

## *EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY: THE SPECIAL CASE OF PACIFIC STUDENTS*

Roy Nash<sup>1</sup>Massey University College of Education  
Hokowhitu Campus  
Palmerston North

### **Abstract**

A causal relationship between aspirations and achievement is widely recognised by the sociology of education. Bourdieu, for example, has argued that students “internalise the odds” of their social group and thus reproduce these “objective chances” imposed by the social structure. Contemporary studies, however, particularly of ethnic minorities, indicate the relationship to be more complex. In New Zealand, the achievements of Pacific students, for example, are generally poor despite their high aspirations. These issues are discussed in the context of empirical data, both quantitative and qualitative, from the Progress at School project, and with reference to recent commentaries on this theme by Bourdieu. Some brief comments on the implications for policy makers are offered.

### INTRODUCTION

The Government’s policy initiatives designed to reduce the “gaps” are directed at improving social and educational opportunities, in the widest sense, for low socio-economic communities, in order to bring them closer to the levels of well-being enjoyed by those not in this category. Although the attention of the media is often focused on Māori, it is appropriate to examine the circumstances of Pacific people where they have special characteristics (Earle 1995). The sphere of education is one where this is arguably the case. Both Māori and Pacific students underachieve in the educational system compared with Pākehā and Asian students, and there is some merit in examining the position of Pacific students in an analysis able to attend to the particular history and status of their communities. The following analysis will draw on published Ministry of Education statistics and data from the Progress at School project (Nash and Harker 1998). The Progress at School project, funded by the Ministry of Education, was designed as a school-effects study and monitored the educational attainments of 5,400 students from Year 9 (in 1991) to the completion of their secondary education. The research was conducted broadly within a theoretical context influenced by the eminent French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1999). It is necessary to point out at once, however, that the

---

<sup>1</sup> E-mail: roynash@voyager.co.nz

common recognition of Bourdieu as a “reproduction theorist” will be subjected, with the aid of his own recent work, to a revisionist interpretation in this paper.

## THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Bourdieu supposes that social and economic relations are reproduced from one generation to another because people acquire from their socialisation a *habitus*, “a system of acquired dispositions functioning at the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as the organising principles of action” (Bourdieu 1990:13), which sets their aspirations broadly in line with the opportunities open to their social group. In a sense, people come to internalise their statistical fate, and in that manner bring about what appears to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The school, moreover, contributes to this process by excluding, through its active neglect of their “non-recognised” *habitus*, working-class and cultural minority children.

In a nutshell, the argument is that, “[t]he working classes are trapped in their *habitus* through cultural impoverishment and cultural difference” (Branson and Miller 1991:42). This position, although accepted by many, has also been sharply criticised as a “dark”, “determinist” and “immutable formulation” (Mehan et al. 1996:216), Bourdieu (1999) refers to the “internalised chances” argument as “the statistical mode of reproduction”, and Fowler (1996:9) points out that in his view, the “low percentage of the children of workers and peasants who achieve educationally at the levels of the children of the *haute bourgeoisie*, is in itself proof of the operation of such generative relationships which often act against the will”. This epistemological manoeuvre, to say the least, is not universally accepted.

The model requires that all individuals from a certain group have the odds of success and failure for their group embodied in a generative *habitus*, so that if, for example, only 5% of lower working-class children enter university, children from this class have a taken-for-granted knowledge of the odds against them built in to the *habitus* and so reproduce them. But in order for this argument to work it would have to be shown that individuals possessed a learned ability to estimate the probability of those “like themselves” to achieve any relevant future state, and that their actions were shaped in accordance with that knowledge. That has not been done and it is difficult to imagine how it could be done. People certainly have specific dispositions to act, but they do not have *that* kind of disposition – and it is *unrealistic* to suppose that they do in order to maintain a form of “statistical” explanation. Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s status as a theorist of “reproduction” has been widely accepted and maintains a radical appeal for many who work in education.

## The Role of the School in Working-class Reproduction

Reproduction through the internalisation of objective chances, even if demonstrated by its results, seems at the same time to suggest that aspirations among the dominated classes and groups that fail at school should be low. As an empirical fact this has actually been in doubt for many decades, and in the case of certain groups is spectacularly untrue. One of these problematic cases, the French North African population, has forced itself to Bourdieu's attention. How does Bourdieu explain the complete mismatch between the high aspirations of this community and their actual location in the division of labour and the social hierarchy? The answer will be developed in a discussion of a parallel "special case" nearer home: Pacific families and their children in New Zealand also maintain very high aspirations similarly quite at odds with their actual location in the social structure.

Bourdieu's theory has always been multi-layered, subtle, and free of an over-pedantic insistence on "consistency". The school – as he writes – makes its own contribution to the reproduction process. The particular nature of its reproductive mechanisms, moreover, is not static, and, in a paradox more apparent than real, the contemporary school *retains* as it *rejects* (Bourdieu et al. 1999:185):

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 that is based in the anticipated adaptation to dominated positions.

Only in recent decades has the school assumed a central role in *working-class* reproduction. But it is now the case that most young people remain in school – there is virtually no other choice – until they are 17 or 18 years of age. For many this means passing through adolescence while coping with the experience of cumulative failure in an alienating institution. It is in this context that working-class boys and girls – particularly the former – typically 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 central to the identity of young people as they begin to live as the adults they wish to become. But at the same time, the truly defining property of adult status – work – seems so remote, despite the fact that many students have part-time jobs, that aspirations often long remain at the level of fantasy.

In the protected, indeterminate world of the school, that delays their entry to "real world", working-class boys indulge in dreams of becoming professional sports stars, or of joining

the army, and working-class girls of becoming singers and actresses, showing little or no interest in the occupations most must before long enter. Students at school often practise, as Bourdieu notes, "the art of surviving at the least possible cost" (Bourdieu 1999:429) and have learned how to provoke their teachers with that attitude of "disenchanted resignation disguised as careless nonchalance" (p.425) that even in France is known as "le cool". The contemporary school has been forced to adapt to these conditions with singular modifications to its educational practice and theory.

The theoretical changes are particularly interesting. Bourdieu notes that the most influential of current theories – which has a certain "radical" genesis – rejects the once dominant psychological perspective in favour of "structural" alternatives:

Factors that seem "natural", like talent or taste, give way to poorly defined social factors such as the inadequacies of the educational system or the inability and incompetence of the teachers (whom parents increasingly hold responsible for their children's poor results), or, even more confusedly, to the logic of a completely deficient system in need of an overhaul. (p.422)

There are followers of Bourdieu who will not be amused by the irony of these comments. He suggests that those, not least among them teachers, who once maintained the conventional view that educational inequality was the result of "natural gifts" or intelligence, and so on, have now adopted a different position. It would be unkind to over-document the existence of this "critical" position, subjected to such unexpected critique, and Walkerdine and Lucy (1989:192) must represent an entire genre. Summarising a case study of a working-class girl, they write:

Only massive changes in the British educational system would make it possible for her to do anything other than fail and become one more figure in the ridiculous self-fulfilling prophecy of the attainment of working-class pupils.

Yet it has been noted that Bourdieu *has* argued that the school recognises the *habitus* of the dominant class as legitimate, regards those who lack this *cultural capital* as ineducable by want of innate intelligence, and systematically excludes them by a process of neglect. Bourdieu *has*, moreover, demonstrated that the practices of the educational system, informed by misrecognition on a massive scale, must be subjected to constant critique and reform. It is not altogether surprising that tens of thousands of students have been taught this account of "Bourdieuian" theory and practice. His comments suggest, however, that what many have learned is not a *method of practice*, but merely a formalistic "sociological" account of "reproduction" with little substantive explanatory power outside the context of its application. Thus has Bourdieu come to protest that he is not a "Bourdieuian".

With these observations made – and they will be taken up again – it will be useful to present some comparative data on attainment and access to tertiary education with particular reference to Pacific students.

#### COMPARATIVE DATA ON ATTAINMENT AND ACCESS

Table 1 presents in an abbreviated form the attainments of school leavers by ethnic group. These data reveal why there is so much concern with the “gaps”. There is a five-fold or six-fold difference between the bursary attainments of Pākeha and Māori and Pacific students. The figures for Asian students ought to rule out of consideration those theories that involve such untheorised concepts as “Western knowledge”.

**Table 1 Attainments of School Leavers, 1997, by Ethnic Group (%)**

	All	Pākeha	Māori	Pacific	Asian
7th Form	42.1	47.6	17.8	26.5	65.9
6th Form	23.9	24.5	22.4	28.8	18.0
Sc. Cert.	16.4	15.7	22.2	18.5	7.3
None	17.6	12.2	37.7	26.2	8.8

Note: 7th Form includes Bursary, Entrance, HSC; 6th Form refers to Sixth Form Certificate in one or more subjects irrespective of grade; School Certificate similarly refers to one or more subjects irrespective of grade; and “None” means No Formal Qualifications. Source: Ministry of Education (1998a:17) Figure 3.

For school leavers, access to tertiary education is largely controlled by school qualifications and the data presented in Table 2 reveal an entirely expected pattern.

**Table 2 School Leaver Entry to Tertiary Education, 1998, by Ethnic Group (%)**

	Pākeha	Māori	Pacific	Asian
Degree	24.8	8.5	9.3	62.8
Diploma	4.7	3.0	10.5	2.5
Certificate	9.3	2.6	10.1	8.7

Note: Includes only full-time full-year courses.

Source: Ministry of Education (1998b).

It is evident from Table 2 that the ethnic distribution of access to tertiary education reflects the attainments of school leavers. It should be noted that many Māori and Pacific students must enter university with lower qualifications than Pākeha students: the proportion of Pākeha students entering university matches almost exactly the proportion with A or B bursary qualifications, but the proportion of Māori and Pacific students entering university is about twice the proportion of those with that level of school qualification.

These data do not, of course, explain themselves; indeed, they present the sociology of education with a severe test of its explanatory power. Table 3 presents evidence fundamental to any serious discussion of the causes of social differences in access to education. The Progress at School research found attainment at secondary school to be associated very strongly with prior ability on tests of reading and “scholastic ability”. It is important to consider the implications of this without theoretical prejudice.

**Table 3 Ethnic Distribution of Year 9 Test Scores and Social Class**

	Pākeha		Māori		Pacific		Asian	
	mean score	% in class	mean score	% in class	mean score	% in class	mean score	% in class
Professional	0.63	23.3	0.16	10.6	-0.70	7.6	0.51	16.8
Intermediate	0.32	31.8	-0.10	17.0	-0.26	15.0	-0.02	18.4
Skilled	0.06	21.0	-0.31	19.0	-0.74	12.2	-0.53	25.4
Low Skilled	-0.11	17.4	-0.45	32.1	-0.81	40.4	-0.41	25.4
Non-working	-0.18	6.6	-0.63	21.2	-1.00	24.8	-1.00	14.1
Total (n)		3,366		1,015		327		185

Note: Social class categories based on the Elley-Irving socio-economic scale: (“professional”: categories 1 and 2; “intermediate”: category 3 including farmers and horticulturists; “skilled”: category 4 excluding farmers and horticulturists); “low skilled”: categories 5 and 6; with non-working added. Test scores derived from PAT Reading Comprehension and Test of Scholastic Ability (NZCER) standardised with mean = 0, and standard deviation = 1.

Source: Progress at School data (Nash and Harker 1998).

The distribution of Year 9 test scores (which can be interpreted with some justification as a reflection of what many psychometricians regard as acquired verbal intelligence) is clearly associated with social classes, except in the case of Pacific students. There are a number of reasons for this “exceptionalism”. The sample is rather small (there are only 25 in the broad professional category), some are not fluent speakers of English (for whom the tests are designed), and the occupational data may be subject to a degree of systematic internal error particularly in non-manual occupations (such as a “tutor”, SES category 1, who is actually a craft demonstrator). In addition, the relationship between literate socialisation practices and occupation, which in other populations has emerged over several generations, is less apparent in these communities. It goes without saying that these references to “literate socialisation practices” and “cultural capital” should be detached from their “deficit theory” connotations and interpreted in their fully elaborated Bourdieuan context.

The significance of the Year 9 test scores was demonstrated unequivocally in the analyses of secondary school attainment carried out by the Progress at School research. Almost half

of all students who gained a university entrance level bursary award are from the upper fifth of the Year 9 test score distribution. However, whereas 25.7% of Pākeha students have scores in that group, the figures for Māori and Pacific students are 8.5% and 4.9% respectively.

If it is said that Māori and Pacific students make little relative progress at secondary school, then it should also be said that they do not show much relative decline. There is evidence of such decline, but it is not compelling. The Progress at School research divided mid-ability students with School Certificate (English) into three groups: those who had improved their relative level of performance since third form, those who had maintained their position, and those who had declined. Most students maintained their position, but rather more Pacific students declined (34.7%) than improved (22.4%), and this should be noted. On the other hand, of the 391 Pacific students, there were only 49 mid-ability candidates who attempted this subject, and with a sample of that size the analysis is not unduly robust; it means that 11 students improved their relative position, 21 stayed as they were, and 17 declined. The only variable shown to be associated with the educational progress or decline of Pacific students is an index of family reading practices.

To charge low-decile secondary schools with failing to improve the educational progress of low-ability Māori and Pacific students, relative to that of high-ability Pākeha students in high-decile schools, on such evidence is unwarranted, to say the least. It is third form tested "ability" that "makes the difference". There were, in fact, just 19 Pacific students in the upper ability quintile. Of these, four left before attempting School Certificate (almost certainly to enrol at other schools), 13 completed sixth form, and eight gained a bursary level attainment – including five with more than 200 marks. These results are comparable with those of students from the less-skilled Pākeha working class (although two of the Pacific students with a high bursary mark were from professional families according to school records). Some of the implications of this argument must be discussed.

#### ABILITIES AND "DEFICITS"

Many people regard the argument that "ability" is a major cause of school success as a "deficit" theory, and set their faces against it for that reason alone. No one wants to return to the "deficit" theories of 30 or 40 years ago. Focusing only on practices and ignoring the structural conditions of their production, these theories seemed to "blame the victim" and exonerate the oppressor.

Bourdieu (2000) understands, of course, the ideological barriers that inhibit discussion about realities that can be suppressed only at the risk of provoking precisely the consequence of all such repression, that is their symptomatic expression in a disguised and more dangerous form at other sites:

It is difficult to talk about the dominated in an accurate and realistic way without seeming either to crush them or to exalt them. (p.233-234)

Within Bourdieu's approach it is pointless to oppose dispositional ("psychological") theories to structural ("sociological") theories, when the entire argument has the form of a structure-disposition-practice model. As Bourdieu (1998:136) has allowed himself to say:

The ability to produce a complex chain of logical reasoning or the ability to accomplish a perfectly rigorous moral act... remain the privilege of only a few because these anthropological potentialities find their full realisation only under definite social and economic conditions... one cannot, at the same time denounce the inhuman social conditions imposed upon proletarians... and credit the people placed in such situations with the full accomplishment of their human potentialities.

This may seem only a whisker away from the once conventional theories of "lower-class behaviour" (Roach 1967), and it is significant that Bourdieu has felt the need to "bend the stick", as he likes to say, in order to express dissent from the romanticism, populism and unrestrained relativism so prevalent in this discourse. The relationships between social class, the possession of literate resources, the generation of effective cognitive ability through specialised socialisation practices, and the achievement of literacy by children, being real, continue to exist even when ignored.

### THE PROBLEM OF ASPIRATIONS

Some of the most influential theories of educational inequality argue that working-class students underachieve at school because they have low aspirations and do not wish to succeed in middle class terms. It has been noted that Bourdieu's "internalisation of objective chances" thesis appears to require low aspirations. Willis's (1978) famed British study, showing that working-class youths resisted the demands of the school and lived within cultural forms taken from their own community, also rests on the same argument. However, the Progress at School data do not support the contention that working-class aspirations are generally low. In fact, aspirations reflect demonstrated achievement more than social origin. However, Pacific students are a major exception to this pattern as their aspirations are extraordinarily high and bear little or no relationship to their scholastic achievements. It should be noted that the analysis is unable to recognise differences in aspirations and attainments that might be associated with ethnic origin within the broad Pacific community. With that caveat, however, the data available may be examined.



**Table 4 Year 9 Test Scores and Fourth Form Aspirations**

Aspiration	Pākeha		Pacific	
	Mean score	% in class	Mean score	% in class
University	0.72	40.3	-0.56	42.0
Polytechnic	0.22	24.6	-0.84	25.2
Intermediate	0.10	12.6	-0.81	14.3
Manual	-0.13	16.9	-0.78	4.6
Other	-0.40	5.6	-0.90	13.9
		100%		100%

Table 4 shows that whereas Pākeha students, at least by the end of fourth form, have developed aspirations finely graded by the level of attainment required to achieve them, Pacific students appear not to have grasped the effective relationships in this area. The aspirations of Pākeha students are over-ambitious by a factor of almost two – for no more than a quarter will actually enter university – but those of Pacific students exceed any probable reality by a factor of at least four. Only the relatively high proportion of Pacific students in the “other” category, representing short training courses for students without qualifications or unemployment, hints at the existence of “realism” by young people from this community.

It is interesting to note that the proportion expecting to enter manual occupations is three times higher for Pākeha than Pacific students. There is, of course, a tradition of skilled industrial work in the former population that barely exists in the latter. These data hint at an attitude of all-or-nothing on the part of Pacific students: either success at school and a professional occupation, or failure and unskilled labour. And that is, in fact, the reality. However, these data indicate that the structural reality is exactly opposite to the hopes revealed by their reported aspirations.

It is common to encounter young people at the age of 16 who have still not internalised the “rules of the game” and cling to aspirations that cannot possibly be achieved. The Progress at School research was able to hold extensive conversations with many Pacific students and the argument can be illustrated. As a fourth form student, Isabella indicated her aspiration to enter university and she maintained it at least until the middle of sixth form when she was again interviewed. The fieldworker asked Isabella how her studies were going:

**Isabella:** Typing’s boring. Accounting’s boring. Maths is too hard. English is all right, Mr O’Connor’s not too bad. Nothing really. I don’t like school.

**Interviewer:** No. What are you going to do when you leave? Any plans?

**Isabella:** After I’ve finished I’d like to do child psychology.

**Interviewer:** That sounds great! Are you serious?

**Isabella:** Yeap.

**Interviewer:** How did you get that idea?

**Isabella:** I don't know, help kids. I like being with kids.

**Interviewer:** Do you look after kids quite a lot?

**Isabella:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Do you know any one who does that job?

**Isabella:** No. I know counsellors and social workers.

**Interviewer:** OK. Do you know much about what you'd have to do?

**Isabella:** Yeah. I did research on child-carers. It was a fifth form English project, we all had to do it.

**Interviewer:** Has anyone in your family been to university?

**Isabella:** No.

**Interviewer:** So you'd be the first?

**Isabella:** Yeah, no one else has finished college [secondary school].

"Are you serious?" the fieldworker asks, in a neutral tone, but nevertheless indicating some doubt if not incredulity on hearing Isabella's aspiration voiced in the context of this account of her experience of school. The girl is entirely unenthusiastic about her subjects, confesses that she dislikes school, and is uncertain of how to realise the occupational goal she has formed. Even to someone ignorant (as the fieldworker was not) about Isabella's poor grades, the status of her aspiration would seem problematic. It hardly needs to be said that Isabella was forced, before many months had passed, to reconsider her future. She left school without completing sixth form to take up a short employment training course for students with low educational qualifications.

The fact that Pacific students have high aspirations creates an explanatory vacuum if structure-disposition-practice models that include reference to family and community practices are, as a matter of principle, ruled out as "deficit" theories. Such a move leaves the educational system as the only explanatory candidate.

In any case, as the system plainly does not provide Pacific students with an education equal in its outcomes to that of other groups, the cause of their exclusion – by a manoeuvre of thought so common as to be considered respectable – is already established (Murphy 1990). Within this paradigm, if such it can be called, there is little for the sociology of education to do but refer to the "structural" inequities of the educational system and describe the mechanisms of process which, in the conventional methodology of sociological research in education, need involve only the description of such surface features of schooling that appear to support the required conclusion (Jones 1991, Thrupp 1997, Mulitalo 2000).

## PACIFIC COMMUNITIES AND THE SCHOOL: A BOURDIEUIAN PERSPECTIVE

Pacific students present an exceptional case for the sociology of education in as much that the usual associations (they are presented in Table 4 for Pākeha students) between aspirations, ability, and attainment are barely evident. Pacific people in New Zealand are largely from recent third world immigrant communities engaged in unskilled labour, and it is with those facts that the explanation of its peculiarity should engage (Loomis 1991, Ongley 1991).

Bourdieu has discussed the effects on the French immigrant community from North Africa of the destruction of its traditional practices of intergenerational social reproduction. The authority of the family, that is of the father, to organise the transition to work in manual trades has been shattered, and responsibility for the future of the offspring – and of the family itself – has been assumed by the school. We can find our own parallels for this analysis. The position of the Pacific community in New Zealand in relation to the school was recently described in a direct and informed account by a dean responsible for Pacific liaison in a school where almost half the roll were from the Samoan and Tongan communities:

“Most of the families have been here for 20 years or more now, at least, but this suburb is much newer. You have to remember all the time the position they’re in. At the moment, there’s just about enough work, although the closure of the assembly plant is still being felt, but it’s still the unskilled, low-paid work that they came here to do a generation ago. The whole community – one should say communities, because there are four or five quite distinct nationalities here, and there are real rivalries between them – is desperate to improve its position. It invests its hopes in its children. They’re put under enormous pressure to succeed and it’s one of the most difficult things to watch the disappointment that sets in when a family realises that its hopes are not going to be realised. I had a girl with her family in here at the end of last year. She felt that she’d got as far as she could go, she’d completed sixth form, but she thought that bursary would be beyond her, and she was almost certainly right. So she decided to look for an opening in the travel area and take a course at polytech. I thought it was a sensible plan. But the parents took a lot of persuading. OK, the parents and the kids – young people – don’t want factory jobs. The fact that that’s where most of them will end up is not the point. And as a school we use that, we collaborate, you might say, we hold out opportunities to them. As an institution we make implied promises. We say, ‘If you don’t pass, you won’t get the job you want’, and so on. But we know the rules of this game, we know what the standards are, and so on, and we have to get that across to the parents and to

the students. Of course, it's a lot easier with the students. The whole thing is very difficult. A 'realism' that has us saying to the students, 'you haven't a hope', is not in our interests, and it's not in theirs, and it's not even true – not for all of them. But at the same time we have to be careful that we don't simply reinforce the hopelessly unrealistic expectations their families often have for them. If there is a solution to this problem, then it must be through communication. We've had to develop organic connections with the community and we now have several Pacific teachers."

This quotation is offered only for its illustrative value and does not, of course, constitute "proof" of the relations discussed. Nevertheless, it does seem that the Pacific community is conscious that it has lost a degree of control over its mechanisms of social reproduction in this crucial area. However, many Pacific families lack the specific forms of cultural capital required to use the school successfully, and unless that fact is recognised as the central problem for educational reconstruction, the chances of remedying the situation become that much more remote. The nature of the cultural capital recognised by the school is, of course, the subject of intense debate; the crux of the matter is simply whether it is arbitrary or necessary. That topic, however, demands a discussion that would take this paper far beyond its purpose.

It so happened that in our research we were able to interview the young woman mentioned by the school dean, and the dignified account she gave of her experiences is worth relating:

**Interviewer:** So you're intending to leave school at the end of this year?

**Jade:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Is that your decision? You know, have you discussed it with anyone, like your teachers or your parents?

**Jade:** Yep! [laughs]

**Interviewer:** You have?

**Jade:** Yeah. I've discussed it with my parents a lot of times!

**Interviewer:** Oh. What do they think?

**Jade:** Oh, 'cus, you know how – oh for, in – Islanders – Island parents, they really encourage you guys to, to do well in school because, they look at themselves and they haven't done very well? So, that's when you've got a lot of pressure on you?

**Interviewer:** Mm.

**Jade:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So they want you to stay on longer? To do seventh form?

**Jade:** Oh, my Mum's, oh she's – she's with me with, going on this course, and so is my Dad, but sometimes my Dad changes his mind. 'Cus he says that I, I should stay on till seventh form to, get to know, a little bit more? 'Cus even sixth form, you don't really know, only some... But he's all right. He's getting better! [...]

**Interviewer:** Did you always intend to leave at the end of sixth form? Or did you think of carrying on and going to university, or some other form of further education?

**Jade:** Oh. By the end of fifth form, I didn't think I'd, I mean, I know I wouldn't be a sort of person who'd go to varsity.

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Jade:** So that's why I decided to look at the polytech courses, and that made up my mind from there. [...] 'Cus I actually took a – they had a link course, through the school, so I went to go to see how – how it was, and it was pretty good! And being a travel agent is fairly – a lot of work? And like, oh, there's other options and that in the travel agencies, and all that, and it was really good to see how many things we would have to know? It took a – I think it was a four day course, yeah. We went into town for it. It was pretty good.

One of the many conversations on the subject of her future between Jade and her parents cost her a black eye – the comment on her father, “he's getting better”, should be placed in its true social context. It is hardly necessary to draw attention to the role of the school in shaping Jade's decision to leave school and choose the occupation she did. Many Pacific students, in particular, are subjected to intense family pressure to achieve scholastic success. This pressure put Tom and Ed, brothers, under a degree of emotional stress that boys will only rarely display in an interview. It is significant that Ed tries to rein his brother in, “Don't want a whole story Tom”, but on this occasion Tom, acknowledging the advice, “Sorry man”, goes on to say what is on his mind. (Some of their peers were forced to give up involvement in sport, which can be a very severe sanction, or threatened with physical chastisement or with being returned to the Islands.) Tom and Ed spoke with deep feeling of their experiences:

**Tom:** Music's the kind of thing I actually want. But, but see, see that's different to our parents. Like, see, basically when it comes to School Cert he pulled, he brings us down. He doesn't say things like, “Oh, I want you try hard”. He, well, he mostly said to me and Ed like, he said to us, “See, you have your same subjects again, and if you don't try harder”...

**Ed:** “You waste our time”.

**Tom:** “You're wasting your time, again”, you know? And to us that's negative, because, parents should be backing – backing you up. [...]

**Ed:** Don't want a whole story, Tom.

**Tom:** Sorry man. [...] Like we were saying about our Dad like, he actually broke, he actually, I reckon he actually hurt both of us saying, you know, like, "you're through School Cert again", and he was looking at me saying, "this your third time", and he was saying to Ed like, "this is your second time, you ain't going get no third chance", so yeah.

**Interviewer:** Did he pass School C. and everything? Or...

**Ed:** Nah! He left school 'cus he wanted to. 'Cus in those days there were a lot of jobs available, so he just left school and got a job.

**Interviewer:** Is he working now?

**Ed:** Nah! He's on the dole. What a great thing! [laughs]

These working-class boys were finding it difficult to cope with their father's high academic expectations for them. They were both coming to terms with their own talents, and learning how to acquire and develop skills through application, but this process was made difficult for them by their father's demands. They had remained at school, repeating some School Certificate subjects, and made some progress. Yet their achievements at school were constructed by their father as a failure for which they were responsible.

Tom and Ed were learning something from school; it is possible that a technical course linked to a useful skill would have been more worthwhile than repeating School Certificate, although Tom eventually did partly achieve the success he worked for. Their relative inability to meet the academic demands of the school was not due to their lack of application.

Every day these boys were able to see students grasp ideas and concepts that often left them bewildered, but the school attempted with some success to encourage them to develop other areas of competence and obtain some value from their areas of strength. It was their parents who were impeding this process, with responses that threatened to drive a wedge between the boys and their father that need not be mentioned. Of course, many parents in this situation are doing all that they know how, all in their power, to enable their children to climb out of the unskilled working-class – a section of society vulnerable more than any other to economic depression, occupying the lowest ranks of the social order, and, as far as the men are concerned, left with its authority undermined even in its own homes. "What a great thing!" exclaims Ed, thinking of his father on the dole, and that attitude must have been difficult for his family to deal with, too.

## CONCLUSION

A final warning from Bourdieu (1999:187):

It is essential to checkmate explanations whose highly fantastic nature would be immediately apparent if they did not awaken the oldest phantasms of the Western tradition.

Is it necessary in the context of this paper to provide an explanatory gloss – that Bourdieu would perhaps find too crude for his taste – on these words? Let us assume not: Flynn (2000:66), addressing his compatriots from exile in Dunedin, has made the same point: “The emerging American liberal-left ... regards as indecent questioning beliefs no sane person can hold”. All the fear and guilt of a racist and colonial past – a past ever in our present – should not be grounds sufficient to abandon a common sense grasp of reality.

The school can too readily become, in communities that have no historical experience of its functions, a repository of desperate hopes rather than of planned strategies. In a community often able to perceive readily only a division between the world of factory labour and the world of the professional elite, the aspirations of the family – as Bourdieu says, of the *Father* – can spiral out of control. A wide range of intermediate-skilled occupations are dominated by small family firms and entered through social contacts the Pacific community does not possess.

The polytechnic qualifications that are increasingly demanded for skilled work are not a guarantee of employment, but merely a prerequisite for a more informal selection process. With but slender literate cultural capital and educational resources, there seems often no course of action open to families wanting the best education for their children than exhortation and punishment.

There are practical implications to be drawn from this analysis and they, too, might be obvious enough. In the first place, the high aspirations of the community should be seen as a positive resource on which schools can build. There is work to be done, of course, in helping students and their parents to transform unattainable dreams into realisable aspirations. The fact that more than half of Pacific students are New Zealand born means that their socialisation into the family and the school is extensive, but it does not necessarily imply, of course, that the factors inhibiting their success at school are primarily located in the educational system. There is even more important work to be done to develop practices of literate socialisation at an early age and to sustain them throughout childhood. And there is sensitive and creative work to be done within the school and the community to *interrupt* the ingrained habits of life that hinder education, and to harness

those that foster education. This is to argue, with Gibson (1998:629), for a “strategy of paced, selective acculturation” into the central culture of literacy.

What is necessary to education within the Pacific culture should be recognised by the school, and what is arbitrary – and alien to Pacific culture – in the school’s practices should be abandoned precisely in order to protect and realise its own necessary educational function. These brief notes are not intended as a prescription for practice – for the best practice will emerge from the organic relations being created between schools and Pacific communities – but if they give support to the structural initiatives now being put into place by educational and social programmes, they will have served a useful purpose (Ministry of Education 1998). The temptation to perceive contributions to a debate as “forward looking” or “backward looking” should be resisted. At any rate, to attempt to move forward without a thorough grasp of the historical conditions of the emergence of contemporary practice is to risk, at least, a shaky start and a bumpy ride.

#### REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, P. (1990) *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Practical Reason*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Bourdieu, P. et al. (1999) *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California.
- Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Pascalian Meditations*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Branson, J. and D. Miller (1991) “Pierre Bourdieu” in P. Beilharz (ed.) *Social Theory: A Guide to Central Thinkers*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.
- Earle, D. (1995) “Pacific Islands people in Aotearoa/New Zealand: existing patterns and emerging paradigms” *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 4:14-23.
- Elley, W. and J. Irving (1985) “The Elley-Irving Socio-economic Index: 1981 Census revision” *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 20 (2):115-128.
- Fiske, E.B. and H.F. Ladd (2000) *When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale*, Brookings Institute Press, Washington, D.C.
- Flynn, J.R. (2000) *How to Defend Humane Ideals: Substitutes for Objectivity*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
- Foliaki, L. (1994) “Social work and the Pacific Island community” in R. Munford and M. Nash (eds.) *Social Work in Action*, pp.152-166, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North.
- Fowler, B. (1996) “An introduction to Bourdieu’s ‘understanding’” *Theory, Culture and Society*, 3(2):1-16.
- Gibson, M. (1998) “Promoting academic success among immigrant students: is acculturation the issue?” *Educational Policy*, 12 (6):615-633.



- Jones, A. (1991) *"At School I've Got a Chance" Culture/Privilege: Pacific Islands and Pākehā Girls at School*, Dunmore, Palmerston North.
- Ministry of Education (1998) *Ko e Ako 'a Kāia Pasifika Report: Pacific Islands Peoples' Education in Aotearoa, New Zealand Towards the Twenty-first Century*, Ministry of Education, Wellington.
- Lauder, H. and D. Hughes (1999) *Trading in Futures: Why Education Markets Don't Work*, Open University Press, Buckingham, U.K.
- Loomis, T. (1991) "The Politics of Ethnicity and Pacific Migrants" in P. Spoonley, D. Pearson and C. Macpherson (eds.) *Nga Take: Ethnic Relations and Racism in Aotearoa/New Zealand*, pp.37-50, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North.
- Mehan, H., I. Villanueva, L. Hubbard and A. Lintz (1996) *Constructing School Success: The Consequences of Untracking Low-achieving Students*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Ministry of Education (1998a) *Tertiary Education Statistics, 1998: Selected Tables Summarising 31 July 1998 Student Numbers and Programme Enrolments*, Data Management Analysis Division, Ministry of Education, Wellington.
- Ministry of Education (1998b). *March School Statistics Report 1997*, Data Management Analysis Division, Ministry of Education, Wellington.
- Mulitalo, T. (2000) *Fa'asamoa and Social Work Within the New Zealand Context*, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North.
- Murphy, J. (1990) "A most respectable prejudice: inequality, educational research and policy" *British Journal of Sociology*, 41 (1):29-54.
- Nash, R. and R.K. Harker (eds.) (1998) *Making Progress: Success and Failure at Secondary School*, ERDC Press, Palmerston North.
- Ongley, P. (1991) "Pacific Islands' migration and the New Zealand labour market" in P. Spoonley, D. Pearson and C. Macpherson (eds.) *Nga Take: Ethnic Relations and Racism in Aotearoa/New Zealand*, pp.17-36, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North.
- Reid, N.A., P. Jackson, A. Gilmore and C. Croft (1981) *Test of Scholastic Abilities*, NZCER, Wellington.
- Reid, N.A. and W. Elley (1991) *Progressive Achievement Tests of Reading, Teacher's Manual*, NZCER, Wellington.
- Roach, J.L. (1967) "A theory of lower-class behaviour" in L. Gross (ed.), *Sociological Theory: Inquiries and Paradigms*, pp.294-314, Harper & Row, New York.
- Robinson, V., H. Timperley, S. McNaughton and J. Parr (1994) *The Community-school Collaboration Research Project*, Auckland Uniservices, Auckland.
- Taskforce for Improving Participation in Tertiary Education (1999) *Report of the Taskforce for Improving Participation in Tertiary Education*, University of Auckland.

- Thrupp, M. (1997) "How school mix shapes school processes: a comparative study of New Zealand schools, *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 32 (1):53-82.
- Walkerdine, V. and H. Lucy (1989) *Democracy in the Kitchen: Regulating Mothers and Socialising Daughters*, Virago, London.
- Willis, P. (1978) *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*, Saxon House, Farnborough.