.* Canberra: AGPS.

Jones, S. & Vagle, M. D. (2013). Living contradictions and working for change: Toward a theory of social class-sensitive pedagogy. *Educational Researcher*, *42*(3), 129-141. http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0013189X13481381

Kemp, D. & Norton, A. (2014). *Review of the demand driven funding system: Final report.* Australian Government. http://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review_of_the_demand_driven_funding_system_report_for_the_website.pdf

Khoo, S. T. & Ainley, J. (2005). *Attitudes, intention and participation.* LSAY Research Reports No. 41. http://research.acer.edu.au/lsay_research/45

Lareau, A. (2002). Invisible inequality: Social class and childrearing in black families and white families. *American Sociological Review*, *67*(5), 747-776. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3088916

Lee, J. O., Hill, K. G. & Hawkins, J. D. (2012). The role of educational aspirations and expectations in the discontinuity of intergenerational low-income status. *Social Work Research*, *36*(2), 141-151. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/swr/svs025

Looker, D. & Thiessen, V. (2004). *Aspirations of Canadian youth for higher education.* Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. http://www.pisa.gc.ca/eng/pdf/sp-600-05-04e.pdf

McCarron, G. P. & Inkelas, K. K. (2006). The gap between educational aspirations and attainment for first-generation college students and the role of parental involvement. *Journal of College Student Development*, *47*(5), 534-549. http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-1278605611.html

Morley, L. (2012). Researching absences and silences in higher education: Data for democratisation. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *31*(3), 353-368. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.634385

Murdoch University (2014). *Murdoch's aspirations and pathways for university project* [Brochure]. Perth, Australia: MAP4U. http://our.murdoch.edu.au/Research-and-Development/_ document/HDR/Scholarships-Opportunities/FINAL_MAP4U-Promotional-Flyer.pdf

Naylor, R., Baik, C. & James, R. (2013). *Developing a critical interventions framework for advancing equity in Australian higher education*. Canberra, DIICCSRTE. http://www.industry.gov.au/highereducation/Policy/Documents/CriticalInterventionsFrameworkDiscussionPaper.pdf

Palardy, G. (2013). High school socioeconomic segregation and student attainment. *American Educational Research Journal, 50*(4), 714-754. http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0002831213481240

Parker, S., Stratton, G., Gale, T., Rodd, P. & Sealey, T. (2013). *Higher education and student aspirations: A survey of the adaptive preferences of Year 9 students in Corio, Victoria*. Melbourne, CREFI, Deakin University. http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/efi/pubs/nbc-report.pdf

Perry, L. B. & Southwell, L. (2013). Access to academic curriculum in Australian secondary schools: A case study of a highly marketised education system. *Journal of Education Policy, 29*(4), 467-485. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2013.846414

Powell, L. (2012). Reimagining the purpose of VET - Expanding the capability to aspire in South African further education and training students. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *32*(5), 643-653. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.01.008

Raco, M. (2009). From expectations to aspirations: State modernisation, urban policy, and the existential politics of welfare in the UK. *Political Geography*, *28*(7), 436-444. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2009.10.009

Rampino, T. & Taylor, M. (2012). *Educational aspirations and attitudes over the business cycle* (No. 2012-26). ISER Working Paper Series. https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/publications/working-papers/iser/2012-26.pdf

Ray, D. (2006). Aspirations, poverty and economic change. In A. V. Banerjee, R. Benabou & D. Mookherjee (Eds.), *Understanding poverty*, (pp. 409-421). New York: Oxford UP.

Sarojini Hart, C. (2013). *Aspirations, education and social justice: Applying Sen and Bourdieu*. London: Bloomsbury.

Schoon, I., Martin, P. & Ross, A. (2007). Career transitions in times of social change. His and her story. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 70*(1), 78-96. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2006.04.009

Sellar, S. & Gale, T. (2011). Mobility, aspiration, voice: A new structure of feeling for student equity in higher education. *Critical Studies in Education*, *52*(2), 115-134. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2011.572826

Sellar, S., Gale, T. & Parker, S. (2009). Massaging desire: Disadvantaged students' aspirations for higher education. In *Proceedings AARE Conference 2009*, Canberra. http://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2009/gal09061.pdf

Smith, L. (2011). Experiential 'hot' knowledge and its influence on low-SES students' capacities to aspire to higher education. *Critical Studies in Education, 52*(2), 165-177. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2011.572829

Smyth, J. & Wrigley, T. (2013). *Living on the edge: Rethinking poverty, class and schooling.* New York: Peter Lang.

St. Clair, R., Kintrea, K. & Houston, M. (2013). Silver bullet or red herring? New evidence on the place of aspirations in education. *Oxford Review of Education, 39*(6), 719-738. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2013.854201

Tafere, Y. (2014). *Education aspirations and barriers to achievement for young people in Ethiopia.* (Young Lives Working Paper No. 120). http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/outputs/Younglives/wp120-tafere-education-aspirations.pdf

Walker, M. (2003). Framing social justice in education: What does the 'capabilities' approach offer? *British Journal of Educational Studies, 51*(2), 168-187. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8527.t01-2-00232

Walkey, F. H., McClure, J., Meyer, L. H. & Wei, K. F. (2013). Low expectations equal no expectations: Aspirations, motivation, and achievement in secondary school. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 38*(4)*,* 306-315. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2013.06.004

Wilks, J. & Wilson, K (2012). Going on to uni? Access and participation in university for students from backgrounds of disadvantage. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 34*(1), 79-90. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2012.642335 [also at http://epubs.scu.edu.au/educ_pubs/635/]

Willis, S. & Joschko, L. (2012). A 'high quality, high access' university that aims to marry excellence and equity. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 14*(1), 8-26. http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.14.1.8

Youth Connect (2014). *Parents as career transition support* [Brochure]. Perth: Youth Connect.

Zipin L., Sellar, S., Brennan, M. & Gale, T. (2013). Educating for futures in marginalized regions: A sociological framework for re-thinking and researching aspirations. *Educational Philosophy and Theory.* http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2013.839376

Sam Prodonovich is a Murdoch Aspirations and Pathways for University (MAP4U) project leader and PhD candidate at Murdoch University, Western Australia. Email: s.prodonovich@murdoch.edu.au

Dr Laura Perry is a senior lecturer of comparative education, education policy and the social contexts of education at the Murdoch University School of Education. She conducts research about educational inequalities, and the policies and practices that can ameliorate them. Email: L.Perry@murdoch.edu.au

Professor Andrew Taggart is Pro Vice Chancellor, Engagement, at Murdoch University. Email: a.taggart@murdoch.edu.au