Research Article

Defining Academic Success: Socioeconomic Influences on High School Students' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. secondary education system shows persistent achievement gaps, especially along socioeconomic lines. Prior work has emphasized objective SES metrics and material measures of success, often overlooking students' own definitions. This study aimed to: (1) collect baseline data for thematic analysis of high schoolers' perspectives across school types (public, private non-denominational, and alternative private non-denominational); (2) develop explanatory grounded theory; (3) interpret findings and propose causal mechanisms; and (4) translate insights into practice. Using a realist stance, we combined Straussian grounded theory with thematic analysis and a phenomenological interview approach while mitigating acquiescence, wording, and habituation biases. The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status assessed perceived status in two contexts. Participants were 18 students (ages 15–18; grades 9–11) from nine schools. Semantic and latent themes were generated inductively through a five-step process; grounded theory used a three-step Straussian procedure. Two central themes emerged: (1) "success means different things to me" (multiplicity of definitions) and (2) "where ideas come from" (the social construction of success). The core concept was "calibrating academic success between external benchmarks and personal growth within the realities of available support." Grades and college were the most common definitions (17/18); mastery and curiosity was second (7/18 interviews). Interviews with multiple definitions (10/18) were associated with higher subjective social status scores. These findings provide baseline data and theory on how students' meanings of success shape their educational experiences and relate to perceived social position.

Keywords: Definition of Success; Academic Performance; Subjective Social Status; Thematic Analysis; Grounded Theory; Educational Equity

INTRODUCTION

Across the United States (U.S.), conversations about the "achievement gap" often default to objective indicators—grade point average (GPA), standardized test scores, course rigor, graduation, and college matriculation (1). While these metrics matter, they reveal little about how students themselves define "academic success," what they value, and why. In practice,

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interventions designed around external benchmarks can fail to hit their mark if they are misaligned with students' own aspirations and criteria for achievement. The specific problem this study addresses is that previous research has emphasized structural correlates of performance while underexamining students' lived definitions of success and how these definitions vary by social position.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a well-established determinant of educational opportunity and outcomes, shaping access to resources, school climates, and pathways after graduation (2). Yet SES describes material conditions more than it captures how young people perceive their standing. Subjective social status (SSS), a person's perceived rank in the social hierarchy, adds this missing psychological layer. SSS, commonly measured with the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (3) (often called the MacArthur "ladder"), may influence motivation, goal-setting, stress appraisal, and the meanings students attach to school accomplishments in ways that objective indicators do not (4,5). A clearer understanding of how SES and SSS jointly relate to students' own definitions of academic success can illuminate mechanisms that sustain disparities and suggest levers for improvement that respect students' voices.

Despite a growing literature on achievement gaps, relatively few studies center on high school students' perspectives on what counts as success (6), and fewer still examine how those perspectives vary systematically with SSS. Existing work tends to treat success as a fixed endpoint (e.g., "get good grades and get into college") rather than a multifaceted construct that may include mastery, curiosity, personal growth, community contribution, well-being, or future readiness (7). This gap constrains policy and practice: if schools measure only what they externally mandate, they risk incentivizing narrow forms of success, particularly for students who perceive different barriers, opportunities, or meanings in school achievement.

To address this, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study that foregrounds student voice while systematically linking definitions of success to social position. We use semi-structured interviews with high school students to elicit rich narratives about what "academic success" means, why it matters, and how it is pursued. We then analyze transcripts using thematic analysis (TA) (8) to identify common and divergent elements in students' definitions, and grounded theory (GT, Straussian tradition) (9) to build an explanatory model that connects those definitions to contextual factors. The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status - Youth Version (3) is administered to each participant to index SSS, allowing us to compare themes across perceived social standing while also considering SES as a contextual backdrop.

This approach advances the conversation in three ways. First, it reframes success as students experience it, rather than as adults assign it, providing a more valid basis for student-centered practice. Second, by integrating SSS with TA and GT, it links meaning-making to perceived social position, illuminating why similar school environments can yield different goals, strategies, and stress responses. Third, it translates qualitative insights into actionable implications for educators and policymakers seeking to broaden success indicators, scaffold motivation, and reduce inequities without diluting rigor.

Accordingly, our aims are: 1) to characterize how high school students define academic success in their own words; 2) to examine how these definitions vary across levels of SSS; and 3) to generate an explanatory model that accounts for observed variation and identifies practical implications for measurement, counseling, and school design. Throughout the manuscript, we use the following abbreviations consistently: socioeconomic status (SES), subjective social status (SSS), subjective social status in societal context (SSS-Home), subjective social status in school context (SSS-School), thematic analysis (TA), and grounded theory (GT).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Data Source and Variable Selection

Design

The study was structured following realist ideology (10): the assumption that the data resulting from research can reveal an objective reality. As no preexisting research on how high school students' personal understanding and definition of success impact their educational journeys or on the relationship between how students perceive their social position and how they define academic success exists to inform study design, a grounded theory methodology was selected, and thus the research is hypothesis-producing rather than testing. Data was collected from 18 semi-structured interviews. The standards for reporting qualitative research (SRQR) were followed during each step of the research process (11).

We used a multilevel ("Mehrebenen") mixed-methods design in the sense of Schoonenboom & Johnson, collecting qualitative interviews (TA/GT) and quantitative MacArthur SSS measures from the same participants and integrating them at the interpretation stage (12). Level 1 captures within-student narratives; Level 2 examines cross-student patterns linking SSS to the breadth and content of success definitions (12). In this parallel design, mixing of qualitative and quantitative data occurs across numerous levels of analysis, as the qualitative and quantitative data are analyzed and subsequently amalgamated to answer associated aspects of the same research question or sequence of related questions.

Recruitment

Participants were contacted via the app Messages (Apple, 2025) to gauge initial interest; they were informed of the purpose of the interview, what would be expected of them, their agency and ability to withdraw from the study at any point or decline to answer questions asked of them, how their information would be treated according to legal and ethical guidelines ensuring their utmost anonymity, and the $15 gift card compensation they would receive. Compensation was based on a 15$/hr salary, as is standard for highschool school-aged individuals in the Northeast (13), and the understanding that participants were generously allotting time during their summer break to partake. Once written consent was obtained, interviews were scheduled at the interviewee's convenience. All interviews were voluntary. All affirmative responses were scanned manually for eligibility and adherence to the study's criteria by one researcher. All volunteers were invited to participate, with 12 participants interviewed before saturation was reached, and an additional 6 were conducted to ensure that results were comprehensive for a total of 18 interviews. Moreover, 48 hours prior to each aforementioned interview, an in-depth text pertaining to preliminary information, including the time commitment, what to expect, voluntary participation and confidentiality, compensation, interview date, time, and meeting location, was conveyed to the interviewee.

Interview Procedures

Interviews were completed between June 20, 2025, and August 2, 2025. Interviews were conducted online via the secure platform Google Meet (Google, 2025) due to the accessibility of the platform, which does not require an app to download and utilizes Wi-Fi to operate. No time limit was provided for interviews, and the median length was 28.24 min with a minimum of 11.55 min and a maximum of 45.26 min. The interview protocol was developed with great attention to reducing plausible wording (by maintaining neutrality and ensuring questions were as open-ended as possible), habituation (by providing a set of questions that targeted numerous areas, thereby avoiding redundant answers), and acquiescence (by concealing any perceived interviewer opinion and preference) (14).

Each interview included 18 questions aimed at investigating the study's key variables—resources, SSS, definition of success, sources of definition, and school performance—from a nuanced perspective. An additional 3 questions that strayed outside of the academic realm were included to ensure that interviewees felt at ease, as well as familiarize them with the study's semi-structured format and protocols (Appendix I).

Statistical Analysis

Data Storage

All statistical analysis was conducted using Google Sheets (Google, 2025), Voice Memos (Apple, 2024), and Google Drive (Google, 2025). Each interview was recorded and transcribed from Voice Memos and subsequently moved into a secure Google Drive folder with password authentication. All data were adequately destroyed upon the termination of the study, following standard research protocols. Limited personal information about participants was collected; recorded data was confined to participants' names, the school to which they are currently enrolled, their gender, grade, and question answers. All information, besides participants' names, was collected during interviews.

Spread of Data

Overall, 9 schools were represented. Of those who participated, 27.77% attended an alternative private school, 33.33% a traditional college preparatory school, and 38.88% a public school (n=5, n=6, and n=7 individuals, respectively). Furthermore, participants were 44.44% male and 55.56% female (n=8 and n=10 individuals, respectively). 22.22% of students were Freshmen (n=4), 33.33% were Sophomores (n=6), and 44.44% were Juniors (n=8). Seniors were not included in the study, as they had already graduated. 77.77% of interviewees cited New Hampshire as their

home, 16.66% Massachusetts, and 5.555% Vermont. However, the majority of schools were located in New Hampshire, providing a general point of localization and uniformity for practices concerning schooling. Race was a demographic that fell outside of the study's scope and context, and thus was not taken into account or recorded.

Self-reported socio-economic status, measured by the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status, ranged from 1 to 9, while subjective social standing at school according to the same standard ranged from 6 to 10. One participant declined to participate in the survey, and thus only 17 responses were recorded. The most frequently reported scores for SSS-Home were 5 (n=4) and 7 (n=4), and the least frequently reported was 6 (n=1). 8 (n=8), and 10 (n=1) for SSS-School, respectively. Overall, 23.53% (n=4) of answers regarding SSS-Home fell at or below 5, while 76.47% (n=13) of answers fell above it. By contrast, 0% (n=0) of answers pertaining to SSS-School at school fell below 5, while 100% (n=17) of answers fell above it. This resulted in a mean score of 6.882 and 7.882; standard deviation of 1.278 and 0.993 (n1=SSS-Home, n2=SSS-School).

Following the assembly of this comprehensive dataset, statistical analyses were performed to evaluate the relationships between individuals' Subjective Social Standing and their understanding of academic achievement.

Saturation

We assessed thematic saturation using Good–Turing sample coverage, applied to the distribution of coded theme mentions (each coded mention = "token," each unique theme = "type"). Following the standard estimator where the unseen-mass $p0 \approx n1/N$ (with n1 = count of themes observed exactly once and N = total coded mentions), coverage is $\hat{C} = 1\text{-}p0$; the estimate was $\hat{C}=0.93$, implying only ~7% novelty for the next coded mention (15). As a cross-check, the sample size and the point of diminishing returns were consistent with interview-saturation norms reported by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) (16).

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding, particularly the grounded theory approach; this method of analysis involves evaluating qualitative data to identify, investigate, and interpret patterns that emerge from the data, with the goal of producing a theory grounded in the data itself. It is a systematic process of breaking down data (open coding), examining relationships between the codes that appear (axial coding), and then honing in on core categories to build a theory (selective coding).

Furthermore, each interview concluded upon the interviewee's completion of the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status, specifically the youth version. The scale is a two-item measure that assesses an individual's understanding of their position in the social hierarchy, specifically focusing on their perceived rank relative to others in a society or community. The scale utilizes a visual aid consisting of a ladder with ten rungs, asking individuals to place themselves on the ladder in two different contexts: American Society (by standards of wealth, education, respect, and job placement) and the individual's school (by standards of grade earnings, respect, and standing) (17). The scale has been identified in numerous instances and across multiple studies as being a highly reliable tool when implemented in studies analyzing adolescents (18), as well as being a valid measure when associated with objective measures of socio-economic status (19).

By employing a semi-structured method, wherein a predetermined set of open-ended questions (ex. Do you feel like you have the resources you need to achieve your definition of academic success?) inform an interviewee's response which in turn dictates the direction of the conversation and follow-up questions posed, and only integrating the scale afterwards, we were able to explore the role of SSS in shaping individuals' understandings of academic achievement from a multifaceted lens. In doing so, we defined measurable themes that transcended experience and perspective, an approach that has not yet been taken in this field of study. This is particularly important due to the exploratory nature of the study.

Not all of the data gathered during interviews is presented in the results section, as some material was not directly relevant to addressing the central research question. This selective inclusion ensures that findings remain focused, coherent, and analytically rigorous. However, all data were carefully reviewed, and decisions about exclusion were made transparently to uphold ethical standards and research integrity.

We excluded material only when it 1) did not address our primary question about how students define academic success (e.g., questions regarding academic pressure); 2) duplicated ideas already represented by clearer excerpts, where we retained a single,

representative quotation; or 3) failed basic quality standards (e.g., inaudible audio, ambiguous/off-record remarks, or incomplete survey items) and participant did not consent to being contacted for a follow up.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted prior to commencement by the Pearl Independent IRB. Participants' consent was obtained in two forms: over text message and verbally. Individuals were reminded that their participation was entirely voluntary. They were told they may skip any questions that they wished, were free to stop the interview at any time, for any reason, without penalty, and that any questions they chose to answer did not have a right or wrong answer. They were made aware that anything shared during the interview would remain strictly confidential and that only the research team would have access to their responses. Further, that their name and any identifying details would be removed from the final data; participants' names were replaced with randomized numbers to maintain deidentification. Finally, they were notified that upon the termination of the study, all records would be adequately destroyed following standard research protocol.

RESULTS

On average, participants located themselves one rung higher in the school context than in the broader U.S. context (SSS-Home: M = 6.88, SD = 1.28, range = 5–9; SSS-School: M = 7.88, SD = 0.99, range = 6–10). In 12 of 18 cases the school rating exceeded the U.S. rating, 3 were equal, and 2 were lower; the association between the two ladders was near zero ($r \approx -0.06$). This local status lift, higher perceived standing inside school than in society at large, was a salient, data-driven pattern which had not been pre-specified but observed consistently in this sample.

Figure 1 summarizes our analytic focus on what students mean by academic success and where those ideas originate.

Figure 2: As part of the interviews, students offered free-text definitions of "academic success." Using an a priori but inductively refined scheme, responses clustered into four descriptive subtypes: Grades & GPA as currency (n = 17), Mastery & curiosity (n = 7), Balance & well-being (n = 2), Future access (scholarships, jobs) (n = 1). More than half of students (10/18) named two or more themes.

Figure 3: Students also identified where their ideas of academic success originated, which clustered into four subtypes: family narratives (n = 9), school mission and culture (n = 4), peer benchmarking/social media (n =3), and personal aspirations (n = 5). Subtypes were not mutually exclusive, and often layered with one another (n = 4).

For the thematic analysis, a single core organizing idea captured the data across participants:

"Calibrating self-worth between external benchmarks and personal growth within the realities of available support." A small selection of quotes to showcase themes are presented here; they are selected for their clarity of expression rather than comprehension or variation.

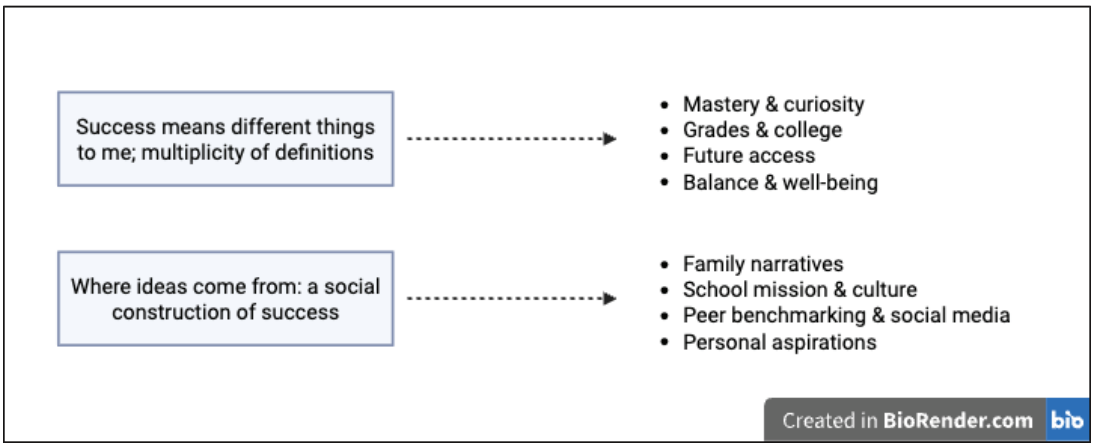

Figure 1. Main themes and sub-themes. Two analytic families are depicted: (A) Definitions of academic success (mastery & curiosity; grades & college; future access; balance & well-being) and (B) Origins of these definitions (family narratives; school mission & culture; peer benchmarking & social media; personal aspirations).

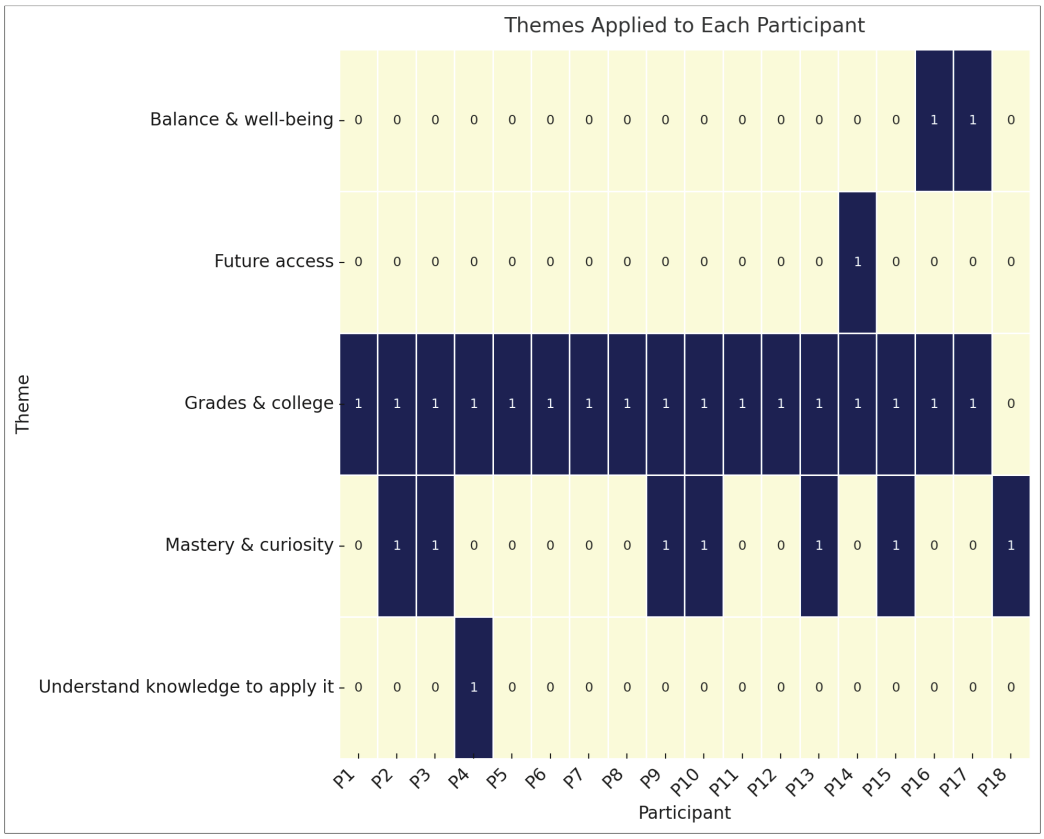

Figure 2. Themes of academic success applied to each participant (N=18). Cells indicate whether a theme was coded for a participant (1=yes, 0=no). Participants could endorse multiple themes; rows need not sum to 1. See Methods for procedures.

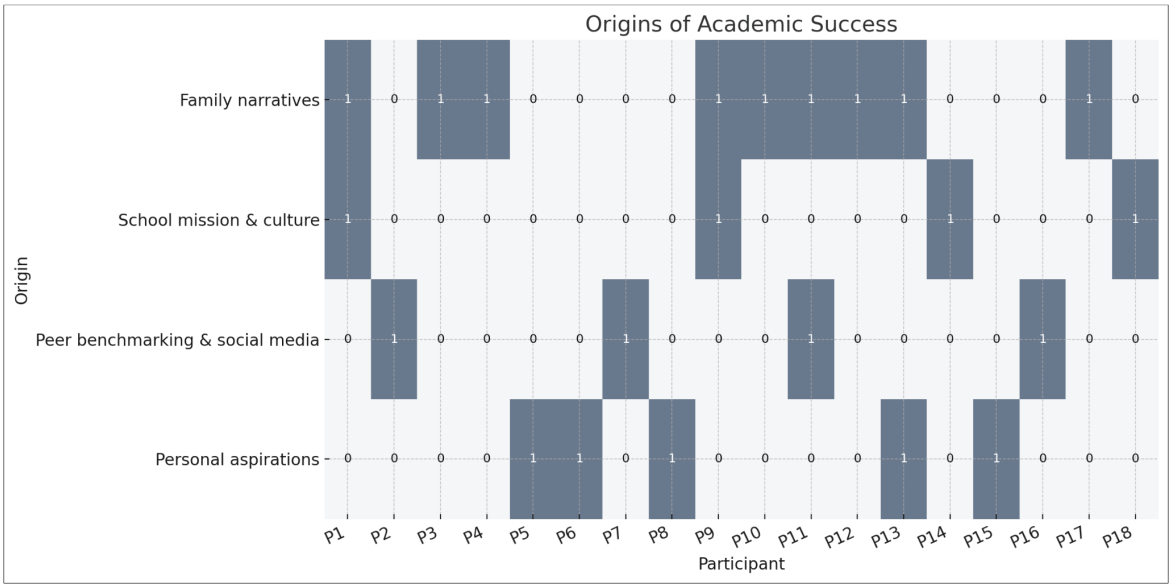

Figure 3. Origins of academic success ideas by participant (N=18). Cells indicate whether an origin category was coded for a participant (1=yes, 0=no). Multiple origins per participant were permitted; rows need not sum to 1. See Methods for procedures.

"Success means different things to me" – Multiplicity of Definitions

Grades and college

Getting into the college of your choice. Good, grade point average. - P1

Good grades, awards. At my school, we have like, it's called a Head List…that's like the highest form of honor room. So I guess I am succeeding when I am making it onto the Heads List. - P5

Good grades, results are good. GPA and academic achievements, I guess, like being the president of a club or getting some kind of exceptional student award or something. - P7

I have really high standards for myself, so academic success means not only, like, getting a really good grade. For me that's probably like an A or an A+ on, like, assignments, but it also means, like…being, like, the person that gets the highest grade in the whole class. - P15

Mastery and curiosity

Getting a grade, but also, like, understanding the material that you're given more than just getting a good grade…getting good grades, obviously, but also, like understanding. I want to know that I'm learning something here. - P2

Learning from your experiences in school and applying it to your real life. - P18

Not just,like, good grades in the subject, but also to feel like confident and I understand it…For example, I took, like, biology freshman year, and, like, I got the grades in the class, but, I felt like my understanding of the topic wasn't complete. I was able to recite facts, but I wasn't able to comprehend some of the stuff as deeply as I wanted to. I feel like I wasn't as successful in that class. - P13

Obviously, there's like the letter grading system, so, you know, you get A's, that's success, because you've learned, you've demonstrated that you've learned the material. And that I think even someone who's even more successful would go a step further…Seeking more, and also sharing what you've learned, I think, is an important bit too. - P4

Balance and well-being

Personally, it looks like challenging myself to take classes that I believe I'll not get burned out in. And getting 90s or above. - P16

I'm really working towards, like maintaining a healthy relationship with school and like, um a life because I know that I can hyperfix it on one of the two. And so I've been recently trying to find like a good happy medium. Where can I succeed and do well in school, but also, like feel confident and happy outside of school. - P17

Where ideas come from: a social construction of success

Family narratives

Probably from like what my parents expectations and like my older brother. He's a crazy, smart kid beginning in sixth grade and now he's building a satellite for NASA. He's like a junior in college. - P10

I guess I have a lot of sisters, and I feel like all of us have always kind of done very well in school. - P12

Oh, geez. It's that from my mother. Yeah, my mom is very, um about getting my grades up and making sure I. Mm hmm. Keep that expectation of maintaining my grades. - P1

Seeing how my brother defines academic success and, like, how the effort that he puts in, like, that kind of defines how I view it. - P3

School mission and culture

I think a lot of it comes from my school. It has lot of competition. Everyone kind of wants to know how well everybody's doing academically…So I like to kind of stay on top of that and like kind of keep going ahead as far as I can. - P9

I think at my school, like, the expectation is that, like, you try hard, and I think that, like, that is part of, like, my mindset...especially like the last couple years…I want to, like, achieve success. - P14

Peer benchmarking and social media

Everyone kind of thinks, oh, you should get into college, like, after high school to college, you get a degree, you get a good good job. It's kind of a socially accepted thing, I feel. - P2

The culture of my friends…A few of my friends, they strive for academic success. They always try get, like, their best grades and everything and do really well. And then I guess social media too, it comes from media a little bit. - P7

Only from the people I surround myself with. - P16

I guess, society as well, just from, like, what I have seen on, like, the internet. - P11

Personal aspirations

I want to go into med school. I want to be a doctor, so a lot of that comes from me knowing my goals are ambitious and I need to be able to separate myself from other kids who are shooting for the same goal. - P5

I've always just seen it as, like, if I get anywhere below A, I don't, like, approve of it for myself personally, like, I push myself to get the high grades…I always push myself higher now. - P8

The history of my grades. Like I've always had good grades. And I want to like continue with that. - P6

Origins and multiplicity

As seen in Figure 4, students who endorsed multiple definitions of success were most likely to cite family narratives as the source of their ideas (60% of multi-theme students vs 37.5% of single-theme), and multiplicity was most prevalent among those naming family origins (66.7%). Within the multi-theme group, personal aspirations uniquely co-occurred with an additive performance + mastery profile (100% Grades & college and 100% Mastery & curiosity), while school mission & culture paired performance with future access (50%) and peer benchmarking/media split between mastery (50%) and balance/well-being (50%).

Explanatory Grounded Theory

Students assemble a status-conditioned portfolio of success, calibrating what "counts" (e.g. grades, mastery, college, balance, future access) against the opportunities and expectations circulating in their environments.

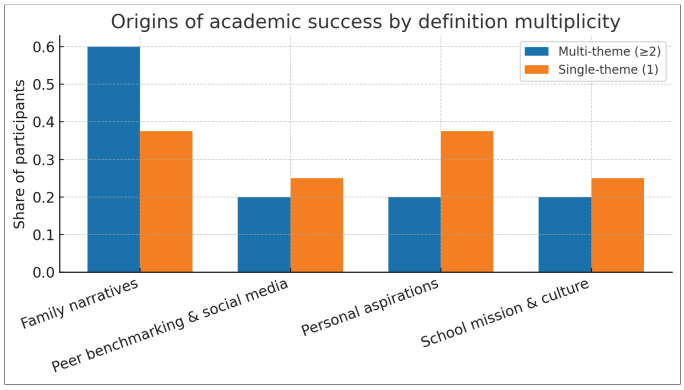

Figure 4. Origins of academic success ideas by definition multiplicity (N=18). Bars show the proportion of participants in the multi-theme group (≥2 definitions) and single-theme group (1 definition) who endorsed each origin. Participants could endorse multiple origins; thus bars within a group need not sum to 1.

Two recurrent configurations organize the data. First, an additive portfolio in which performance (grades/college) remains central while mastery/curiosity is layered on. This pattern was most visible when students referenced family narratives or personal aspirations, and when SSS-Home/School status felt comparatively higher. These conditions widen planning horizons and make deeper learning (not just performance) accessible. Second, a protective recalibration in which students retain performance but explicitly incorporate balance/well-being to manage strain and preserve identity. This appeared more often where peer benchmarking/social media were salient and SSS-School status was lower.

Origins act as carriers that tilt the portfolio: families normalize performance and broaden aims; school mission/culture pair performance with future access through pathways; peers and media amplify comparison, pulling definitions toward either skill building (mastery) or self-protection (balance); aspirations consolidate performance and mastery for longer-term goals. Across configurations, performance anchoring appears to persist–students add their goals rather than replace them.

Processually, students move from uptake (messages from origins) to calibration (aligning aims with perceived status and feasibility) to enactment (e.g. course choices, workload management strategies, pursuit of goals). The theory predicts that strengthening family-like scaffolds and school pathways will expand additive portfolios. Mitigating corrosive comparison will reduce protective narrowing, yielding broader, more sustainable definitions of academic success without diluting standards.

DISCUSSION

This study had three aims: first, to establish baseline, thematically coded definitions of "academic success" among high-school students; second, to examine how these definitions vary with subjective social status (SSS) on the Home and School ladders (and their difference); and third, to translate these findings into practical guidance for schools and counselors. That being said, given the small, regionally narrow sample (N=18; New England-region), effect-size estimates are imprecise and all patterns should be read as exploratory and context-dependent; transferability to more diverse geographic, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic contexts is uncertain until a larger study is conducted. Five key findings emerged.

Firstly, students' definitions of success are plural rather than singular, and multiplicity tracks SSS (weakly). More than half the sample articulated more than one definition (10/18), most commonly grades/college (17/18) plus mastery/curiosity (7/18). The correlation between theme count and SSS–Home was $r = .204$ ($df = 15$; 95% CI −.31 to .62), and with SSS–School $r \approx .02$ ($df = 15$; 95% CI −.47 to .50). Both effects are small and non-significant at $\alpha=.05$. However, "small" matters here: with df=15, $|r|\approx.48$ is required for $p<.05$ (two-tailed); at this N, confidence intervals are necessarily wide, so point estimates have low precision and should be read as exploratory signals. Power calculations indicate ~194 participants are needed to detect r=.20 with 80% power ($\alpha=.05$), ~124 for r=.25, and ~85 for r=.30 (20). In short, the direction—especially for SSS–Home—may be consistent with the qualitative model (students add goals as perceived standing rises), but magnitude must be established in a larger, preregistered study.

Secondly, in reference to the data collected, performance anchoring appears to persist while mastery layers on, especially at higher SSS and when aspirations are explicit. Students most often described an additive portfolio: grades/college plus mastery/application. This pattern concentrated among those citing personal aspirations (5/18) and family narratives (9/18) as origins. Within the multi-theme group, aspirations uniquely co-occurred with performance + mastery (100% endorsement of both within that subgroup), indicating that future-oriented goals may consolidate, rather than trade off, mastery with credentialing.

Thirdly, participant responses indicate that balance/well-being enters definitions when perceived school rank is lower and peer comparison is salient. Although Balance & well-being appeared infrequently overall (2/18; 11%), it was more common among students reporting lower SSS–School (directional descriptive) and among those referencing peer benchmarking/social media (3/18) as sources. In these accounts, students retained performance markers but recalibrated to include sustainability (avoiding burnout, managing workload) as a protective criterion, consistent with a protective recalibration configuration in the grounded theory.

Fourthly, "where ideas come from" tilts the portfolio. Origins were not mutually exclusive and showed distinct pairings: family narratives were cited by 9/18 (50%) and were most common among multi-theme students (60% of multi-theme vs 37.5% of single-theme); conversely, two-thirds (66.7%) of those naming family showed multiplicity. School mission & culture (4/18; 22%) often paired performance with future access (e.g., scholarships, pathways; 50%). Peers/social media origins split between mastery (50%) and balance (50%). These patterned co-occurrences suggest that origins act as carriers: families normalize high performance while broadening aims; school pathways link performance to access; peer/media contexts intensify comparison pressures that can draw definitions toward either skill-building or self-protection.

Finally, the local status lift (School > U.S.) was common among survey responses, but the gap itself is not the primary driver of definitions. Students, on average, placed themselves about one rung higher at school than in the broader U.S. (SSS–School $M = 7.88$, $SD = 0.99$; SSS–U.S. $M = 6.88$, $SD = 1.28$). In 12/17 cases School > U.S., 3/17 were equal, 2/17 lower, and the two ladders were largely independent ($r \approx -0.06$). Theme patterns were more consistent with absolute SSS levels than with the School–Home difference score, which showed near-zero relation to the modal definitions.

These findings have the potential to be significant for several reasons. Taken together, they may indicate that students do not choose between grades and deeper learning; rather, they add mastery/application to a performance anchor when status and supports make broader goals feel feasible. Where school rank feels lower and comparison pressures are salient, students might retain performance goals but add balance/well-being to protect identity and health. In other words, what gets added depends on context: mastery under higher perceived standing and clear aspirations; balance when rank feels lower and comparison is corrosive. Because SSS measurement is quick to administer and potentially responsive to school practices (mentoring, visible roles, revision cycles, transparent criteria), these status-patterned definitions are measurable and potentially malleable. For equity, the implication is to design environments that broaden the feasible set—so more students can carry a multi-goal model (performance + mastery + sustainability) without diluting standards.

Methodologically, the convergence between counts (e.g., 17/18 performance; 10/18 multiplicity) and the grounded-theory configurations (additive vs protective) strengthens internal validity. However, whether the 'additive vs. protective' layering holds, and which layer is added, should be tested in larger, preregistered, multi-site samples.

Translation of research into practice

The data imply specific, low-lift changes educators and counselors can implement now, while larger tests proceed:

- Measure and revisit definitions. At the start of the course (and midyear), ask students to list and rank what they consider success, allowing multiple selections (e.g., performance, mastery, balance, application, future access). Treat this as a living plan, not a one-off inventory.
- Design for dual anchors. Because performance and mastery appear to co-travel, especially at higher SSS, grade the product and require a short application or reflection ("what I can now do/ teach"). Make both visible so mastery isn't a side quest.
- Protect multiplicity for lower-SSS students. Use structured choice (assessment menus, capstone pathways) and scaffolded opportunities to try high-status tasks with low risk (draft-feedback-revise cycles, exemplars), widening the perceived feasible set.
- Normalize balance where SSS-School is low. Offer schedule buffers (built-in catch-up windows), resubmission policies, and explicit workload planning. Frame these supports as standards-aligned tools, not as remedial concessions.
- Leverage higher SSS-Home to broaden beyond grades. For students already performance-anchored, channel that readiness into deeper pursuits (research/capstones, teaching peers, community impact pieces) so "success" grows beyond transcripts.
- Make expectations explicit and humane. When providing resources (tutoring, extensions, extra time), state that support is for learning rather than a performance contract. This can blunt the "others expect me to do better because I have support" pressure.
- Monitor SSS and adjust supports. A brief ladder check each term (Home and School) can cue advisors to shift emphasis: broaden goals when SSS rises (support multiplicity); shore up balance and mastery access when SSS-School is low.
- Track changes in students' ranked definitions, SSS, and outcomes across a semester. Simple pre/post dashboards (by grade and program) will show whether multiplicity grows and whether balance-oriented supports reduce overload without suppressing achievement.

Taken together, the data suggests that the pattern may be straightforward: as subjective status rises, students tend to add goals (not trade them), keeping grades/college central while making room for mastery and application; when perceived rank at school is lower, balance more often enters the definition. Designing classrooms and advising to surface, legitimize, and support this pluralism is the practical path forward.

LIMITATIONS

There are five key limitations to this research, the majority of which are inherent to qualitative research, but are clearly outlined here to verify the usability of this research for a general audience. Firstly, the size of the population interviewed was relatively small. While saturation was achieved and the number of individuals interviewed is typical for an exploratory qualitative study, smaller sample sizes inherently have lower statistical significance, making it more challenging to detect real effects or deviations between groups, even if they exist. This, in turn, increases the risk of a Type II error, failing to reject a null hypothesis that is actually false.

Similarly, as with all participant recruitment via individual connections, there is a high risk of sampling impacting results. Consequently, the transferability of the sample's findings to the larger population is unknowable. For those assuming a positivist view, it cannot be concluded that the experiences represented in this study are universal or that they are applicable to a broader population.

Secondly, due to the nature of thematic coding, results derived from the study may be missing slight nuances as they might have been overshadowed by the codes identified. In essence, data not pulled from interviews, due to the fact that it did not pertain to the codes or themes identified, could have a transcending pattern, thus revealing an unknown conclusion. Using Good-Turing sample coverage (15) on the observed counts yielded $\hat{C}=0.93$, implying only ~7% novelty for the next coded mention.

Thirdly, the study failed to represent individuals who categorized themselves on the extreme poles of the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status. Specifically, no individuals in the study identified themselves, within the context of American society, as having a status of 1-4 or 10. This can be partially attributed to the fact that no assumptions or investigations into the individuals contacted's socio-

economic backgrounds were made (which would ensure we had an adequate spread of individuals from every standpoint on the scale) to remain ethically fair and limit bias. Furthermore, when contextualized within the low standard deviation in score (n=1.278), this lack of representation can also be explained by humans' natural desire to "say what is right"; participants' scores could have been influenced by an unconscious, predetermined assumption that a score of 6 or 7 was "fair" or "modest."

Fourthly, the study had little ethnic and racial diversity. This is because, due to the nature and context of the study, race was a demographic that fell outside its scope, and thus was not recorded or taken into consideration. Therefore, the study's findings have limited generalizability to the broader population, as the group might not be representative of the diversity that exists within the given population (21). The fact that the study's locus was New England also exacerbates this issue, reducing the study's generalizability to a geographically diverse population. However, due to the fact that the study honed in on a niche population (primarily white highschoolers – attending three different subcategories of school – living in New England), the results are likely very indicative of the broader group they belong to (all primarily white highschoolers, attending one of the three different subcategories of school, and living in New England).

Finally, effects may be sensitive to single cases and "mention" ≠ "priority"; what individuals mention once may not be entirely the truth or just part of the truth. Because SSS likely covaries with school type, grade level, and resources, mixed patterns should be confirmed in the forthcoming survey with appropriate covariate controls.

CONCLUSION

To our knowledge, few studies have investigated how high school students' personal understandings and definitions of success impact their educational journeys as well as the relationship between how students perceive their social position and how they define academic success. Most students held more than one definition, typically keeping grades/college at the center and adding mastery/application, while a smaller subset added balance/well-being to protect against overload. In our small sample, breadth of definitions showed a modest, directional link with perceived status in the broader U.S. context and little to no link with perceived status at school; these patterns are suggestive rather than conclusive. Performance anchoring was nearly universal and appeared somewhat more common when students felt higher status at home, whereas mastery tended to layer onto, not replace, performance. Balance/well-being surfaced more often when students felt lower status in school. Notably, the difference between school and home status was less informative than students' absolute sense of status. Given the limited size and regional scope of the dataset, these findings should be read as hypothesis-generating. A larger, preregistered study is needed to test these patterns with adequate power and to clarify how schools can broaden students' feasible goals without diluting rigor.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors attend the same secondary school as several participants; participation was voluntary, the authors held no evaluative authority, and all data were de-identified prior to analysis. The authors themselves were not acquainted with the participants before the interview.

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SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

Please find the following supplemental material available below.

Appendix I: Full Interview Guide

Below is a list of each question asked to interviewees that were coded and analyzed (n=11), phatic questions (n=1), and questions gathering generic data (grade, school, ect.) (n=6). Questions are formatted in the list they were asked to interviewees. Follow-up questions are indicated by #, letter (the broader question they fall under, with a letter specifying their place in the order of follow-up questions):

1) How is your day going so far?
2) What does the phrase "academic success" mean to you?
    1a) What would "academic success" look like at the end of this school year or by the time you graduate?
3) What are your academic goals right now?
4) Where do you think your ideas about academic success come from?
5) Do you ever feel pressure to succeed academically?
    4a) Where does that pressure come from? You, someone else, something?
    4b) Is this pressure motivating, stressful, both? Or is it something else?
6) Do you feel like you have the resources you need to achieve your definition of academic success?
7) Do you feel like you have the support you need to achieve your definition of academic success?
8) Do the resources and support you have change how other people see your ability to succeed in school?
9) Do the resources and support you have change how you see your ability to succeed in school.
10) If you didn't achieve your version of academic success, how much do you think it would change your future?
11) How do you feel when you do well in school?
12) How do you feel when you struggle in school?
13) Tell me about something you are proud of from your last school year?
14) What grade you're in, the school you go to, and what a typical school day looks like for you?
15) What about the weekend or afterschool? What does that look like for you?
16) What about the summer? How do you spend your time?
17) Is there anything else you would like to share?
18) Did I miss anything?