# Chapter 9
# Knowledge, Justice, and Equity:
## Access to the Academic Curriculum Among Indigenous School Students in Australia

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores how systemic differences across schools in Australia contribute to equality or inequality in Indigenous students' learning opportunities, specifically access to the school curriculum needed to progress to university. Equitable access to the academic curriculum is particularly important for Indigenous students because they are impacted by a range of issues affecting school completion, achievement, and university participation. This research focuses on one aspect of the key transition from school to university, examining whether Indigenous students experience a greater range of challenges in gaining the prerequisite requirements for university study than other students of similar circumstances. In exploring these issues, the authors adopt a position of curricular and epistemic justice, arguing that "doing justice" with power-marginalized learners involves changing the basis for thinking about the nature of knowledge and how knowledge is valued.*

## INTRODUCTION

Inequalities are referred to by Pakulski (2004) as "…steep but complex and fluid" (p. 3) that go beyond the uneven distribution of resources. Instead, they arise from:

*…the way in which unequally distributed "social resources" and symbolic classifications combine in producing bounded hierarchical groupings. (Pakulski, 2004, p. 4)*

Inequalities in schooling and higher education are persistent and intractable for Indigenous[1] students in Australia. These inequalities exist in many areas but are particularly apparent in the distribution of the student population across school sectors (that is, government and non-government schools), location, and the social segregation that determines, in many cases, the kinds of schools that Indigenous students are able to attend (Perry & Southwell, 2014; Alegre & Ferrer, 2010). The purpose of this research is to examine how schooling circumstances, as well as socioeconomic factors, impact on students' capacity to gain the prerequisite requirements to enter university upon school completion, and whether Indigenous students experience a greater range of challenges in doing so than other students of similar circumstances.

Using data on schools, students and courses in Australia's largest state of New South Wales (NSW) (NSW Education Standards Authority [NESA], 2017),[2] the research is a matched sample design in which students identifying as Indigenous in their final year of school are selected and matched to the same number of non-Indigenous students with similar individual and school characteristics. It is recognized that university entry is only one outcome of schooling but is albeit an important example of the stratified and hierarchical nature of the school curriculum in Australia.

## BACKGROUND

## Indigenous Student Access and Equity

Despite the influence of policies designed to improve equity in both the school and higher education sectors, Indigenous students are still less likely to complete Year 12 or attend university than their non-Indigenous counterparts (James, 2007; Lamb et al., 2004). These associations are known to be influenced by a range of factors, including levels of school achievement (Parker et al., 2015), gender (Teese et al., 1995) and "… the specific confluence of family, peer, school, community, and personal factors" (Gore et al., 2015, p. 174).

In Australia, at least some of the explanation for lower university entry rates among Indigenous people is related to achievement differentials that emerge during the earlier and later years of schooling. Much of the research in this area focuses on interventions to address such achievement differentials, but there are also many identified "secondary effects" related to aspects such as aspirations and choice behaviors which also influence Indigenous young people's propensity to enter university as a post-secondary destination (Parker et al., 2015; Gore et al., 2017). Indigenous students are less likely to aspire to a university education than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Craven et al., 2005); they are also less likely to complete further education past school (De Bortoli & Cresswell, 2004). A large study sampled across three Australian states found that while most non-Indigenous students in their later years at school aspire to attend university, most Indigenous students in these years aspire instead to go to technical college or get a job directly after school (Craven et al. 2005). Even those Indigenous students who are high achieving are less likely to go on to university directly from school than non-Indigenous students (Behrendt et al., 2012; Nguyen, 2010), suggesting that Indigenous people's post-school aspirations are influenced by a range of complex factors (Lamb et al., 2004).

Entry into higher education is critical in ensuring that people have access to opportunities in professional fields of employment such as health, education, law and business. Due to the under-supply of Indigenous graduates in key fields, several professional associations and bodies have set up initiatives to promote a better flow of Indigenous students into these fields and to support a more positive set of

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