

Toward a Theory of Student Aspirations

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Student aspirations is a term that is used frequently in education, yet there is little understanding and agreement as to what it means and even less understanding about its origin. It is the purpose of this paper to trace some of the key historical perspectives of the construct of aspirations, and from this backdrop introduce a new manner in which to view student aspirations. We have elected here to highlight two influential areas of research: level of aspiration and achievement motivation. These key areas, supplemented by social comparison theory, provide a historical framework with which to understand aspirations.

Overview

It is rare to find an educational mission statement today absent of some reference to student aspirations. Indeed, educators have long recognized the value of students who set ambitious goals, and who are inspired in the present to progress toward those goals. It is expected that students who set challenging goals learn to become task-oriented, feel a sense of purpose, and learn more. It is no surprise, then, that raising the aspirations of students is a universal priority.

As with any social construct (e.g., achievement, anxiety), the term aspirations lends itself to a variety of definitions and interpretations. Does it refer to goals, expectations, or dreams? Intentions? Performance motivation? Should aspirations be viewed from a short term or long term perspective (or both)? Is it a general, overall measure or context-specific? Is it a value-laden or value-neutral concept? For example, if one aspires to be an accomplished thief, is there a judgment to be made whether this is a good or bad thing? Clearly, "aspirations" embodies several different meanings, and thus deserves clarification.

The construct of aspirations finds its origins in the experimental research on "level of aspiration" conducted in the early 1930s. Although work in this area contributed to our understanding of human behavior, many of the findings were produced from "within the laboratory" and thus had few implications for students or schools. Research in level of aspiration faded in the late 1950s and achievement motivation emerged as a dominant theory of motivation. The motive to set goals and succeed at reaching those goals appears to be an acquired trait, one susceptible to intervention. This suggests that educators may be in a position to

positively impact students' desire to achieve. Lastly, social comparison theory indicates that within groups there are pressures toward uniformity. Given this phenomenon, it is not unreasonable to assume that the aspirations of students are influenced by standards implicitly or explicitly set by the school and/or peers.

It is our belief that a definition of aspirations must be contextualized, and further, that it should address both present and future perspectives. For these reasons we hypothesize that a student with aspirations is one who is involved in various activities for both their inherent value and enjoyment and their connection to future goals.

Level of Aspiration

The concept of "level of aspiration" was first noted by Dembo (1931/1976) in an experiment designed to investigate anger. In an effort to evoke frustration and anger, subjects were asked to engage in tasks that were either very difficult or impossible to perform. An unintended consequence of the experiment was that subjects formulated their own, medial aim when the original objective was too difficult to attain. This transitional goal, although relatively easier to accomplish, represented a step toward the more challenging objective. Dembo called this intermediate goal the subject's "momentary level of aspiration" (Gardiner, 1940).

Early level of aspiration experiments explored the conditions for success and failure experiences (Frank, 1941). In those instances, success and failure experiences were inferred from the general behavior of the subjects. The next 2 decades witnessed investigations designed to quantify, for a given task, the levels at which individuals intended to perform. The attempt to operationalize the concept of aspirations was made through the quantification of such measures as *height*, *rigidity/mobility*, and *responsiveness*. These all represented specific goal-setting behaviors, such as the

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number of times the level of aspiration moved in the same direction as the preceding performance (i.e., *responsiveness*).

In 1931 the first major psychological experiment related to level of aspiration was conducted by Hoppe. He examined factors that influenced goal-setting behavior by measuring the effect of success and failure on individuals' decisions to raise or lower their level of aspiration. Hoppe assessed individuals' aspiration level on the basis of three criteria: (1) the spontaneous remarks of the subject, (2) the occurrence of success and failure experiences, and (3) the way in which the subject "goes at" the task (Gardner, 1940; Hoppe, 1931/1976). Hoppe's research introduced the notion that experiences of success and failure were indicative of *intermediate* goal attainment. Specifically, a success experience is conditional upon a performance that exceeds the momentary level of aspiration. And, conversely, a failure experience results when the performance falls below the intermediate objective. Hoppe concluded that "the experience of a performance as a success or failure does not depend alone on its objective goodness, but on whether the level of aspiration appears to be reached or not reached" (Frank, 1935a).

Also among Hoppe's findings was that individuals' level of aspiration exhibited a lack of stability during the course of an activity, and that there appeared to be disparities among individuals in terms of their level of aspiration. Such differences, he thought, were suggestive of personality differences in the areas of ambition, prudence, courage, and self-confidence (Gardner, 1940). Like other researchers during this time, Hoppe defined level of aspiration within the context of a specific task. He construed level of aspiration to be the "totality of . . . expectations or aspiration for the future performance achievement of a person, a totality which shifts after each achievement, and which is sometimes vague and sometimes precise" (Hoppe, 1931/1976).

It was generally recognized that Hoppe's technique of measuring aspiration level lacked the degree of objectivity and validity called for by experimental research standards. In response, Jucknat (1937) proposed a less subjective measure. He required subjects to choose among a series of progressively difficult tasks (mazes). Although this design was thought to offer a more objective indicator of level of aspiration, it was not immune to social bias. Subjects were asked to reveal their intended performance on some task in the presence of the researcher, which clouded their "true" intentions (Gardner, 1940).

Attempts to develop even more precise measures of level of aspiration were undertaken. Prior experiments had required subjects to reveal their intended performance on one dimensional, rarely executed tasks without the knowledge of how they would perform. Frank asked subjects how well they intended to do on a task after telling them how they did on the previous trial (e.g., how well in relation to

others, how well without references to others, and so on). This shift in methodology in a sense re-defined the construct of level of aspiration. Frank described level of aspiration as "the level of future performance in a familiar task which an individual, knowing his level of past performance in that task, explicitly undertakes to reach" (Frank, 1935b).

Later, Frank reported that the relation of level of aspiration to the level of past performance "at any time depends primarily on the relative strength of the following three needs: (1) the need to keep the level of aspiration as high as possible (i.e., above the level of past performance), (2) the need to make the level of aspiration approximate the level of future performance, and (3) the need to avoid failure, where failure is defined as a level of performance below the level of aspiration (this need tends to drive the level of aspiration below the level of past performance). Further, both environmental and personal facts appeared to affect the relative strength of these three needs. Such personal factors, he postulated, could partially explain the degree and direction of the difference between level of aspiration and performance. Four profiles were delineated: (a) the person who tends to keep "his feet on the ground" would demonstrate the need to maintain a level of aspiration close to his level of past performance, (b) the person with his "head in the clouds" would hold his level of aspiration to unrealistically high levels, (c) the "cautious" person would keep his aspiration level below his level of past performance and (d) the "ambitious" individual would consistently set his level of aspiration at reasonably high levels (Frank, 1935a).

Frank (1935b) also identified two psychological determinants of the level of aspiration. The first is the desire to avoid failure, or the need to keep the aspiration level below the level of past performance. The second, and more prevalent, is the need to maintain a high aspiration level irrespective of performance. The ego-level, as defined by Hoppe (1931/1976), underlies these two needs. Hoppe described the ego-level as the "wide-embracing goals of the person . . . which extend far beyond the single tasks . . . [and] . . . are related to the self-regard." In other words, people desire to do well, not only for the sake of doing well, but to enhance their social status. The desire to avoid failure and the need to keep aspirations unrealistically high are thus mediated by the ego-level.

During the 1940s the definition of level of aspiration underwent further refinement. While still regarded as "the level of future performance in a familiar task which an individual explicitly undertakes to reach" (Adams, 1939; Frank, 1941) the notion that culture played a role emerged. Indeed, comparisons of the adequacy of performance to the task were supplemented by references to the performance of the group (Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, & Sears, 1944; Sears, 1940). Success and failure experiences were manifest through the social environment.

Frank (1941) found that level of aspiration may take on different meanings, depending upon contextual and individual factors. Two mechanisms through which level of aspiration moderates behavior were proposed. First, it may be used as an incentive to improve performance. This can occur in two ways: a level of aspiration that is above the level of past performance can provide a goal to strive toward, or, a level of aspiration that is lower than past performance can reduce tension/performance anxiety, both of which presumably foster high(er) levels of achievement. Second, keeping the level of aspiration (unreasonably) high can serve to protect the ego from the effects of failure. Poor performance relative to the goal is deemed insignificant (by others and by the individual), not taken seriously, thus preserving self-esteem.

Ultimately, Frank (1941) viewed level of aspiration as the “final integration of complex and constantly shifting personal and situational factors.” Some of these factors have been identified in the literature. For instance, the level of aspiration situation was thought to pose a threat to self-esteem. To deal with this perceived threat, individuals employ two strategies: they try to do well *and* they manipulate their level of aspiration. In this sense, level of aspiration characterized “a compromise between the subject’s evaluation of his ability with respect to the difficulty of the task and his desire to achieve a high level of performance—that is, between a judgment and a goal” (Frank, 1941).

Level of aspiration experiments have significantly contributed to subsequent interpretations of the concept of aspirations; however, they were of limited scope and direction. Numerous investigations during that era attempted to quantify aspiration level by engaging subjects in a variety of tasks and questioning them in a multitude of ways as to their intended performance. Frank (1941) recognized that statistical analyses of this nature were “clearly too superficial to cast much light on the dynamics of the level of aspiration.” He reported that the “significance of [these] studies of the level of aspiration lies in their demonstration of a promising experimental approach to problems of success and failure, of the formation of goals, and the genesis of the ‘self’ and its relations to personality structure, achievement, and the social environment.” Social and cultural factors undoubtedly influence level of aspiration. Studies that attempted to tease out group effects revealed an interesting trend: the tendency among members to aspire to the collective level of aspiration of the group.

Achievement Motivation

During the late 1940s, as interest in level of aspiration research waned, achievement motivation emerged as an established theory of motivation. Achievement motivation can be defined as the conscious or unconscious drive to do well in an achievement-oriented activity.

The 1950s and 1960s were known as the “Golden Age” of achievement motivation research. Research in achievement motivation addressed a variety of areas. McClelland focused on the social origins of achievement motivation and its role in economic development (e.g., cross-cultural studies). Atkinson and his colleagues created several quantitative models designed to predict behavior in success and failure situations (Atkinson, 1957; Atkinson & Feather, 1965). The past two decades have seen cognitive-based frameworks being applied to explain the drive to achieve (e.g., locus of control, attribution theory).

Although McClelland and Atkinson (1949) were largely responsible for the development of the theory of achievement motivation, they were heavily influenced by Murray’s (1938) research on personality. According to Murray, human behavior is essentially goal-directed, and the most important information to know about a person is the direction and intensity of his or her aspirations (Collier, 1994). Murray identified a two-tiered list of human needs that account for behavior. Among his list of secondary needs, or those needs acquired and modified during socialization, is the desire to achieve.

Considerable evidence suggests that achievement motivation is an acquired trait, one that is formed at an early age and remains constant over time. Nonetheless, McClelland (1978) showed that achievement motivation can be distended. He compared a group of businessmen from a small community in India that underwent achievement motivation training to an analogous group. Over a 2-year period the experimental group created more new businesses and registered over twice as many employees as the control group (Collier, 1994). Kolb (1965) conducted a related study with underachieving male students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. He found that school grades improved for all groups; however, the lower-class students did not maintain these higher achievement levels. This was interpreted to suggest that achievement motivation is a product of the social environment.

Individuals high and low in achievement motivation appear to differ in a number of ways. On complex tasks, those high in achievement motivation start at the same level as those with low achievement motivation but do progressively better as they proceed (McClelland, 1961). Persons high in achievement motivation prefer activities of moderate difficulty, whereas those low in achievement motivation choose tasks of either extreme difficulty or easiness (Collier, 1994). Mahone (1960) and Morris (1966) reported that students high in a measure of achievement motivation selected occupations commensurate with their level of ability while students who exhibited fear of failure tendencies did not.

The expectations and standards of the group significantly impact the aspirations of its members regardless of their level of achievement motivation. In other words, the

aspiration level of individual group members is buoyed by the prevailing group standard. Thus, even those with an inner drive to achieve limit their accomplishments to the success level of the group; they fear being ostracized or alienated from the group. This tendency toward uniformity is more pronounced the more isolated the culture.

Social Comparison Theory

Within a particular culture there is an inherent pressure toward uniformity (Festinger, 1942/1989a). Festinger (1942/1989b) explicated his social comparison theory via nine hypotheses. The first four are addressed here. People have a need to assess their beliefs and level of ability (Hypothesis 1). When objective evidence is largely absent, people tend to use others of similar ability and opinion as a source of comparison (Hypotheses 2 & 3). There is a general desire to *improve* one's ability (i.e., get better at something), but one cannot improve one's beliefs. Efforts to reach agreement are based primarily on pressures toward uniformity, and this can run counter to attempts to achieve. The result is that group members strive to do well but only proximally better than the members of the group (Hypothesis 4) (Collier, 1994).

Social comparison theory can help explain individual differences in level of aspiration. *The group serves as a powerful anchor that limits the level of aspiration, particularly when the group is cut off from other groups . . . [p]eople tend to use others who are similar or have similar levels of abilities as a source of social comparison. The threat of ostracism tends to restrict the performance of those with high ability, and performance levels are typically anchored somewhere around the mean* (Collier, 1994).

Although related, achievement motivation and level of aspiration do not represent exactly the same concept. Level of aspiration typically refers to the task-specific assessment of the degree to which an individual intends to perform, with reference to past performance and social milieu. It is more an effect or result. Achievement motivation can affect level of aspiration, and influence how we think and process information (McClelland, 1961). It is a cause as well as a trait. Moreover, achievement motivation emphasizes the interaction between stable personality factors and transient environmental influences. It serves to explain the goal-directed behavior of individuals with respect to their motives, expectations about the consequences of their actions, and values placed on the expected consequences (Atkinson, 1957).

The Hypothesis

Using prior research on aspirations, achievement motivation, and social comparison theory as a basis, we suggest an integrated schema for conceptualizing aspirations.

Aspirations can be defined as *a student's ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals*. This construct of aspirations has two major underpinnings: *inspiration and ambitions*. Inspiration reflects that an activity is exciting and enjoyable to the individual and the awareness of being fully and richly involved in life here and now. It is depicted by an individual who becomes involved in an activity for its intrinsic value and enjoyment. An individual with a high level of inspiration is one who believes an activity is useful and enjoyable. Ambitions represent the perception that an activity is important as a means to future goals. It reflects individuals' perceptions that it is both possible and desirable to think in future terms and to plan for the future.

This way of viewing student aspirations is unique in that it combines the motivational components of the present (inspiration) with the future (ambitions). Individuals' perceptions may reflect only one of the dimensions, however. For example, some students may be thoroughly engaged in activities in the present, but have no future goals nor see their value. In contrast, other students may set long term goals yet do little or nothing in the present to accomplish those future goals. Ideally—and by our definition—an individual with aspirations must exhibit behavioral traits reflective of both ambitions and inspiration. That is, they must have the ability to identify and set goals for the future while being motivated in the present to progress toward those goals.

Moreover, the inspiration and ambitions dimensions occur within particular contexts, and as such are subject to varying value judgments. For example, if someone's goal is to be a wealthy drug dealer and this individual is currently inspired to sell drugs to one's peers for a substantial income, by our definition this person could be characterized as someone with aspirations. Obviously, this is not the intent of schools who promote student aspirations. Therefore, it is imperative as we define aspirations we do not look at this concept void of cultural differences and expectations.

Although our work began with its focus on educational goals, through our historical analysis and experience in schools, we see the concept of aspirations being played out in virtually all arenas of personal growth. Specifically, aspirations can and must be recognized not only with respect to educational attainments, but vocational and perhaps, most importantly, quality of life issues as well.

Implications for Students and Schools

The inspiration/ambitions conceptual design of aspirations has implications for students and schools. This manner of perceiving student aspirations takes into account the interaction of the students in their environment. It forces educators and researchers to answer the questions: How

does school climate influence student aspirations? What conditions, if any, appear to effect changes in the way students view the work they do in school and the goals they set for their future? Such questions lead to the need to identify the conditions in school which will affect the student's ability to think about the future, while at the same time being inspired in the present.

McClelland's work on achievement motivation has provided evidence that the drive to achieve is acquired and subject to certain influence. He showed that the achievement motivation and hence achievement levels of groups could be raised. Perhaps the drive to achieve (and to aspire) among school cultures and subcultures can be improved, which could lead to overall achievement gains.

Social comparison theory indicates that within groups there exist inherent pressures toward uniformity. Schools should be aware of this tendency and challenge it by fostering an environment that encourages diversity, excellence, and risk-taking among their students. Students who perform exceedingly well in an activity (i.e., better than everyone else) are put in a position where they are different from others. Educators can combat the tendency toward uniformity by making it acceptable for students to excel and aspire to try different things.

While schools are in a position to help foster aspirations, students are not absolved of all responsibility. To the contrary, students must take responsibility and be held accountable for their present and future situations. They, too, have to speak out and work with educators to create an environment that promotes empowerment, a sense of belonging, sensible risk-taking opportunities, and engaging activities (Quaglia, 1996).

Implications for Research

We have presented a new manner in which to perceive the construct of aspirations. Prior research, adhering to the framework described above, our field research, and anecdotal evidence have logically lead to this theoretical perspective. We iterate that it is currently an hypothesis. Further research must be invested to confirm or disconfirm its validity. There are many questions to be answered. Among them, are there indications that students who set future goals and who are motivated in the present to achieve those goals "better off?" And if so, are there distinct properties of goals (in terms of their specificity, level of difficulty, and proximity) that appear to align themselves more than others regarding our definition of students aspirations?

Conclusion

The early research helped us understand aspirations as an expression of the desire to achieve and improve. We have drawn and learned from two key areas of research.

Level of aspiration research has shown that aspirations is qualified by the nature of the activity or goal, by experiences of success and failure, and by social pressures to aim high and do well. Measuring the intention to do or be something is scarcely amenable to the mechanistic process of quantification. To be sure, measuring a "true" aspiration level is an inexact, if not possible, task. This is hardly surprising when one considers the dynamic nature and vast complexities underlying human behavior.

Research in achievement motivation has contributed through its identification of the trait to want to achieve and through its illumination that such a trait can be acquired and modified. Moreover, achievement motivation of entire groups appears to be malleable. Given that people's inner drive to achieve influences their aspiration level, improvements in the former should lead to improvements in the latter. Assuming that students' aspirations can be impacted in some way, and assuming that the best way to go about that is to do so indirectly via changes in whole group aspirations, there are enormous implications for schools (e.g., create an environment which fosters aspirations).

Finally, social comparison theory has taught us that cultural standards bear upon individuals' expectations. Group pressures toward uniformity place a ceiling on performance (and perhaps aspirations). Schools can learn from and challenge this tendency.

For a child to dream is such a heralded notion. But how often do we as educators encourage students to dream yet overlook what it will take in the present to realize those dreams? Likewise, how often do we become so concerned with the present that we ignore the future? To neglect the present is to sabotage the future. We propose a view of aspirations that incorporates both the present and the future. It emphasizes the need for individuals to look at what they are doing now and recognize its relevance to their future. Only then, we suggest, do they truly have aspirations.

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