Young, female and looking to the future: Exploring the aspirations of adolescent girls in regional Tasmania

by

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the aspirations of adolescent girls living in rural and remote areas of the Cradle Coast region of Tasmania. Based on ethnographic interviews and life history portraits, the thesis demonstrates that rural girls have multiple aspirations for school, work, parenthood, relationships, travel and lifestyle, as well as affective aspirations such as those for happiness, success, independence and balance. This thesis demonstrates how these aspirations, and the capacity to fulfil them, are shaped by the girls’ cultural worlds. The study is part of an emerging body of work that recognises the importance of culture in understanding adolescent aspirations. It generates new conclusions about how and why culture matters by exploring the impact of the socio-cultural context on a broader range of adolescent aspirations than most other existing studies. Few existing studies take a culturally contextualised approach to exploring various aspirations in connection with one another. There are even fewer studies that do so with an adolescent, rural, female cohort. Through taking an ethnographic approach, this research is able to show how many cultural factors are interwoven with other factors and how this impacts on adolescent life aspirations and the associated educational and career decision-making. In doing so, this study contributes new insights into how culture and ‘cultural capacities’ create educational, social and/or rural disadvantage. For example, it highlights how aspects of culture such as community and family traditions, expectations, norms and values shape ‘capacity’ and how this may then influence participation in higher education and educational outcomes. These insights are particularly relevant for policy makers concerned with how to widen participation in higher education and how to address access barriers to education, particularly for disadvantaged groups. The findings from
this study are also relevant for education providers and practitioners in terms of engaging adolescents who are traditionally under-represented in education, including those from rural and regional locations. The study uses detailed life history portraits and thematic analysis of rural girls’ shared aspirations and influences to illustrate how and why culture matters. These portraits are constructed from personal stories collected during in-depth interviews and they include in-context cultural descriptions and the girls’ own thoughts and feelings regarding their many aspirations. The thematic analysis of the personal stories collected provides for additional understanding of the impact of the socio-cultural context by identifying the girls’ shared aspirations and influences. Largely through its approach, this study generates new conclusions about how the aspirations of rural adolescent girls are culturally constructed and how this impacts on school and work decision-making.
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