

Status awareness of pupils at secondary school

Using a mixed method with photo elicitation



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Problem

- Society based on the ideal of equality
- Inequality in work conditions, salary and social status, based on educational level is accepted
- Maintaining or improving one's status is the second most important motivation for action after sheer survival and health, though very few people would admit this
- Upward mobility is an affirmation of the value of persons
- Everybody wants to be a 'winner', what about the 'losers'?
- **Research question: How do young people who are not able to reach a high level of education cope with this situation?**

“Lack of respect, though less aggressive than an outright insult, can take an equally wounding form. No insult is offered another person, but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not seen—as a full human being whose presence matters. When a society treats the mass of people in this way, singling out only a few for recognition, it creates a scarcity of respect, as though there were not enough of this precious substance to go around. Like many famines, this scarcity is man-made; unlike food, respect costs nothing. Why, then, should it be in short supply?”

(Sennett, 2003).

Research

- Youngsters between the age of 15 and 17 (N=177) from 3 types of education:
 - Low (low and middle vocational track)
 - Middle (higher vocational track)
 - High (university track)
- Approach from the insider perspective
- Using photographs to elicit reactions
- Analysis of discussions, group interviews and the answers to open questions
- Comparison of reactions and answers between subgroups based on educational types

Method

- Pupils in small groups of 3 discuss photographs of people and arrange them in a circle, representing society
- Pupils arrange photographs, choose a place for oneself and motivate their choice
- 4 questions with open answers;
 - Who are you?
 - What are you able of?
 - What is your goal?
 - What is important to reach your goal?

Social hierarchy

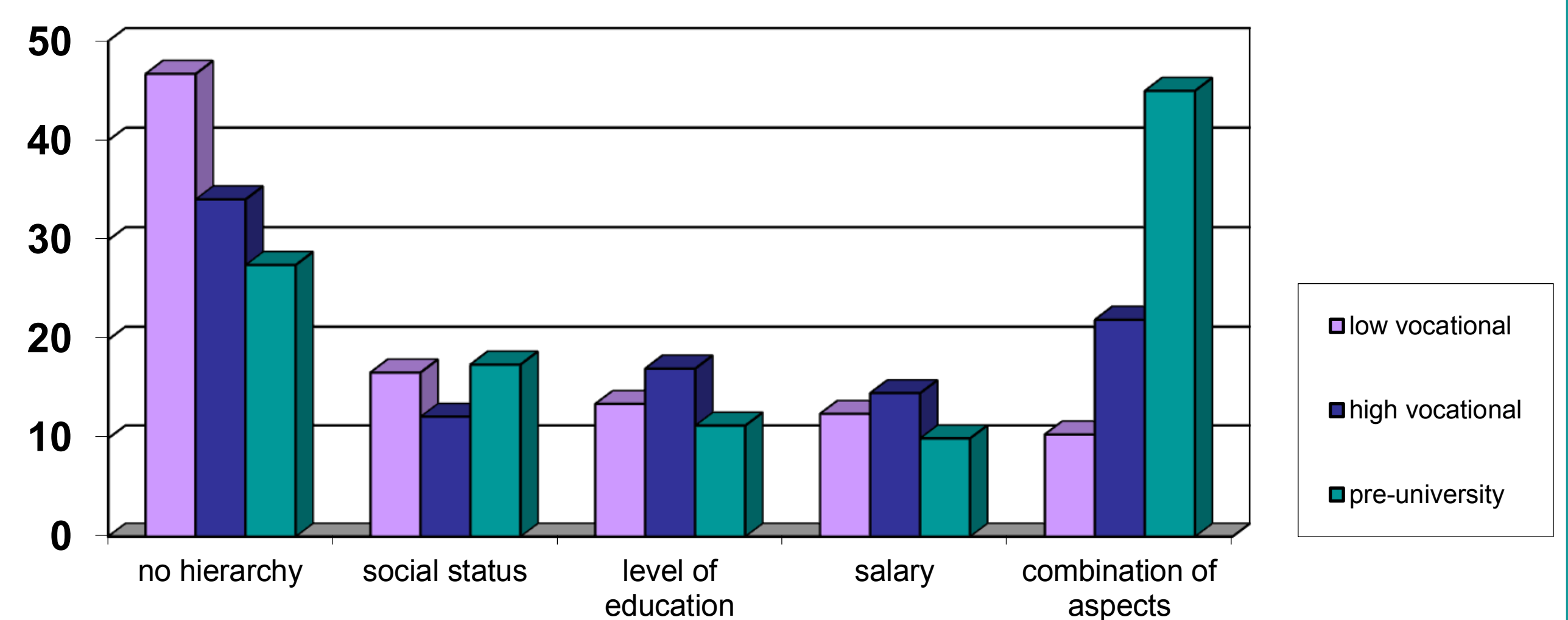
If the youngsters discuss the photographs and make an arrangement, are they aware of an hierarchy? If so, which dimension is most salient? (salary, level of education, social status)

Outcome: grafiek

- Adolescents are aware of social stratification
- Most important dimension: level of education and adding something to society
- Low-level pupils classify people significantly less frequently in hierarchical ways than middle and high-level pupils do

Hierarchical aspects (percentages)

N = 177



How can we understand this?

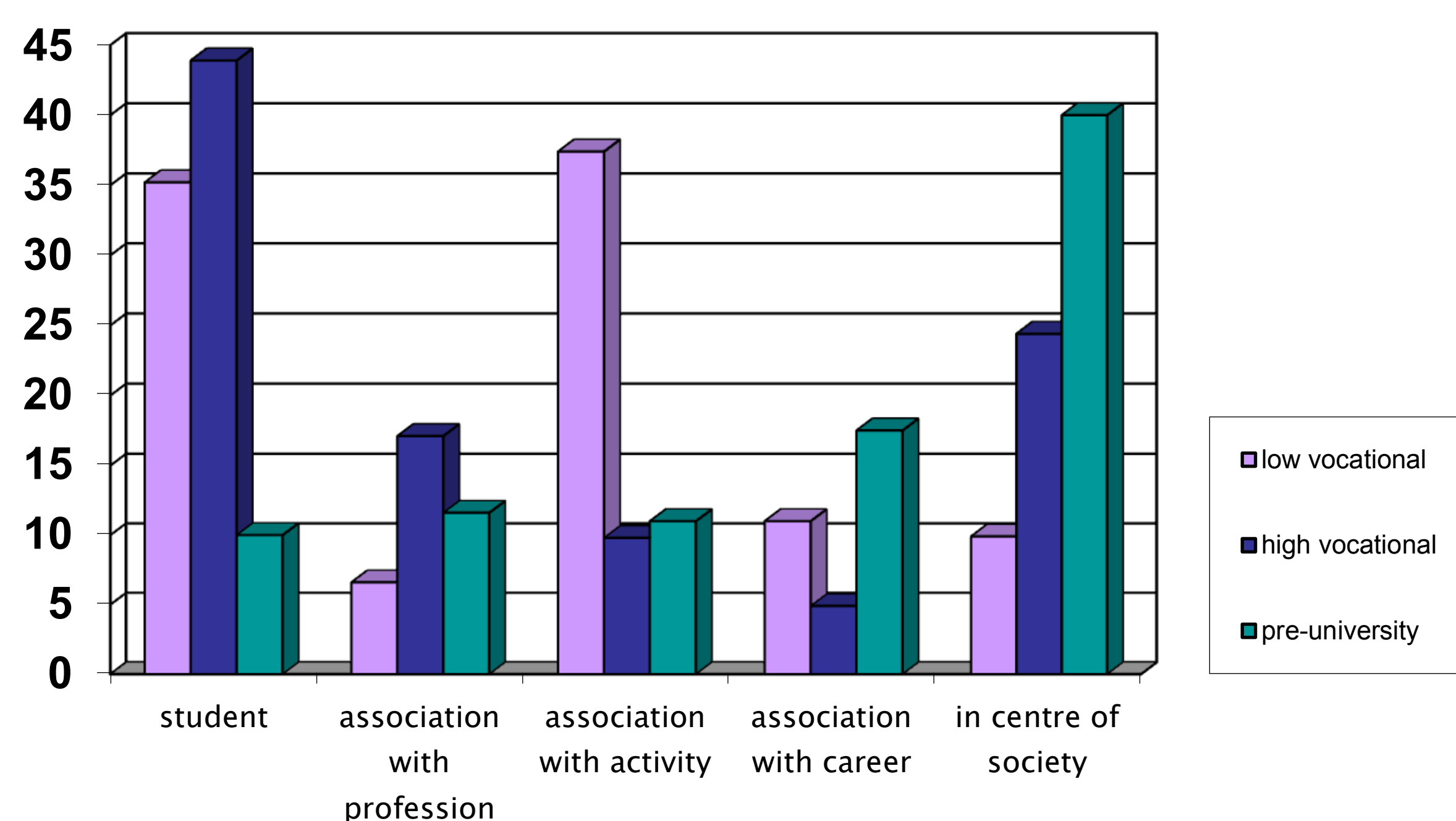
- The mechanism of selective perception is described as one of the most powerful way's to enhance the self-esteem of a person. Pupils from the low vocational track have little to gain from the hierarchical order, so why should they notice it?
- One perceives the world in such a way that it reflects you in the most favourable position
- Is this what's going on?

Personal social position

- How do pupils locate themselves in the social spectrum?
- With which group, class or type of people do they associate themselves?
- To what degree are they aware of their social position?
- We learned that there certainly was a clear awareness of their position as they saw this.

Personal social position (percentages)

N = 177



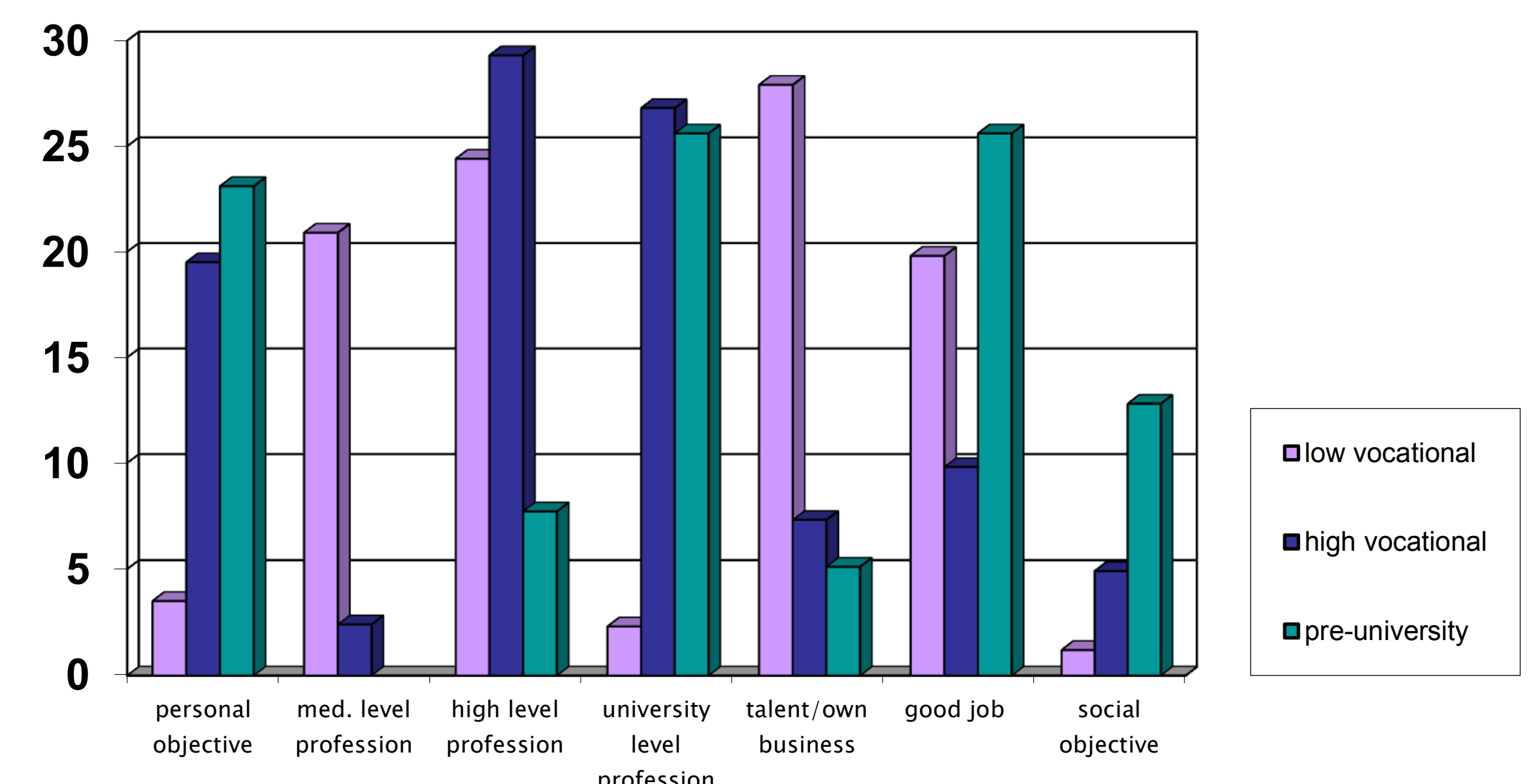
Which position do they choose for themselves?

- Low-level pupils associate themselves with being a 'student' and awareness of circumstances for jobs (insite or outside, physical work or 'brain' work).
- Middle-level pupils associate themselves with 'students' as well, but with plans for a specific profession.
- High-level pupils associate themselves as being in the middle of society, which probably is their future role

Expectations and goals

What do you want to achieve? (percentages)

N = 177



The question 'What do you want to achieve?' generated different answers from the pupils of the various types of education. It stands to reason that most opt for a job or profession that fits their present or prospective level of education. But, it was quite a surprise to learn from several interviews that many low vocational pupils opt for further education at a school for higher vocational training and a job that fits this high level of education.

Educational research shows that the odds are against them.

Conclusions

- Adolescents are aware of social stratification
- Low-level pupils classify people significantly less frequently in hierarchical ways than middle and high-level pupils do
- High-level pupils know they will have a very good future position in society thanks to their level of education
- Low-level pupils hope to get a good position in spite of their level of education
- Strategies to protect self-esteem can invoke self-handicaping, loss of motivation and can lead to school drop-out
- Many pupils have to cope with strong disappointments when they learn that they don't have the ability to succeed in higher levels of education
- The disappointment is put aside by thinking: 'later I can still become what I want to be'

