



# Low expectations equal no expectations: Aspirations, motivation, and achievement in secondary school



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 29 June 2013

### Keywords:

Motivation  
Expectations  
Aspirations  
Secondary school  
Achievement  
Attributions

## ABSTRACT

Underachievement and failure to complete school have long-term negative consequences for students. Aspirations regarding completion of secondary school that predict achievement outcomes are related to factors amenable to intervention. This study investigates relationships between academic achievement and self-reported educational aspirations, motivation, affiliation with peers and teachers, and attributions. Survey participants were 5369 Year 10 and Year 11 students at 19 nationally representative secondary schools in New Zealand, and available achievement records were sourced for 2439 Year 11 students. Survey data were factor analyzed followed by further examination of relationships across demographic factors, self-reported aspirations, motivational factors (*Doing My Best* and *Doing Just Enough*), attributions, and interpersonal affiliations (*Teacher* and *Peer*). For Year 11 students, relationships between different factors and subsequent achievement were also analyzed. Students who indicated no aspiration to complete a school qualification were indistinguishable from those with low or moderate aspirations, and the analyses supported only two divergent groups comprising students with either low or high aspirations to complete qualifications. Aspirations were significantly related to different patterns of motivation, affiliation, and attributions predictive of academic achievement. Students of different ethnicity and gender also fell unequally across the two groups. These results suggest that promoting low or even moderate expectations and aspirations for student achievement may actually reinforce lower academic achievement. Instead, teachers and schools should communicate high expectations to prevent school failure and effective interventions to enhance student outcomes.

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## 1. Background

Students who leave secondary school with minimal qualifications are increasingly disadvantaged in today's societies and the global economy. Those who fail to complete secondary school are more likely than graduates to be unemployed or underemployed as adults, require income support, and be disproportionately at risk for substance abuse, crime, mental health problems, and poor quality of life (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000; Fergusson, Swain-Campbell, & Horwood, 2002; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000). The challenge of school completion persists in many developed nations, including New Zealand where as recently as 2004 approximately one-third of students left school without a minimal secondary school qualification.

Concern about these outcomes in New Zealand drove a major policy reform that replaced a secondary assessment system based on norm referenced end of year examinations with a

standards-based system using both classroom and examination assessments: the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) (Ministry of Education, 1999). This move reflected evidence that a standards-based system was optimal for all students and particularly so for students likely to score below their peers on norm-referenced assessments (Crooks, 1988; Natriello, 1987). Implementation of the NCEA has been associated with more students attaining a basic level qualification before leaving school. By 2011, the proportion of students who left school with a first level qualification had risen to 84% and the percentage of secondary students qualifying for university entrance increased substantially (see Table 1). However, overall improvements mask continuing ethnic disparities: whereas less than 12% of students of European descent left school without qualifications in 2011, more than 31% of Indigenous Māori students did so.

Beyond cultural and other demographic patterns, however, individual attitudes and characteristics within groups play key roles in shaping academic achievement outcomes. The focus of this study is to clarify patterns of student motivation and achievement goals that are identifiable before students fail, can be measured easily, and suggest directions for intervention to shift negative

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**Table 1**

Percentage of school leavers with a university entrance standard, by ethnic group (2004–2011).

Year	Māori	Pasifika	Asian	European	Other ethnic group	Total
2004	9.6	11.6	51.8	33.2	24.5	28.7
2005	9.8	12.0	54.0	34.1	25.5	29.4
2006	12.2	13.8	58.1	36.9	33.0	32.5
2007	15.0	16.6	60.8	39.4	29.8	34.9
2008	17.1	18.9	62.4	43.8	37.4	39.1
2009	18.4	22.8	63.1	46.2	42.3	41.1
2010	20.0	25.8	65.3	47.5	42.3	42.2
2011	23.4	29.5	66.8	50.8	46.6	45.4

From the ministry of education website, *Education Counts*. <http://www.education-counts.govt.nz/indicators/data/education-and-learning-outcomes/3668#1> (Accessed 02.11.12).

patterns associated with under-achievement to positive patterns related to high achievement.

### 1.1. Relationships among motives, learning, and outcomes

Student attitudes towards education and educational achievement are influenced by factors long preceding entry to secondary school. While past experiences cannot be changed, educationalists can focus on current context and other factors that can be altered to enhance student outcomes (Hattie, 2009). Three such dimensions are: students' intentions and goals for the future (aspirations), their personal motivational orientations, and social influences from families, teachers, and peers.

The first key dimension concerns intentions and goals for the future. Ajzen's (1991, 2011) theory of planned behavior provides a useful framework for investigating influences on specific tasks and set goals that are distinct from the more generic influences of motivation orientations on achievement. Applied to educational outcomes, the theory predicts that student aspirations and achievement in particular learning contexts are influenced by three factors—the extent to which the student values the achievement opportunity, whether the student feels social pressure to achieve or avoid achieving, and whether the student perceives he/she has some control over achievement. These three factors combine to establish a student's intention with respect to each opportunity to perform a specific task; these intentions in turn predict the behaviors that lead to achievement. Students would make the effort to do well if: (a) they value the outcome; (b) people whom they care about demonstrate that they value the outcome; and (c) students believe in their ability to achieve the outcome.

Research in support of this theory has shown that intentions are strong predictors of behavior. Sheeran (2002) found a mean overall correlation of 0.53 between intentions and behavior, with a weaker but still significant relationship where there is a longer time gap between the intention and the behavior (McEachan, Conner, Taylor, & Lawton, 2011). This time interval between intentions and outcomes is relevant to academic achievement, where intentions often involve longer-term goals. Although the theory of planned behavior has been applied most commonly to health outcomes, Manstead and van Eekelen (1998) investigated its application to academic achievement and demonstrated that students' intentions significantly predicted their grades. There is also evidence that secondary students' statements regarding intentions to stay in school are highly predictive of subsequent school outcomes (Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, & Williams, 2002). Furthermore, Lee, McInerney, Liem, and Ortiga (2010) showed that future goals and aspirations add to the effects of intrinsic motivation and achievement. Asking students about their intentions to complete school qualifications may be an efficient means to assess student

risk for underachievement and the basis for intervention. This is one key concept in the present study.

A second key area concerns the influence of motivational orientations on learning and achievement outcomes (Pintrich, 2000; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Research shows that students with more internalized motives achieved better grades at school than students lacking these motives (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Recent meta-analyses have shown that general achievement goals (e.g., mastery versus performance) have explained on average only between 2% and 6% of variability in outcomes (Huang, 2012; Hulleman, Schragger, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010). Corker and Donnellan (2012) extend these findings in demonstrating that combining broader aspirational goals with more specific target goals significantly predicts academic achievement. Similarly, research has demonstrated that two motivation orientations incorporating more specific target goals related to New Zealand's standards-based NCEA qualification—termed *Doing My Best* and *Doing Just Enough*—were significant predictors of different patterns of achievement (Hodis, Meyer, McClure, Weir, & Walkey, 2011; McClure, Meyer, Garisch, Fischer, Weir, & Walkey, 2011; Meyer, McClure, Walkey, Weir, & McKenzie, 2009a). The *Doing My Best* goal reflects a performance approach achievement goal relating to specific outcomes on the NCEA (e.g., 'I want to take credits that allow me to try for Merit and Excellence, rather than just Achieved'). The *Doing Just Enough* goal reflects a performance avoidance goal that also relates to specific outcomes in the NCEA (e.g., 'Once I have my 80 credits, I'll be satisfied'). These are motivation orientations are specifically referenced to NCEA assessment incorporating meaningful goal orientations for performance against standards, rather than norm-referenced assessments where grades are influenced not solely by the student's performance but also by how other students perform.

A standards-based system such as the NCEA can affect students in two contrasting ways. A positive *Doing My Best* orientation could enhance effort if students recognize that their grades reflect attainment of standards under their own control, without being adversely affected by what other students do. Alternatively, a standards-based system could also encourage a more negative *Doing Just Enough* orientation: students who might otherwise excel in a competitive environment may be encouraged instead to do only the minimum to pass the standard. To lessen this risk with the NCEA, endorsements for Merit and Excellence provide incentives to encourage students' working beyond passing only.

These motivations also link to students' causal attributions for their results: McClure et al. (2011) demonstrated that students' attributions for their best and worst marks were related to students' motivations but predicted additional variance in their achievement results. In the current study, we predicted that high aspiration groups would attribute their best and worst marks more to ability and effort (internal causes) and less to luck and the teacher (external uncontrollable causes) than low aspiration groups.

The third focus of this research examines social and contextual influences on student learning. Traditional motivation theories and individualistic motivation scales have tended to de-emphasize interpersonal, cultural, and community influences, with some exceptions. Urdan and Maehr (1995) urged some years ago that researchers consider social influences on motivation and achievement as well as intrapersonal factors. The theory of planned behavior discussed above predicts that social factors can be important determinants of student learning when internalized. Peers, family members, and other significant persons in children's lives (including teachers and mentors) have been shown to have both positive and negative influences on educational outcomes (Pomerantz, Grolnick, & Price, 2005; Wentzel, 1998). Rudasill, Reio, Stipanovic, and Taylor (2010) showed that student-teacher relationships mediated the relationship between student's temperament

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