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2015

### Imagining The Future in London and New York City: The Aspirations and Imagined Futures of High School Seniors

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*Imagining A Future After High School:  
A Comparative Ethnography of Schooling, Aspiration and Age Imaginaries  
in London and New York City*



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**29<sup>th</sup> April 2015**

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# Outline



1. *Introduction to the research: a comparative ethnography of schooling, aspiration and age imaginaries*
2. *Background:*
  - *the concept of age imaginaries (vignette: Y7 PDC at Lakefield School)*
  - *critiquing aspiration: imagined futures and quantum personhood*
3. *Current research: Emerging findings at Bronx High*
  - *Fields of ongoing inquiry: multiple imaginings of the future*
  - *Multiple and contested (quantum?) narratives of future selves: vignettes from Bronx High*
4. *Discussion*

## *But first...*



- *When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up? Why?*
- *When you were a senior, what did you want to do with your life? Why?*

*OR*

- *Can you remember a time when you were younger and did something really risky?*



# *Introduction to the research*



- *A two year comparative ethnography exploring the themes of aspiration and imagined futures among students in a high school/secondary school in the Bronx, NYC and London*
- *Research Questions:*
  - *Simple: What do you want to be when you grow up? What are you going to do next?*
  - *Harder: What is the meaning/value/purpose of a life? How is this purpose situated temporally? What is 'success'?*
  - *How are students schooled (trained, disciplined) into these beliefs?*
  - *Future gazing cities?*
- *Building on a long tradition of school ethnography & sociology of education that explores aspiration, inequality and 'the future' in some way (from Hargrieves, to Willis, to Ogbu, to Varenne & McDermott, to McLeod, to Noguera, to Evans, etc., etc.)...so, nothing particularly new...(do we need another??)*
- *...yes: attempting new comparative and theoretical perspectives that hopefully reveal more the complexities of aspiration in contemporary contexts of US-UK schooling*

# *Introduction to the research*



## *First Phase: Bronx High*

*The school context: A school with an elite history, in a Jazz Age building; more recently a 'failing' school; and now a 'turnaround' school; a notorious school; a school invested with genuine hope, but also entrenched disadvantage.*



## *Background: an overview of the concept of age imaginaries*



*Current research emerging from previous ethnography exploring age and social identity in an English Secondary School (Alexander, in press)*

• **Age imaginaries:** *the multiple discourses, practices and processes of meaning-making that combine to shape notions of individual and collective age-based identity*

*The social imaginary:* drawing on C. Taylor (2002) (what 'ought to be'); B. Anderson (1983) (imagined communities); C. Castoriadis (1987) (the ontology of determinacy)

• *Age as a social construct and an important axis of identity that is fluid and characterised by constant change (Alexander 2014; Alanen 2001; James & Prout 1997; James & Jencks 1998)*

• *The process of imagining age: taxonomies of known age imaginaries (discourses of age);*

*'Schooling age': to educate; to train; to render skillful or tractable by training; to discipline; to bring under control; correct*

*- novel imaginings of age in an around these discourses;*

*- reconciling/articulating the novel with(in) the known;*

*Age is imagined relationally between staff and students. This can lead to conflict or coming together (or both) as different age imaginaries are negotiated in relation to one another.*

• *E.g. imagining age for younger teachers; PDC classroom at Lakefield school: childhood, growing up; 'adulthood'*

# Age imaginaries in the classroom



- **An example from Year 7 PDC: preparing for the charity fair**

*Drawing on Lanclos' idea of children's 'dual lives' at school (2003)*

*Multiple imaginings of age: Discourses of 1) childhood; 2) growing-up; and 3) adulthood in the classroom*

- *Discourses of childhood in classroom interaction*
- *Discourses of 'growing up' in the PDC curriculum: being 'sensible', 'grown up' and 'mature'*
- *Playing 'adulthood' through 'adult' spheres online: google images*
  - *'boobs': gendered age imaginaries*
  - *covert/hidden identity play online: being 'silly' or being 'adult'?*
  - *the significance of media consumption*

## *Age imaginaries in the classroom*



### **An example from Year 7 PDC: preparing for the charity fair**

- Ms. Gibson [standing, resting on the front of her desk]: OK then, boys and girls, what kinds of things are you thinking about then, as charities that we're gonna support?
- [Meagan puts her hand up eagerly]
- Ms. Gibson: Meagan [looks at Meagan]
- Meagan: We could do, like, animals, like, protecting animals...
- Ms. Gibson: OK, good, like you mean against animal cruelty? Like the RSPCA?  
Meagan: Yeah...
- Ms. Gibson: OK, good, good girl, well done. [looking around] Lance. [smiles and looks at Lance, who has his hand up]
- Lance: We were thinking about Cancer Research and Race for Life? Because both our mums are doing Race for Life...
- Ms. Gibson: Great! Good boy, well done, that's a good idea

## *Age imaginaries in the classroom*



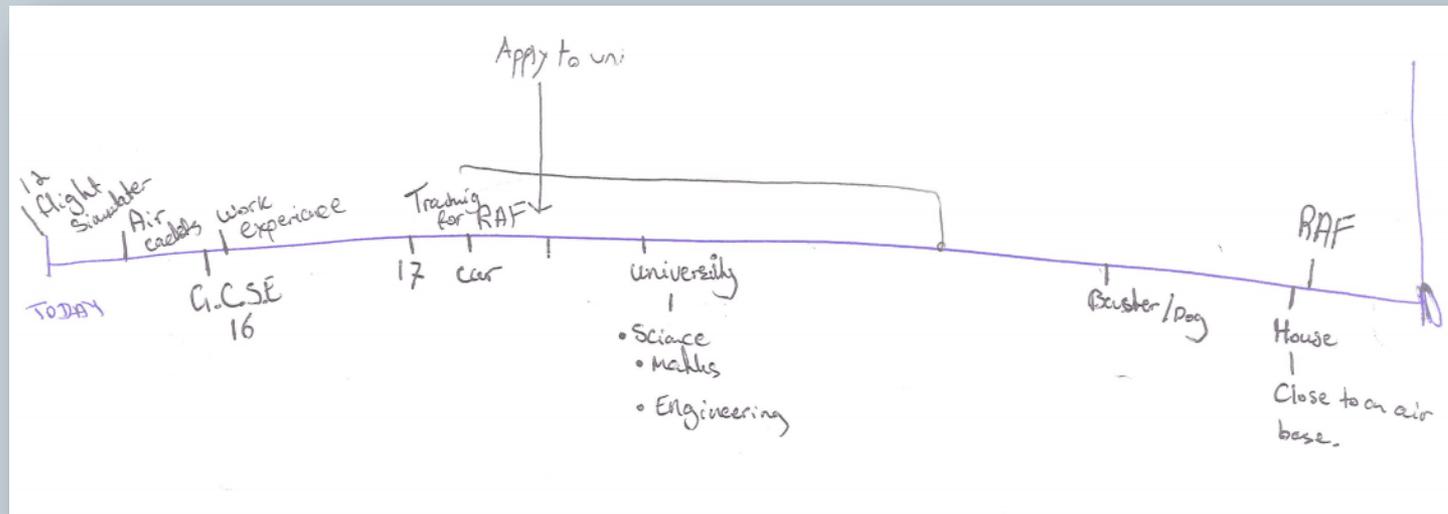
### *An example from Year 7 PDC: preparing for the charity fair*

Both Lance's group and Henry's group dutifully began by looking at the main websites for the RSPCA and Cancer Research, respectively, and were well ahead in terms of achieving what had been set out by Ms. Gibson as the objectives for the lesson. Others who had initially shown a similarly 'sensible' and 'mature' approach to the initial discussion, however, were eagerly exploring the more gruesome online content relevant to their chosen causes. Meagan, for example, was now typing 'abused cats and dogs' into her Google images browser with a mix of nervous anticipation and gleeful curiosity. The images that emerged were suitably shocking, producing stifled groans ("Oh my God! Errrgh! That is *so* bad!") and covered mouths from Meagan and the other girls huddled around the computer. As Ms. Gibson came over to investigate the noise, the window was quickly minimised in favour of the same RSPCA homepage being looked at by other groups. At another desk, Stuart, a boy with fuzzy blonde hair, had typed 'people with cancer' into Google images and was nervously giggling and groaning with the boys in his group about the disturbing images of cancer patients that the search had produced. This time, it was my presence that urged Stuart to minimise the screen, with Stuart's neighbour, Leon, hissing "Sir's coming!" as I wandered past. Both boys looked at me sheepishly, expecting admonishment for their behaviour from the other adult in the room aside from the teacher. Again, Ms. Gibson was unaware of this use of lesson time. As the lesson continued, at the far end of the classroom Meagan's group of girls had typed 'boobs' into Google images, and were giggling at the search results, some of which were mildly pornographic. Hearing the girls giggling, but without venturing to see what they were looking at, Ms. Gibson frowned and said "Um! Girls, I hope you're not being childish and silly over there!" before returning her attention to the group she was working with. Blushing, Meagan minimised the window and again returned to the RSPCA website. When the bell rang to mark the end of the lesson the students were asked to pack up and stand behind their chairs, and then were dismissed table by table. As I followed the class out, the girls previously looking at 'boobs' on the internet ambled out of the door in a huddle, murmuring to each other about whose 'tits' were biggest, giggling and blushing as they went.

## *age imaginaries, and imagined futures*



Current research also drawing on a project about imagined futures entitled **Raising Aspiration in Oxford City Schools** (Citifoundation): How do Year 9 students imagine the future, and how do they navigate towards the figured world of university?



*...which lead me to ask:*

*How are age imaginaries figured in the future? How does this relate to aspiration?*

*What is the temporal nature of personhood, and what is its relation to schooling?*

# Quantum personhood



- *How are age imaginaries figured in the future?*
- *What is the temporal nature of personhood, and what is its relation to schooling?*
- *Using metaphors of quantum physics to complicate ideas of personhood, age and aspiration; figuring multiple future age imaginaries/ imagined futures*
  - *uncertainty; paradox; entanglement; potentiality; multiverses... 'spooky action at a distance'*
  - *Drawing on the extensive literature on personhood (Fortes; Geertz; Strathern; Latour; Carsten, among others) Personhood as relational; as process; articulated through multiple narratives of self; as spatially and temporally disparate (including virtual spaces); shaped by potentiality: the impact of choices unchosen, plans unmade, statuses unachieved*
  - *Drawing on anthropological and sociological lit. about temporality and the future – most recently Tavory & Eliasoph 2013 on forms of future-coordination (protention; trajectories; narratives; plans; temporal landscapes)*
- *Complicating understandings of aspiration: what does this mean in relation to schooling?*
- *Exploring the dimensionality of aspiration in relation to individualism and discourses of late modernity (what counts as a purposeful/meaningful/successful existence?)*
- *How do we reconcile the linear, unidirectional nature of dominant discourses of aspiration with lived experiences of the multiple, quantum nature of constructing personhood in the past, present and future?*
- *an exploration of the ways in which 'quantum' personhood is made sensible (and, often, in the process, invisible) to dominant taxonomies of the person, particularly in relation to the imaginings of age, individual purpose and aspiration in school.*

## *Emerging findings: multiple imaginings of the future at Bronx High*



Identifying the contested (and interconnected) nature of imagined futures at various levels (what the future 'ought to be'):

- a) at the level of discourse and policy (imagined futures of the education system; of society)
- b) at the institutional level (the imagined future of the school)
- c) in the structure and content of the curriculum (various ways of structuring aspiration and of enacting imagined futures);
- d) and in the classroom (negotiated imagined futures of and between individuals). Identifying the entangled, relational and sometimes contested way in which futures are imagined (individuals imagining what their own and other's futures 'ought to be' – and not always in a positive way) Race, ethnicity, gender and age all figure in how futures are imagined between persons



## *Emerging findings: multiple imaginings of the future*



*Identifying the contested (and interconnected) nature of imagined futures at various levels (what the future 'ought to be'):*

### ***a) At the level of discourse and policy:***

- *The perpetual crisis of 'youth'; 'poverty' of aspiration; anxiety about celebrity aspiration; discourse about academic success leading to economic success (esp. through Higher Education); The American Dream; school reform leading to the 'right kinds' of aspiration, evidenced through improved performance (esp. graduation rates, college preparedness); recent policy changes for assessing 'success' and 'failure' at the level of the school & for teachers*
- *What is the relationship between these imagined futures and the social and economic realities of the post-recession present (and future)?*

## *Emerging findings: multiple imaginings of the future*



*Identifying the contested (and interconnected) nature of imagined futures at various levels (what the future 'ought to be'):*

***b) At the institutional level (the imagined future of the school): individual and collective imaginings***

*- 'the school of choice for all families in the Bronx': failing schools turned around by harnessing the imagined futures of students (as evidenced in graduation rates and access to higher education); and the intention is always good (there is extensive provision for this: ROTC; SASF, Good Shepherd, Council for Unity, etc.)*

*- the imagined futures of schools and school (lack of) choice: self-fulfilling prophecies?*



## *Emerging findings: multiple imaginings of the future*



### **c) in the curriculum (various ways of structuring aspiration and of enacting imagined futures)**

- Future-gazing structures of curriculum: US/UK comparisons
- Content and activities that encourage the reckoning of (particular, and sometimes conflicting) imagined future selves
  - Work-Study: Applying for CUNY...and preparing for minimum wage jobs

### **d) and in the classroom:** contested, relational, negotiated age imaginaries, and imagined futures of individuals – lived experiences of a), b) and c)

- *Diverse imaginings of age and the future at the end of high school:*
  - *Daniel ('Game/Over'), Yvonne, Chris, Darryl, Andy ('Life is Straight Improv')*
- *Imagining 'adulthood' in relation to educational 'success' and graduation; in opposition to 'childish nonsense'*
- *Co-constructing aspirations and imagined futures: Chemistry, or the Voice?*
- *Fahim (via Suli Breaks): critical perspectives of the relationship between 'success' and schooling:*

*AP English, free-writing; a crisp, bright November day, two minutes to the bell:*

*"You need to be successful at school to succeed...but is that really valid? Education is the key...but school is the lock. As long as you show up you get through...but if life was a family tree, then hard work and education are brothers, and school is a distant cousin."*

## *Emerging findings: multiple imaginings of the future*



### **d) and in the classroom (negotiated imagined futures of individuals – lived experiences)**

*Applying for College:*

- The genre of the College Letter: multiple futures selves (Jackson's story)*
- FAFSA applications: unsettling narratives of self, entangled with family*



## *Concluding remarks*



*...What makes for a meaningful life?*

*How does the answer to this question shape how we make sense of the future for youth at the end of schooling?*



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*Funded by the US-UK Fulbright Commission*





## INTRODUCTION

This research provides a window into how seniors make sense of their impending futures in a New York City public high school. The findings are drawn from a comparative ethnography of aspiration and imagined futures in secondary schools in London and New York. The aim of the research is to explore similarities and differences in how youth in these two cities make sense of their impending futures in contemporary, post-recession US and UK society.

Put simply, I ask seniors the broad questions 'what do you want to be when you grow up?', and, 'What are you going to do next?'. I then unravel the more complex discourses and narratives that influence not only the nature of the questions and the possible answers they yield, but also the lived reality of what students might end up 'being' when they leave school. This means that the ultimate question driving the research is: for young people today, what makes for a meaningful or purposeful life?

In considering these issues, I identify emerging examples of student agency in achieving aspirations as well as barriers to these aspirations. I also interrogate the social, economic and political discourses that underpin the notions of aspiration (of futurity) that students are presented with in school. I am therefore interested in the conditions, both individual and social, that lead to choices about future trajectories.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

*The Future of Tomorrow: academic & public discourse about youth and the future in the US & UK*

Building on a long tradition of school ethnography that explores aspiration, inequality and 'the future' in some way (from Hargraves, to Willis, to Ogbu, to Varenne & McDermott, to McLeod, to Evans, etc.), but innovative in attempting new comparative and theoretical perspectives that hopefully reveal more the complexities of aspiration in contemporary contexts of US-UK schooling.

Although very little research focuses on these issues in comparative relief in the US-UK context, ideas of youth, aspiration and futurity are deeply embedded in popular, political and educational discourse focused on young people in the United States and the United Kingdom. Indeed, these are issues that resonate deep into popular debate about the future, economic and otherwise, of the US and the UK.

This filters down into the detail of everyday life at school, meaning the future is an important part of the present for high school seniors. How, then, do they make sense of more traditional, linear imaginings of aspiration and the future alongside experiencing circumstances of increasingly precariousness and uncertainty in the post-recession present?



## GLOBAL CITYSCAPES

These questions are made even more salient by the future-gazing contexts of the cities in which they are formed: for many, London and New York represent imagined landscapes where futures are forged and where 'dreams' can come true. For some students, the precariousness of their imagined futures is made ever more present by their experiences of urban contexts where socio-economic advantage lives cheek-by-jowl with considerable disadvantage - where imagined futures can be as elusive as they may be illusory.



## METHODOLOGY

This is a comparative ethnographic project, involving fieldwork in one large public high school in The Bronx, and one state secondary school in London. The research focuses on students in their final year of formal compulsory education.

The first phase of the research involved regular participant observation in lessons and other spaces in the school, as well as semi-structured group and individual interviews and 'life mapping' exercises with seniors and school staff in The Bronx high school.

The researcher spent a minimum of two days per week in the school during the academic year 2014-2015. The emphasis in the ethnography is on privileging the voices of young people in their own articulations of what they imagine the future to be like, and how they plan on making these imagined futures into reality.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research uses three connected concepts in order to make sense of the complex, multiple narratives that young people construct about their imagined futures after schooling:

1. **Age imaginaries:** the multiple discourses, practices and processes of meaning-making that combine to shape notions of individual and collective age-based identity.
2. **Quantum Personhood:** Using metaphors of quantum physics to complicate ideas of personhood, age and aspiration: figuring multiple future age imaginaries/imagined futures. Focusing on: uncertainty; paradox; entanglement; potentiality; multiple future 'universes' of existence. Drawing on the extensive literature on personhood (Fortes; Geertz; Strathern; Latour; Carsten, among others). Personhood as relational; as process; articulated through multiple narratives of self: as spatially and temporally disparate (including virtual spaces); shaped by potentiality: the impact of choices unchosen, plans unmade, statuses unachieved
3. **Imagined Futures** Complicating understandings of aspiration: what does this mean in relation to schooling? Exploring the dimensionality of aspiration in relation to individualism and discourses of late modernity (what counts as a purposeful/meaningful/successful existence?). An exploration of the ways in which 'quantum' personhood is made sensible (and, often, in the process, invisible) to dominant taxonomies of the person, particularly in relation to the imaginings of age, individual purpose and aspiration.

*Qs: How are age imaginaries figured in the future? What is the temporal nature of personhood, and what is its relation to schooling? How do we reconcile the linear, unidirectional nature of dominant discourses of aspiration with lived experiences of the multiple, quantum nature of constructing personhood in the past, present and future?*

## EMERGING FINDINGS



- Schools are home to multiple, intersecting quantum imaginings of the future: A) at the level of discourse; B) at the level of national, state and city policy; C) at the level of the institution; D) at the level of individuals in the classroom (where it is also influenced by popular discourse and media)
- Imaginings of the future emerge in a multiplicity of contexts in school, from text studied in English, to discussions of college in Latin, to disclosures about family through financial aid paperwork, to discussions about work-study, to motivational posters, and so on.
- Figuring quantum personhood is a relational project, involving family, friends and significant individuals including teachers, guidance counsellors, and other mentors who may be in an ad hoc way instrumental in defining a particular future trajectory for students.
- Students learn to construct multiple, quantum narratives of the future that while seemingly incongruent are in fact concurrent and overlapping. One example of this is the explicit construction of future selves through the writing of multiple personal statements for college, involving multiple extended metaphors for what they will be like if selected.
- Many imaginings of the future involve drastic change of life course, often in relation to leaving behind gang ties, criminality, or behaviour and social relations seen as negatively impacting a more traditional narrative of success towards graduation at high school.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This project is generously funded by the Peabody Trust and the US-UK Fulbright Association. I would like to acknowledge New York University and in particular Professor Pedro Noguera at the Metropolitan Center for Equity and the Transformation of Schools for his vital support for this project.



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