

Disposed to succeed:

A realist discourse on progress at school

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The Progress at School project, designed to investigate school effects, found progress at school to be associated with non-cognitive dispositions, most importantly, aspiration, self-concept, and a willingness to be subjected to the discourse of schooling. Some theoretical and practical implications of these findings are examined in a study of students with 'average ability', most of them working-class, who demonstrated cumulative progress at secondary school. It is argued that a theory able to retain the concept of an embodied and stratified self may be reconciled with post-structuralist discourse theories. The value of research into 'discourse' and 'subjectivity' may, however, be recognised more easily within a realist structure-disposition-practice model. The practical task of schools concerned to create a regime able to transform the effective practices of students responsible for their relative academic progress or decline can only be enhanced by the recognition of their habituated social origins.

INTRODUCTION

Inequality of educational opportunity, conventionally if problematically demonstrated by systematic variation in the scholastic attainment of students from different social class and ethnic backgrounds, remains one of the central problems confronting educational systems in democratic societies. The causes of such variation are also likely to be those that generate the even more fundamental difference between the performance of, say, the highest and lowest ten per cent of all students. The considerable investment in international studies designed to monitor attainment and establish comparative benchmarks can disguise the variation that exists between the most and least successful graduates of the compulsory school sector. The difference in attainment, for the proportions mentioned, is about six years, in the sense that whereas the highest group might read at the level of a competent university student, the lowest group might match the ability of a very average 12-year-old (Shavit & Blossfield, 1993). What are the social causes of this 'gap', which represents evidence - as students certainly do not begin their education with relative differences of such magnitude - of differential rates of academic progress? The question, of course, cannot be given an answer by one piece of research, but every study has its contribution to make.

This paper will present evidence that relative progress at school is a product of the habitus conceived as a real structure of dispositions. Progress at school can be attributed, in substantial part, to the habituated practices of students whose effective dispositions are deep-seated and durable elements of their personal modes of being. The empirical core of the argument, based on a large-scale New Zealand study of progress at school, shows that, when prior attainment is held constant, students who make relative progress at secondary school are characterised by high aspirations, positive academic self-concepts, and a willingness to accept the pedagogic and disciplinary order of the institution. These habits of mind are regarded as dispositions of a self that is **accomplished** in specific institutional contexts, of which the school is certainly not the least important. Bernstein's (1990), investigation of the structures regulating the transmission of knowledge - which is concerned precisely with how the social order is sustained by processes of symbolic control - is central to this discussion. Bernstein and Solomon (1999, 272) draw attention to the pedagogic devices that mediate the construction of pedagogic discourses, and make identity a core concept in the analysis of schooling: 'identity refers to contemporary resources for constructing belonging, recognition of self and others, and context management'. Bernstein (1996: 7) states the central idea in a key passage:

A school metaphorically holds up a mirror in which an image is reflected. There may be several images, positive and negative. A school's ideology may be seen as a construction in a mirror through which images are reflected. The question is: who recognises themselves as of value? What other images are excluded by the dominant image of value so that some students are unable to recognise themselves? In the same way, we can ask about the acoustic of the school. Whose voice is heard? Who is speaking? Who is heard by this voice? For whom is it familiar?

The discussion will develop a realist approach to the dispositions of the self, and seeks a rapprochement with influential post-structuralist models of subjectivities constituted by discourses, while retaining a commitment to the essential place of habit, embodiment, and stratification in a theory of the self (Bhaskar, 1991, 1993; Collier, 1989; Sayer, 1992; Outhwaite, 1987). Scientific realism rejects, as does post-structuralism, the standpoint of 'positivist' science (Bunge, 1996, 1998). The Humean negation of causality, the construction of law-like models with no necessary reference to mechanism, and the hostility to concepts of essence and substance, are regarded as inadequate foundations for a satisfactory explanation of physical and social events and processes. The argument must begin with an outline of the empirical research that has informed this theoretical position.

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF PROGRESS AT SCHOOL

The Progress at School project was designed as a longitudinal programme to investigate the effectiveness of New Zealand secondary schools (Nash & Harker, 1998). In many

respects a replication of influential UK research (Smith & Tomlinson, 1989), the study was intended to provide information on the impact on student performance of market-driven reforms to school administration introduced in New Zealand during the 1990s. The attainments of 5400 students in 37 secondary schools were monitored throughout their secondary schooling. Standardised tests were used to derive an index of prior achievement; purpose designed attainment tests were administered after two years at secondary school; and national awards, including School Certificate, Sixth Form Certificate, and University Bursary, were also recorded. The research made a five-year longitudinal study employing a sample of about ten per cent of the New Zealand population cohort at this level. At the end of year 10 (fourth form) most students completed a questionnaire including a set of 30 items constituting a *Quality of School Life* (QSL) instrument (Williams & Batten, 1981; Wagemaker, 1993). The items of the QSL were devised so that students could respond in a way that would allow their dispositions towards school to be quantified as factor scores, and useful measures were obtained on perceptions of teachers and school, academic self-concept, and aspirations.

Our principal interest was in relative progress in the four years of secondary education completed by the great majority of students. The first task was to identify students who had made a relative gain or loss in their level of attainment during this period. The technical difficulties associated with this problem can be obviated to some extent by focussing the analysis on students in the middle of the ability range. Teachers will be familiar with the use of percentiles. If students with intake test score percentiles 4, 5, and 6 have shifted their position by at least two percentiles when compared with a percentile derived from Sixth Form attainment then, depending on the direction of movement, they 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 with slipping grades are more likely than those who are making progress to leave school without completing the sixth form programme. Students may leave school at 16 years of age, which is usually in the course of year 11, and there is a significant withdrawal from school at that point. The two groups – those who progressed and those who declined – moved steadily further apart during their years at secondary school: their virtually identical year 9 test scores 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. These are hugely significant differences. Although this sample of students had similar prior attainment scores at year 9, their attainments at the end of school were very different. It is science and mathematics, subjects more than any other 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 hardly be more compelling. This

finding is worth noting as it stands, but it is significant indeed to discover that students likely to succeed can be distinguished from those likely to fail on the basis of certain characteristic dispositions.

It may be no more than common sense to suppose that students with high ambitions, who like being at school, who think their teachers treat them fairly, and who believe they can succeed, will make more progress at school than those in exactly contrary frames of mind. But it is always useful to know when common sense is right. These individual dispositions were, in fact, markedly associated with relative progress at school, and the analysis revealed some interesting information about the individual characteristics of students in this crucial domain of practice. Average students with a particular pattern of responses, high aspirations (usually for tertiary education), and with positive dispositions towards teachers and school, are particularly likely to achieve at school. Conversely, of course, those with low aspirations, restless, 'tired of trying', and ill-disposed towards school, are more likely to fail. The picture of students likely to succeed or fail at school is becoming clearer.

'AVERAGE' STUDENTS RESPOND

The Progress at School research adopted an integrated 'numbers and narratives' approach intended to overcome the ill-formulated but influential dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative methods. Case studies were made both of schools and students using participant observation and semi-structured interviewing of key respondents. The analysis reported in this section relies on information collected largely by a postal questionnaire to 'average' students who had demonstrated positive or negative relative progress at secondary school. It represents a discrete element of the overall research programme. We received 40 completed questionnaires through the schools and managed to contact a further 15 students (all of whom had left school) by telephone. The students' written responses are worth some attention. There is an element in writing of reflection and concentration that can be less apparent in the spoken word. Most students knew what had happened to them. Of the 19 who obtained poor Sixth Form Certificate grades, all but three indicated that they thought their marks had declined during their time at secondary school. By contrast, 33 of the 36 who obtained good results thought their marks had improved during the same period. The knowledge that aspirations, self-concepts, and a tolerant goodwill towards school are important, and identifiable as distinct factors in a statistical model, should not be allowed to distort our interpretation of the complex unity of the habitus of which they are a partial expression. The processes by which students come to form their conceptions of what they can learn from school are related to a more profound sense of their developing identity as young adults. These theoretical remarks will be elaborated in a later section.

We asked students who had helped them, mentioning parents, teachers, and friends, and their responses are revealing. Most students who made distinct progress, from average to above average levels of attainment, believed that their parents had been the

major influence on their performance at school. There is a significant association between social class and relative progress. Students from professional families almost never lose ground, (18% progressed and 1% declined), whereas those from skilled working-class families were twice as likely to gain as they were to decline (14% and 7%). These figures are no more than indicative - 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 they point to the influence of social class as a source of the discourse of identity that should not be overlooked.

Only one student declared that her family had been the least important influence on her performance at school. All the others wrote about being 'helped', 'supported', 'encouraged', and given the motivation to succeed. Their parents assisted with schoolwork where they could, helped them through 'rough patches', offered advice on future career options, and saw that they 'stuck at it'. The majority of these students were from working-class families - the sample was selected from the mid-ability range which in itself excludes most middle-class students - and it is noticeable that in their own perception they were encouraged and supported at home in every essential respect. Some representative comments will be useful (comments from a few students whose performance declined are given in italics):

- My parents have been a major influence. They are the ones who have given me all the motivation to succeed.
- My mother is the person who has helped me the most at school. If there is anything I find hard in maths or the sciences she explains it to me or we work it out together.
- My parents are very supportive and have put forward a lot of different options that I could take.
- My family has been the most important influence on my performance at school. They have given me encouragement and support in all aspects of my schooling. My family was there to put me through school and teach me to stay there and get qualifications.
- My parents have had a considerable influence on the effort I put into my work. As I am an only child, they have made it possible for me to have as many opportunities as possible, and I feel that they have been a good influence on me.

The influence of teachers was reported in more ambivalent terms. Most of these students were keen for us to understand that there are teachers and teachers. Some teachers were seen as helpful and others as quite the opposite. Perhaps this must be an inevitable experience, and these students seemed to have come to terms with it - they were unlikely to have remained long at school beyond the compulsory age had they not - but they did not all think it necessary that this crucial element of their experience at school should be a matter of getting 'a good run' or 'the luck of the draw'. They wrote about 'some of the

teachers', or 'MY English teacher', or mentioned them by name, and even then were likely to make a nicely qualified statement, 'fairly good', or limit themselves to a careful observation about the specific assistance they had received. Many students were still confronted with teachers they found positively unhelpful, 'unable to communicate', and who showed little concern for them as students 'not top of the class'. These responses, of course, came from 'average' students' who had demonstrated steady and continuous progress at school by acting on favourable dispositions, and in that context their more than mixed experience of teachers as a direct influence on their relative progress is sobering. The following comments will lend support to this interpretation:

- My school teachers and school personnel; have also been helpful in guiding me in the right direction and in telling me what subjects would be best for my career choice. They've also told me what extra curricular activities may benefit me in being accepted for polytech or university.
- My teachers have been the most helpful. They have always given me extra time after class to help me and difficult questions I encounter. To make me understand the subject more.
- My teachers would have helped me the most. When there was a time when I was slacking they pulled me up and basically made me work.
- Teachers 'most' because they give me moral support and if I need the extra work, they give it to me and, also if I need to go over it with me.
- My teachers have been good at trying to make me do my best.

These were the most positive comments received: the majority of students expressed themselves in more temperate and measured terms:

- Occasionally the teachers would help out where needed.
- There are a couple of teachers that I get on with well and they cheer you on.
- Some teachers don't care, and make life difficult, if you aren't top of the class.
- The teachers have been of some help with the critical knowledge they passed on.
- I think school teachers are the most important influences on my performance. This can be good or bad. I have had a really good run of teachers purely because they can communicate with the students. If they can't communicate that is bad because then the students become disinterested.
- *Teachers well some have been really good but others have been terrible.*

Friends are enormously important to secondary school students. Groups of friends are well defined and spend much of their time together in classrooms, but even more in the lunchroom, the grounds, and beyond school in the evenings and at weekends. They get

to know each other very closely, and students are often greatly influenced by the aspirations and practices of their friends. Friendships are usually formed between students whose dispositions towards school are broadly similar. It is not surprising to find, in the light of this, that students attribute some of the causes of their relative improvement in performance to their friends. Significant changes are also occurring in the nature of students' friendships. At the age of 17 many had begun to form affectionate relationships with the opposite sex. It may not be without significance that several students mentioned the positive influence of a boy friend or girl friend. In the case of boys, in particular, this seems to have considerable potential to affect their level of performance.

Anyone who has listened to boys interacting together in school will be aware of the power words have to shape their behaviour. What gives 'nerd', for example, so much power over boys - more than the corresponding 'goody good' has over girls - and who commands that power and for what purpose? The ability of a position in discourse to call out a response from a student depends on the centrality of the concept to the self-image of the individual and the intensity of the reactions of others that act on it in relation to them (Davies 1993; Davies & Harré, 1990; Kenway & Willis, 1993). To be known as a 'nerd', without the resources of effective challenge, is to risk severe sanctions in boys' social networks. Boys who cannot tolerate being called 'nerds', but who recognise that they must obtain school qualifications in order to realise their occupational aspirations, adopt a variety of strategies to position themselves in other ways. They can be observed attempting to 'balance' academic success with achievement in sport, through an active interest in certain forms of popular music, by their relationship with a high-status girlfriend and, even then, by maintaining the minimum level of attainment necessary to achieve their immediate goal. In the terms of the group, nerds are not cool, and a convincing demonstration of 'coolness' will often negate the label and the identity it carries. These themes can be detected in the comments of many students:

- Performance has been influenced by if I like the teacher and the friends that I have and their study habits. Girlfriend also influences you for she has good study habits and therefore that has rubbed off on me.
- The persons who have helped me the most would be my girlfriend and my teachers. The next most important influence being that I want to become a teacher and therefore have to do the work to achieve this.
- Most influence was my friends. All my friends helped me a lot.
- My friends would also be one of the groups that helped me the most.
- Most of my friends try hard at school so I also try hard.

But friends also attracted some less positive comments. Managing the often conflicting demands on their time, even for these students who had made relative progress, often required a major effort of will:

- Sometimes my friends are nothing but a major distraction!!!
- I find it really hard when I am sitting Bursary in 5 subjects & most of my friends aren't sitting it at all. They are going out at weekends, week days etc. but I have to do my homework & study.
- Friends 'least' because they distract me from work program, with things such as sport, parties etc.
- *Last year wasn't a good year for me only because I had bad associates. Because I see nearly every day the consequences of leaving school without any qualifications whatsoever, it has also been a great impact on me.*
- *Friends I have always talked too much in class so they haven't helped much.*

In summary, several students replied in terms that merit particular respect. The first two of the following comments are from girls, and are entirely characteristic of a recognisable position adopted by young women. They speak to assert their independence, acknowledging those who had helped them develop, but determined to take responsibility for their own actions and their own achievements. A young woman may 'find it really hard' to study for an examination when her friends are going out, but the significant point is that she writes 'I have to do my homework & study'. In what sense does she *have* to do it? Not in the sense, almost certainly, that her parents stand over her, but in the sense that she is able to be a subject of a more powerful internalised discourse. This discourse is, again almost certainly, derived from a concrete ambition. The young man who wrote, 'I want to become a teacher and therefore have to do the work to achieve 'this'', articulates this point with great clarity. These young people had worked hard and succeeded where many with similar capabilities had dropped out or achieved much less impressive academic results. It had taught them some lessons both about themselves and others:

- I have found in my case the main influences would be the school and friends. As I am in a split family, the decisions for my education have been made mainly by myself, with the help of the school, over the past couple of years.
- All the people listed above have been there to help me grow and develop into the person I am today, but I don't feel they have affected my performance. They are all very supportive of me but never tell me what to do or what not to do. I feel MY teachers have helped me least. Because they just teach, nothing more/extra.
- The actual school because the mix of people and teachers are quite friendly and helpful when you need them. Friends and other people around me at school have influenced my performance, but when it comes down to it all the individual should take no notice of the 'influences', or deal with them if they are bad, which I have done.

Some of the social and individual characteristics of average students who are likely to succeed or fail have now been identified and discussed. Students whose attainments after four years at secondary school exceeded the level predicted by their entry scores often felt that they had succeeded as a result of their own determined efforts. We asked who had helped them most and they answered dutifully – parents first and then teachers and friends in no particular order – but at the same time they managed to make it clear that our list was marked by an absence. These young people felt that they owned their relative progress above all to themselves. It was their own high aspirations, their own dogged confidence in their ability to succeed, and their own capacity to accept to regime of the school - which imposes its petty indignities even on the most tolerant of students - that had pushed them forward. Most of these girls and boys were of working-class origin and of no more than average ability – they had seen many like themselves fail – but class origin does not determine the fate of individuals, and many of these students had begun to form an identity linked to a vision of their own future rather than their parents' past. All our evidence suggests that the effective dispositions of those who succeed are long-standing and durable. The steady improvement in their marks, year after year, clearly supports that interpretation. Bourdieu (1993) has made us think again about the importance of socially habituated dispositions - of the structures of the *habitus* - as the central mediating component in the construction of sociological explanations. The stratified self and its dispositions require a more extensive discussion.

THE STRATIFIED SELF AND ITS REAL DISPOSITIONS

The concept of the self is extremely difficult in social theory. The following discussion will be concerned with the central term *disposition* - which is necessarily a reference to some state of the body - and its relation to the achievement of the self. The concept of disposition in this scheme is derived in the first instance from Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as the embodiment of cultural structure responsible for the generation of practice. It seems preferable, however, to use the more general term. As Bourdieu (2000, p. 146) remarks, admitting this general sense, 'to deny the existence of dispositions is to deny the existence of learning and knowing'. If 'to speak of dispositions is simply to take note of a natural predisposition of human bodies' (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 136), there should be no objection to the adoption of the term in that sense. There are points of contact between discourse theory and scientific realism that merit a sympathetic investigation. Discourse theory, which does have links to post-modernism and related post-structuralist theories, similarly rejects the tenets of positivist science. It creates, however, models of the physical and social world fundamentally opposed to those preferred by realism (Eagleton, 1996). A structure-disposition-practice model - owing much to Bourdieu in this form - may help the discussion. In a sentence, social structures generate socialised dispositions and socialised dispositions generate actions within social practices. In a realist sociology it is necessary to describe system properties, habituated dispositions, and generated practices in order to construct an adequate model of social processes and events. A realist concept

of the embodied and stratified self - to introduce a term from Bhaskar that will be explained shortly - allows recognition of the deep-rooted structures of the habituated individual. 'Subjectivities' may be recognised, in reality, as structures of the stratified and habituated self. A realist structure-disposition-practice scheme thus maintains, for example, that the causal relationships between familial class position, parental desire to stimulate children's intellectual development, and the adoption of a specific social practice, have all to be demonstrated by practical observation and theoretical argument of a kind appropriate to the events and processes studied. The middle term 'disposition' refers to properties of the individual and, consequently, it follows that the struggle to achieve a disciplinary autonomy for sociology through the conflation of social and psychological properties is misconceived (Archer, 1995). By situating the individual at the centre of its explanatory framework, a structure-disposition-practice model aims to generate *realistic* accounts of the causes and consequences of social processes.

What sorts of people are we capable of being? One of the essential elements of human being and being human is the freedom to choose the kind of person we want to be. This moral, Aristotelian, idea has been accepted by a number of social theorists, including Bhaskar and Margolis (1993, 1998), and requires a concept of self with powers of direction and action. We are agents as well as *subjects*. One of the most important capacities of the self, in this view, is the power to become a particular kind of *subject*. Bhaskar's formal concept of the 'stratified self' represents a break with the 'non-unitary' self of discourse theory. As he puts it, in one of those inimitable phrases, 'an agent, in virtue of being a *stratified self* no more has to forget her Nietzsche in untying a knot than lose her capacity to speak French in saying "yes please"' (1993, p. 49). The point may be obscure and, although glossing Bhaskar is a risky business, it suggests that the concept of *sedimentation*, with its image of layered depth, is a more robust metaphor with which to grasp the multiple dispositions of the self and its achievements than the notion of *fragmentation*. We are rather complex 'stratified selves', not 'unified', if that conveys the idea of an unchanging self, certainly not always of 'one mind', and emphatically capable of being a subject to every variety of discourse, but through all this necessarily able to maintain a constant sense of identity and purpose. Indeed, those most able to maintain that core sense of personal being probably achieve more than others in every domain of practice. It is interesting in this context that Harré, who has made a significant contribution to realist philosophy of science and is a leading figure in the conceptual development of discourse theory, is entirely conscious of the significance of habit in the conduct of human affairs: 'the whole of psychology, as a discipline, hinges on whether and to what degree we should assimilate habits to causes or to monitored actions' (Harré, 1997, p. 184).

THE SELF AND THE INSTITUTIONAL REGIME

Corrigan's (1990) critique of schooling, directly influenced by Foucault's (1980) analyses of the institutionally formed subject, also examines how school regimes can be understood as a set of technologies designed to produce 'schooled' individuals within a specific set of patterns. Christie adopts a similar approach in a study of early childhood education. Children 'are expected to learn some significant lessons in what it is to be a pedagogic subject for the purpose of formal school teaching and learning' (Christie, 1997, p. 137). The effective agent in the theory as stated is, it will be noted, discourse itself in the form of subject positions. In the same tradition, Hunter (1988, p. 37) emphasises that the pedagogical relationship creates a self, that should not be conceived as a state of consciousness, but as a 'whole set of techniques, practices and dispositions through which individuals acquire a real and irreducible capacity for regulatory "work on the self".'

Students have only learned to be the people they are as the result of a long process of active socialisation. This realist insight has distinct implications for schools. Our case studies also demonstrate that working-class students often fail at school because they have formed low aspirations, possess little confidence in their ability to succeed, and are unwilling to be subjected to 'schooling' (Nash, 1999). When we interrogate teacher 'expectations' and examine organisational properties, streaming for example, we recognise how the material conditions for self-construction are created. The school can influence the effective dispositions of its students by the character of its regime (Pollard, 1990). A school where students are treated unfairly will depress their aspirations, their self-confidence, and their willingness to accept the order of the school as legitimate. In boys' school, in particular, bullying is the almost inevitable social consequence of a regime where the dimension of care in these respects has been compromised.

If relative progress at school, and success more generally, is driven at this level of personal being, then certain implications for the possibility of effective pedagogy seem to follow. The processes of identification with the school are easily recognised in the responses given by students to questionnaires and in conversations. Two working-class students, whose attainments were in the mid-range when they entered secondary school and somewhat higher when they left, spoke about their predominantly working-class school institution in terms characteristic of those well disposed to schooling:

Moana: I love this school [...] everything's in order. **Viv:** Yeah, we've got used to it. Being able to do what we like. **Moana:** I reckon this school's awesome, because you get on well with the teachers, and you get on well with everyone - everyone's friends. **Viv:** Most of us know each other from intermediate and some from primary. **Moana:** And everyone's just real friendly sort of thing, because of the atmosphere. **Viv:** There's hardly any conflict, eh? **Moana:** No, 'cus really with really nice teachers you get on with everyone. With the teachers as well.

But the school's efforts in this area, although important and essential, may have only a limited capacity to modify deep-seated dispositions with their early origin in the sites of primary socialisation. Aspirations, confidence that effort will be rewarded with success, and the willing ability to tolerate the regime of the school, which does not imply timid conformity, are often the expression of a deeper sense of classed identity: all have deep roots in the structure of the enduring, if not unitary, dispositions of the self. The relationship between social structures, socialisation practices, and the system of non-cognitive dispositions, has its own history in the disciplines of sociology and psychology. We have certainly learned to be critical of 'over-socialisation' theories and of tainted 'culture of poverty' deficit-theories in particular. At the same time, Bourdieu's work directs attention to the structures of the habitus as the constitution at the level of the individual of class cultural patterns of life. If the school is to respond to habitus that generate practices that result in failure rather than success, then it can do so only by an intensification of its power as an agency of socialisation. That does not mean, of course, the transformation of the school as a 'total institution', on the contrary, it may mean a greater willingness to accept the class cultural arbitrary - 'being able to do what we like' (a highly indexical comment referring to the girls' autonomy to live as young women within a specific gendered and class-cultural conception of adult life) - as a means to transmit the educationally necessary.

CONCLUSION

This investigation into the conditions of differential attainment at school is based on responses from a sample of senior secondary school students who had been identified by empirical monitoring as having demonstrated positive or negative relative progress. When they reflect on those who had helped or hindered them they open in their attributions a window to the sources of their subjectivity. The boys and girls who responded to our questions about the conditions of educational progress did not tell us why they had chosen to become the kind of students who, for example, succeed rather than fail at school. But many had, in a sense, made that choice and continued to exercise it every day. Those who remained at school knew, as they said, that they could choose to become a 'bum' - and they rejected that. They had an idea of the kind of adult they might become - and they lived within that conception of their future. In a realist theory, these are recognised as choices of the self in its unitary conception.

The dispositions of the self - they actually comprise its stratified structure - direct the individual to behave in accordance with such socialised habits. To act in accordance with habit does not, of course, necessarily mean to act without reflection. It is entirely possible to form a habit of acting rationally. When an assignment is due on Monday, the student with high aspirations, confident that her efforts will be recognised, and positive in her regard for the school and its opinion of her, is thus exactly disposed to resist an appeal to spend the evening at a nightclub and complete the task before her. If this sounds like common sense, then so much the better for common sense. The forms of practice within

the family and the school that instill such effective dispositions are, however, by no means so obvious as to make discussion in this area redundant. Time and again one encounters able young people from working-class families who at a critical point in their schooling, as they say, 'give it up' or 'throw it away', because of a failure of desire or motivation. This account should be recognised as compatible with discourse theory. The desire they experience as fading away is not, although Hird (1998) seems to suggest this, the result of a cognitive inability to give voice to the *discourses* in which those desires are expressed. With some young people, indeed, the desire, as a longing to enjoy social status and a 'good life-style' remains as pressing as ever and, one suspects, will leave them long dissatisfied with themselves and with 'the system' because of their inability to realise it (Bourdieu et al., 1999).

The specific frames of mind in which young people make decisions about their future are complex, and to study the structures, dispositions, and practices of social life is to study 'discourse' in its widest sense. Sociologists are right to believe that students' concepts of themselves as adults - as men and women and as workers - are formed in distinct social contexts, and related in an extraordinarily complex manner, and in part through recognised positions within youth sub-cultures, to the formation of trajectories of success and failure at school. The realisation that to study the dispositions of the self is crucial to a full sociological account of social processes is growing stronger (Appel, 1996). As we continue to work for an integrated theoretical approach able to recognise the intrinsic connections between structure, disposition, and practice, our understanding of the multiple and three-layered causes of differential educational progress can only deepen.

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