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# Age increases education gap for indigenous children

Sarah Smiles, Canberra
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INDIGENOUS children do not score very differently from non-indigenous children in their early years, but fall rapidly behind as they get older, research shows.

A study by Australian National University researchers has found that five-year-old indigenous children are only one year behind non-indigenous children in cognitive test scores.

"This gap may sound large, but it is substantially smaller than the gap found in most studies of … older children," said economist Dr Andrew Leigh.

Studies show that indigenous children are about two school years behind by the time they reach late-primary and early-secondary school.

Dr Leigh said the research underscores the need to improve schooling for indigenous children and "close the racial test-score gap".

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has pledged to get every four-year-old in remote communities attending school within five years.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin has also given support to getting kids "out of the chaos" in some remote communities and into secondary boarding schools. The plan has met with concern from some stolen generations groups who say children must be given good schooling options in their communities.

But Ian Mackie, director of the Western Cape College on Cape York Peninsula, said that policy had failed.

"The year 8 to 10 schools which have been provided in these communities haven't worked. Attendance has been poor and academic performance is poor. We're sentencing (the students) to very poor life outcomes and pathways by persisting with that flawed policy," said Mr Mackie.

His college's Weipa campus has received Commonwealth funding to build a hostel for 120 students from remote communities across the Cape York Peninsula.

Mr Mackie suggested to Ms Macklin on her recent visit to Aurukun that a mentoring system be established to give boarders support at weekends.

"It's a significant social change to move to a larger school, a more competitive schooling environment — so children have trouble adjusting," he said.

"The sort of thing that we would envisage is structured activities that mentors participate in (such as) sports afternoons and family fun afternoons."

*This story was found at:*
***http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/03/31/1206850811936.html***

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# Indigenous kids start as equals

Justine Ferrari, Education writer | *April 01, 2008*

**INDIGENOUS children start school with a similar level of developmental skills as non-indigenous children, with gaps in achievement appearing to widen as they progress through school.**

In tests measuring readiness for school and language comprehension, indigenous students aged five have the skills of non-indigenous students aged four.

The analysis by Australian National University researchers Andrew Leigh and Xiaodong Gong estimates that between one-third and two-thirds of the gap in test scores is related to socio-economic differences.

But Dr Leigh, from the Research School of Social Sciences, said the study showed that the big gaps in educational achievement occurred during the school years, not that indigenous students started school far behind the rest of the community.

"Paradoxically, it's really quite an optimistic finding," he said. "It would be deeply depressing if we discovered that four- and five-year-olds were as far behind as 14- and 15-year-olds, which would basically tell us that the problem was in families," he said.

"Governments are bad at fixing families but these results suggest we need to focus on schools, and that's something policymakers have been thinking for years now."

The study looks at the performance of about 5000 children aged four and five and their results in two cognitive tests measured in the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children.

One test asked students to pick one of four pictures that best suited the word said by the examiner. The other asked students to perform 10 writing exercises, from copying shapes to completing a sentence to drawing a picture of themselves.

Indigenous students at the age of five were about one year behind their non-indigenous peers. Dr Leigh said other studies, and the national literacy and numeracy tests, have shown this gap widens substantially by late primary and early high school.

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