

EARLY POST-SCHOOL OUTCOMES OF INDIGENOUS YOUNG PEOPLE: THE ROLE OF LITERACY AND NUMERACY

Nhi Nguyen, NCVET

Abstract

Closing the gap in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is an important Australian social and economic issue. Raising the literacy and numeracy levels of Indigenous youth is one possible strategy in closing this gap.

The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) allows us to assess the extent to which the gap in outcomes between young Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is due to Indigenous disadvantage. That is, once we have removed the effect of background characteristics, and literacy and numeracy, does the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people still remain?

This presentation outlines the key findings from a recent LSAY analysis comparing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes at school, in post-school study and in employment by literacy and numeracy levels. Improvements in outcomes for Indigenous young people over the last decade are also explored.

The results show that while there have been significant improvements in Indigenous outcomes over time, the outcomes for non-Indigenous youth have also improved. Despite these improvements, the research shows that the gap still remains, and in some areas, such as university participation, the gap has actually widened.

Higher levels of literacy and numeracy help to improve the outcomes for Indigenous youth. However, increased literacy and numeracy is still not the complete answer in helping to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people. Particularly in the outcome of undertaking higher level post-school education. Young Indigenous Australians face other disadvantages, such as access to post-school education, that subsequently affect their outcomes beyond literacy and numeracy ability.

Introduction

Recent reports on the progress of Indigenous outcomes show that despite significant improvements in areas of education and employment, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth remain. Across some indicators, for example university participation, the gap has actually widened. This is mainly because improvements for non-Indigenous young people have matched or surpassed the gains made by Indigenous young people.

Governments at both federal and state levels are striving to improve Indigenous people's educational attainment and employment participation.

There are multiple factors that contribute to Indigenous disadvantage. These are highly interconnected and action across a range of areas may be required to improve a single indicator (Productivity Commission, 2009). The Productivity Commission noted that achieving some targets can have multiple effects and lead to improvements across a range of indicators. For example, literacy and numeracy levels are important factors that contribute to Year 12 completion and participation in post-school education and training for all young people (Marks et al, 2000; Rothman et al, 2003). These factors in turn influence employment outcomes and individual health (Productivity Commission, 2009). Due to the consistently lower scores in reading and maths assessments by Indigenous youth, improving their performance in literacy and numeracy is one of the key target areas on the national agenda to help close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians

Research Method

Using data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), this analysis explores the impact of literacy and numeracy levels on the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. The paper looks at whether the early post-school outcomes of Indigenous people have improved in the last decade and compares two LSAY cohorts: those first interviewed in 1995 and those first interviewed in 2003.

The main part of the analysis looks at how much literacy and numeracy levels

contribute to the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people by breaking down the gap in school, post-school study and employment outcomes.

Findings & results

Significant gains have been made in Year 12 completion for Indigenous youth, with the gap between them and non-Indigenous youth narrowing by more than half from a -27 percentage point difference in 1999 to -12 percentage points in 2007.

The proportion of Indigenous 19 year olds participating or completing VET study at certificate III or above increased by 4% between 1999 and 2007.

Higher literacy and numeracy levels are associated with higher Year 12 completion and university post-school study for Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people. However, these rates are lower for Indigenous youth, hence the gap remains.

High achieving Indigenous youth are not participating in university study at the rate of their non-Indigenous counterparts, despite a large proportion of these young people aspiring to university study. Instead, a large proportion of them are undertaking VET study. This may be because in non-metropolitan areas, there is better access to VET than university.

Another concern is that over 70% of Indigenous young people aspire to post-school study but less than half go on to pursue these post-school study plans. This compares to over two thirds of non-Indigenous young people participating in post-school study.

Slightly larger proportions (four percentage points) of Indigenous youth at the average age of 19.5 years are in full-time employment, among them many higher achievers. They are working mainly in trades, sales work, clerical and administration, and personal care. Around 5% are employed as professionals.

Conclusion

Improving literacy and numeracy levels contributes significantly to reducing the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. But a multiple level approach is required to improve Indigenous outcomes as these young people face a combination of disadvantages such as poor access to post-school education, in

addition to low literacy and numeracy levels all of which subsequently affect their educational outcomes.

References

- Marks G, Fleming N, Long M, & McMillan J, 2000, *Patterns of participation in Year 12 and higher education in Australia: Trends and issues*, LSAY Research Report Number 17, ACER, Melbourne
- Productivity Commission, 2009, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009*, Melbourne
- Rothman S & McMillan J, 2003, *Influence on Achievement in literacy and numeracy*, ACER, Melbourne