

## Guidance from the Progress at School Project

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### Abstract

The New Zealand *Progress at School* project followed the educational careers of 5400 secondary school students. The study was concerned with relative progress, defined as an improvement in the level of attainment indicated by year-9 tests and later examination performance. It was found that students with high aspirations, positive academic self-concepts, and a perception of teachers as fair, were more likely than those with contrary dispositions to demonstrate relative progress at school. Some implications of these findings, particularly to do with the intersection between sociology and psychology, are discussed with reference to the tasks undertaken by school counsellors.

### Introduction – Progress at School

Some students make more progress at school than others. It is not just that some students learn more than others, although they obviously do, but that some improve their relative standing over time whereas others show a decline. Two students might enter secondary school in year-9 with the same average level of ability, according to test scores, yet one might go on to gain School Certificate marks in the 80s, whereas the other might not get out of the 20s. A shift of that magnitude in three years is unusual, but it is certainly not unknown, and a considerable degree of relative progress of a positive or negative kind can be observed. *The Progress at School* research has demonstrated that relative educational progress of this kind is associated with aspiration, academic self-concept, and satisfaction with school (Nash & Harker, 1998). Although the research deals with the individual variables of psychology, it was carried out by sociologists of education, and the discussion will draw on the seminal thought of Pierre Bourdieu.

Academic self-concept, broadly understood as the belief in one's ability to achieve a satisfactory level of success at school; aspirations which, if they are to be effective in structuring action, must always be rooted in the habitual self; and an acceptance of schooling, may all be regarded as dispositions of the *habitus*. The discussion, structured by this model, will be contextualised with reference to the professional concerns

of counsellors and school-based social workers whose responsibility it is to monitor individual progress, sustain achievement, and interrupt trajectories of decline. It will be helpful to provide a brief outline of the research.

The Progress at School project was designed to investigate the effectiveness of New Zealand secondary schools. An approximately representative sample of about 5400 students in 37 secondary schools was followed from year-9 to year-13: this represents a sample of about 10% of the population cohort. Standardised tests of reading comprehension and “scholastic abilities” were administered on intake and used to derive a combined “ability” score. At the end of year-10 most students, a total of 3711, completed a questionnaire containing items on aspirations and including a set of 30 items constituting a Quality of School Life (QSL) instrument (Wagemaker, 1993; Williams & Batten, 1981) which was used to generate factor scores. Two of these, academic self-concept and satisfaction with school, are described in this article. Attainment was recorded successively by year-10 test scores, School Certificate marks, Sixth Form Certificate grades, and Bursary as they became available. It is useful to know how much relative movement, or relative progress, occurs at secondary school. Most students actually maintain their relative level of attainment, but the degree of change is perhaps greater than might be expected, and is briefly reported here.

The analysis focuses on students in the middle of the ability range in order to control the effects of ability in a manner accessible to readers with a non-technical grasp of statistical methods. Consider students in the mid-range percentiles 4, 5 and 6 at year-9 who shift their position by at least two percentiles on a measure of Sixth Form attainment. Depending on the direction of movement, they can be said to have either progressed or declined. In a sample of 3188 sixth form students, 199 (6.2%) were found to have declined and 329 (10.3%) to have improved their relative position. More students improved than declined because students whose grades are slipping are more likely than those who are making progress to leave school without completing sixth form. This information itself, were it available to schools through internal monitoring systems, offers the possibility of targeted intervention.

We can show that these two groups – those who progressed and those who declined – actually moved steadily further apart during their years at secondary school: their year-9 test scores were not significantly different, but the “gap” widened to almost half a standard deviation by the end of year-10 and to a full standard deviation at year-12. In one year, comparing School Certificate and Sixth Form Certificate, the difference in the attainments of these groups of students widened from 0.48 to 0.78 standard deviations in English, from 0.72 to 0.98 in mathematics, and from 0.32 to 1.2 in science. It is science and mathematics, subjects that more than any others are either learned in school or

not learned at all, that discriminate most between the students who push themselves forward and those who fall behind. The evidence for a progressive decline could not be much more compelling. There is an association between social class and relative progress; students from the skilled working class were twice as likely to gain (14%) as they were to decline (7%), and in the upper professional class 18% improved and less than 1% declined. It is important to note that the true rate of decline by working-class students is actually higher due to the differential dropout rate before the completion of year-11, but the ratios are indicative of the importance of class resources.

Ethnic status is also associated with relative progress at school: the percentages of European and Maori students, for example, showing positive or negative progress were, respectively, 12.0% and 5.4%, and 9.2% and 15.8%. There is also a marked sex difference: of the total number of boys 10.3% gained and 9.3% declined, but of the girls 14.2% gained and only 5.1% declined. These data should cause no astonishment. What we are most interested in, however, are the factors associated with such relative educational progress.

The variables that contribute most to the discrimination between students who progress and those who decline are: aspiration for tertiary education reported in year-10, academic self-concept, and satisfaction with school. An indication of the strength of the relationships may be gained from inspection of Table 1 and Table 2.

**Table 1: School Certificate attainments of mid-ability students by response to school, and academic self-concept**

Factor	Favourable dispositions				Unfavourable dispositions			
	Engl	Retn	Math	Retn	Engl	Retn	Math	Retn
Satisfaction	51.5	88.7	49.5	79.9	47.8	85.2	45.7	71.6
Self-concept	53.3	74.8	51.8	71.7	48.0	80.7	41.8	59.1

Note: Students in the upper and lower fifth of the distribution of two factor score indices, satisfaction with school and academic self-concept, are indicated respectively as having favourable and unfavourable dispositions. School Certificate English (Engl), mean = 53.0, S.D. = 15.5; School Certificate mathematics (Math), mean = 53.4, S.D. = 21. Retention (Retn) indicates the percentage of year-9 students who attempt School Certificate in a given subject.

Table 1 reveals a clear association between School Certificate marks and dispositions related to school. Students in the middle range of ability with school response and self-concept factor scores in the upper fifth of the distribution are usually more likely to attempt the examination, and gain higher School Certificate marks, than those with factor scores in the lowest fifth. The smallest difference observed is between the mathematics scores associated with satisfaction with school, where the mean for those with

high scores is 3.8 marks (S.D. = 0.18) higher than those with low scores, and the largest difference is between the mathematics scores associated with self-concept, where the mean for those with high self-concepts is 10 marks (S.D. = 0.48) higher than those with low self-concepts. In both cases, moreover, the retention rates are significantly higher for those with the most positive dispositions: compared with the high score set, those with low satisfaction scores would need to increase their retention rate by 11.6%, and those with low self-concept scores by 21.3%, in order to reach equality. These results have both statistical and practical significance.

**Table 2: School Certificate attainments of mid-ability students by aspirations**

Aspiration	Engl	n	Math	n
University	54.3	213	53.1	200
Intermediate	51.7	235	47.3	202
Low	47.2	229	43.7	183

Table 2 shows that mid-ability students are approximately equally likely to aspire, at the end of year-10, to university, intermediate level destinations (including polytechnic study), and to other forms of employment. The association between aspiration and School Certificate attainment is significant. The mean difference between students with the highest and lowest aspirations is, in English 0.46 S.D., and in mathematics 0.48 S.D. These findings illustrate the magnitude of the effects on school attainment of aspirations, self-concept, and a perception of school as a fair learning environment. Data have been presented only for students in the mid-ability range, in order to hold ability constant, but the relationships described are constant at all levels of ability.

## Aspirations

The aspirations of secondary school students are generally high. In one sense, indeed, they are too high, for it is extremely unlikely that a third of students in the mid-ability range will, in fact, realise their hopes of entering university. Occupations granted the highest status are those that demand the longest and most expensive forms of training and receive the greatest social and financial rewards. There is something like universal recognition that these occupations include those of medical practitioner, lawyer, accountant, senior civil servant, and so on, and they are the focus of many students' aspirations. However, although students of different social origin may place a similar value on the school's offer of credentials, they do not necessarily share the school's valuation of its high status knowledge.

Many working-class students adopt a characteristically ambivalent stance towards the valuation the school – and wider society – places on mental and manual labour. It is particularly easy for working-class students, who have done no more than pattern their declared aspirations according to commonly recognised valuations, to restructure them should their grades begin to fail or the expense of a prolonged course of study become starkly real as the point of irrevocable decision-making approaches. Middle-class students are, of course, no less interested in obtaining credentials than working-class students, but they are somewhat more likely than working-class students to accept as valid the school’s concept of education. The tension felt by working-class students, expressed in the demand to know the “relevance” of theoretical subjects, is felt less acutely by middle-class students more “at home” with the underlying model of the educated person that informs the school curriculum. If the aspirations of working-class students are called into question, as may always be the case, their efforts to study become that much more difficult to sustain.

Table 3 shows the extent of what Boudon (1982) calls the secondary effect. There is a tendency for the level of aspirations within each ability group to decline in association with social class. In the highest ability quintile, for example, 79% of students with upper professional origins aspired to university, but the proportion falls to 49% in the case of students from the lowest fractions of the working class. The aspirations of the lowest group would have to improve by about 60% in order to reach equality with the highest group. The association between class origin, ability, and aspiration is relatively constant at all levels of ability. There is an apparently aberrant figure (17% of upper professional students in the low ability quartile) due to small numbers: almost half of all students from that group are in the upper ability quintile.

**Table 3: Students intending to enter university by social class and ability**

SES	Ability quintile				
	Low	Low ave.	Ave.	High ave.	High
Upper prof.	50	17	51	74	79
Lower prof.	37	34	37	52	68
Intermediate	20	20	31	37	64
Skilled	19	21	28	38	60
Other	19	13	22	30	49

Note: Data for year-10 students. SES is given by a modified Elley-Irving Scale (Elley & Irving, 1985).  
 Upper professional, 1; Lower professional, 2; Intermediate, 3; Skilled manual, 4;  
 Others including non-employed, 5.

There should be no difficulty in recognising the importance of preferences based on opportunity costs: it is obviously possible for students to have the same preference for a professional occupation yet make different decisions about studying for it as a result of the different costs associated with the decision. It should be noted, however, that students who aspire to university despite the fact that their grades make that an unlikely hope are not necessarily injured by the eventual necessity to re-evaluate their expectations. Students in this category are often robust enough to cope with disappointment, although the experience can be intense for a period, and they are often rewarded with a lower accomplishment that is nevertheless at a higher level than they might have attained had they worked with lower aspirations in mind. Further discussion of these themes can be found in Nash (2000, and in press).

### **Satisfaction with school**

Satisfaction with school was assessed by a set of items, of which the most significant were: *Teachers are fair and just* and *Teachers treat me fairly in class*, and is thus most strictly interpreted as an index of the perceptions students have of their teachers as fair. It might not be expected that such items have any potency to reflect the real feelings of students, and yet it seems that they do. A considerable proportion of students, particularly in the middle class, hold distinctly critical attitudes towards teachers but also maintain high aspirations and generally achieve their goals. This factor score is, in fact, only one of several extracted from the QSL instrument to assess particular dimensions of satisfaction with school. The findings presented here are supported by related factors assessing the perception of school as useful and worthwhile, and a sense of being “tired of trying”. When students are asked to respond to items of this sort they have only a restricted format in which to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with school. As teachers are well aware, they have opportunities in plenty to make their feelings known more directly.

A serious discussion about the roots of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with school should be contextualised in structural terms. Working-class “reproduction” is in the throes of a long process of transition. Skilled manual occupations, once entered through apprenticeships, have been in decline for many decades and with them also the traditional institutional culture of working-class life. The sources of pride in the performance of a craft skill, and the status it brought, have been subjected to a process of erosion. It is in this context that the school – more than the family and the neighbourhood community – has now assumed the central role in working-class reproduction. As Bourdieu (1999, p.185) observes:

*Destined by their lack of cultural capital to almost certain academic failure, these young people are nevertheless placed in conditions likely to raise their aspirations, often remaining there until a fairly advanced age. By provisionally setting them apart from productive activities and cutting them off from the world of work, school breaks the 'natural' cycle of working-class reproduction itself that is based in the anticipated adaptation to dominated positions.*

Working-class young people are now more or less forced to remain in school to the age of 17 or even 18. There they must pass through their adolescence while, for the most part, coming to terms with the experience of cumulative failure. In this context, working-class boys and girls – particularly the former – create a world in which fantasy and reality co-exist in contradictory forms. The school seems unreal in as much as it refuses to acknowledge an entire range of practices adopted by young people in their places of leisure. But at the same time, the world of work seems so remote, despite the fact that many students have part-time jobs, that their aspirations remain for a long time the subject of fantasy. Even in their mid-teens at least half of all working-class boys dream of becoming professional sports stars or of joining the army, and reveal little interest in the occupations most of them enter. Knowing that perceptions of school are tied to educational progress is one thing, and understanding the social and individual roots of those perceptions is another. Bourdieu's insights may have something to offer those who wish to take the analysis to deeper levels.

### **Self-concept**

Academic self-concept was assessed in this study by a small set of self-response items. The most significant of these were: *I learn most things pretty quickly* and *I know I can do well enough to succeed*. The reason why some students make more progress than others is almost as simple as this: some *want* to be educated more than others. As Swann (1999, p.266) points out, "the human would-be learner is motivated not only by a desire to do something, she or he may also be spurred into action as a consequence of *wanting to know*". This means, of course, that the operative concept of education, and of the educated person in particular, maintained by students should be the focus of our analysis at this level.

The study of the self is one of those areas where intellectual fashion seems never to rest. At the moment, the talk is of *subjectivities*, experienced as *narratives* by *subjects positioned in discourse*. The concept of the self as non-unitary, fragmented, and multiple (Davies & Harré, 1990) has become the dominant position. Although it is important to understand what is at stake in these theoretical discussions, this is not

the place for a more comprehensive account. We may understand that students who express confidence in their ability to succeed at school – that is, to obtain the knowledge and qualifications they need to fulfil their ambitions – are indicating something important about themselves. A belief in the possibility of success cannot, of course, guarantee that success, but if it promotes sustained application and effort, success is undoubtedly that much more likely to be achieved. We may understand also that the school is a site for the production of subject positions. It provides organisational positions (dux, prefect, head boy and girl, and so on) and recognises – “constitutes in discourse” – categories of being (“gifted”, “bright”, “high-flyer”, “leader”, and so on) which have the power to affect the behaviour of those they address. Students also have their categories – “nerds”, “straights”, “tubes”, “swots”, “brains”, and so on – with a variable power to stigmatise. All this points to the importance of social context in fashioning the terms of discourse adopted as subject positions.

Counsellors with an interest in these themes will be aware that there are dispositions of being with affectual roots which might be best understood as properties of the *person* rather than of the *self*. There is integrity of the person, which is almost always organised into a more or less coherent narrative of self, which can be represented as the “core” of an individual’s self-conception. Narratives of the self are necessarily inconstant – self-conceptions cannot be the same at age 16 as at age 10 – but anyone who has watched children grow to maturity will be aware of the element of continuity in the emergence of cognitive and non-cognitive traits. What we recognise as temperament are quite stable elements of personal being that have to be integrated into a coherent general self-concept. A stable, well-integrated self-concept is an achievement that may, in the conditions of modern society, be increasingly difficult to accomplish. The potential for internal contradiction and resultant psychological stress in a society where groups co-exist and compete for voice is ever-growing. When the groups an individual belongs to are in some respects indifferent or antagonistic then the self-conceptions of the individual will be to that extent in a state of tension. It is particularly difficult for students subjected to multiple discourses to think of themselves as people who can succeed. Counsellors can offer real help to students within this framework of understanding.

### **Some implications for workers in schools**

The profile of the student likely to make relative progress at school is beginning to emerge. A young person who wants to do well at school, because he or she hopes to study for an occupation that requires educational qualifications, and who can, at the very least, tolerate the regime of the school, is almost certain to achieve more, other



things being equal, than one with exactly contrary states of mind. These findings will not surprise school-based counsellors. Indeed, it can be an embarrassment to admit that information apparently so self-evident has cost so much time and effort to obtain. And yet it is perhaps worthwhile to restate the obvious if it means that the professional experience and practical intuitions of counsellors and teachers are thereby strengthened.

Change in education depends on one property, without which all the policy initiatives of the central authority are just so many empty words: that property, in the broadest sense, is *pedagogic energy*. Counsellors and support workers able to recognise these dispositions of success (and by negation those of failure) will be that much better equipped both to provide individual guidance and to support relevant changes in institutional practices.

Student aspirations are generally high. It goes against the grain of progressive thought to speak of aspirations that cannot be met, but there are fewer professional positions available than school students who aspire to them, and the objective possibility of a student with low school attainments is remote. A large proportion of students who enter secondary school with high aspirations will be forced to abandon them at some point before they leave. There are real contradictions here that, sooner or later, must be revealed in the students' mode of adaptation to school. One strategy is to "give up" in some subjects, if not all, and to learn ways of "switching off" when under pressure.

Although school attainment has the largest effect on aspirations, there is a significant *secondary effect*, evidenced by the tendency of aspirations to be associated with social class even when ability is controlled. The processes of decision-making responsible for this effect are open to reflection – the effect is as likely to reflect opportunity cost calculations as distinctive values – and this is an area where those responsible for advising young people may find a useful point of contact. Whether a student's response should be recognised as a classed practice, a way of doing things in a collectively recognised manner, or one following from a more or less rational calculation of the costs and benefits, may have some implications for this field of practice (Nash & Munford, 2001).

We live in a society where social and cultural pluralism implies multiple selves, and that social reality imposes considerable demands on the formation of more or less integrated concepts of personal being. It is here that the school may be able to examine its contribution to the development of positive academic self-concepts. The school certainly has the capacity, in this sense, to provide positions, formal and informal, that can be taken up by students. The young woman who explained in an interview that

her girls' school recognised only academics or sports stars – “there's no in-betweens”, she said – was conscious of an absence where the institution has the power to make a presence. When we interrogate teacher “expectations” and examine organisational properties – ability streaming, for example – we recognise how the material conditions for self-construction are created.

The school can have a definite influence on the effective dispositions of its students by the character of its regime. The knowledge that relative success at school is associated with high aspirations, positive academic self-concepts, and a tolerance of the school regime might assist school counsellors and school support workers in their professional tasks. It is perhaps not so much the knowledge that these dispositions are important, for that ought to be no more than the wisdom of good practice should provide, but the added sociological insight that the social relations that constitute the reality of organisations are also those that constitute individual subjectivities.

Counsellors will not need to be told that there are some very unhappy children in schools. In most cases, the sources of that distress are deeply rooted and have their origin outside the educational system. Nevertheless, the school has a clear responsibility to generate contexts in which the expression of social identities not actually antagonistic to the school and its necessary values can be accommodated. A school where students are treated unfairly will depress their aspirations, their self-confidence, and their willingness to accept the legitimate institutional order of the school. Students at predominantly working-class schools are not any more likely – in any serious sense – to underachieve than those at predominantly middle-class schools. There is no reason why any school should be, in this sense, a “failing” school, and the Progress at School research suggests that it is here – at the pastoral level – that the conditions for success can be achieved.

Bourdieu's work provides a scheme with the force of common sense. We have to include in our models of social process the level of social structures, the level of disposition (*habitus*), and the level of intentional action with collective practices. Success and failure at school, absolute and relative, is the result of actions (attending school regularly, listening to the teacher, completing assignments, and so on); these actions are generated by states of mind and being, schemes of action, that have been acquired as the result, very largely, of familial socialisation (high aspirations, positive self-concepts, and a willingness to accept the regime of the school); and those schemes, in turn, emerge in a class and ethnically divided society where social structures (differentially resourced families, credential markets, labour markets, and so on) have a reproductive effect. If we can learn to think about the empirical findings reported here in this broader context, where a working relationship between sociology and psychology is

not only desirable but also mandatory, then our ability to act will be enhanced. This is the object, in fact, of a body of detailed individual case study research that may be of interest to readers (Nash, 1997, 1999a, b). If the findings of this research into the dispositions of success help to sustain the *pedagogic energy* of those who make a difference in schools, then it will have been worthwhile.

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