

Young People's Aspirations in an Uncertain World: Taking Control of the Future?

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Abstract

The future for young people worldwide is characterised by multiple uncertainties, particularly perhaps in countries of the Global South. There is a growing and pervasive expectation that these uncertainties need to be responded to, both by institutions and individuals, so that young people are prepared for an unpredictable and changing world. 'Raising aspirations' is expected to play an instrumental role in preparing young people to confront a constantly changing world. Of the four articles that constitute this special section, two explore institutional efforts to shape young people's aspirations to build new kinds of (national and individual) future, while the other two focus on the messier, more fluid ways in which young people reorient themselves in relation to unpredictable events. Together, they highlight how interventions designed to produce flexible creative individuals largely ignore how young people already live their lives in responsive and creative ways.

Keywords

aspiration, future, uncertainty, young people, youth

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While young people live their lives in the present, there is growing recognition among scholars that the future figures highly in how they feel and act and how institutions intervene in their lives (Ansell et al., 2014; Cole and Durham, 2009). It is often through aspiration that young people orient themselves to the future and are encouraged to do so by families, schools, and governments (Huijsmans et al., 2021). This special section brings together four articles that were presented at a conference on theorising young people's aspirations at Brunel University in March 2018. Drawing on empirical material from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, they examine how young people's aspirations are formed in rapidly changing global contexts. Two of the articles focus on deliberate institutional efforts to shape young people's aspirations to build new kinds of (national and individual) future, while the other two articles focus on the messier, more fluid ways in which young people reorient themselves in relation to unpredictable events.

Over time, uncertainties shift as do individual and collective responses to future uncertainty. From a European perspective, Giddens (1991) suggests that in pre-modern times, individual pathways through life were relatively predictable: there was no need to imagine and strive for a different future. The advent of modernity entailed an expansion of education as part of a vision of progress. Modern education, introduced across the colonial world, aimed to produce and select individuals to serve as teachers, nurses, police, and administrators. To achieve this, it needed to inspire some young people to want these roles, rather than follow in their parents' steps. Aspiration, often associated with individual modernity (possession of a 'modern orientation', in Yogev's (1980) terms), took on a functional role. Yet while individuals may have been unsure as to whether they would ever attain the lives they were encouraged to want, the future of society as a whole was painted through schooling, and more broadly, as relatively predictable and unchanging.

In practice, the future was never certain. Across Europe, the expansion of education has long outpaced growth in desirable employment leaving young people facing precarious futures (MacDonald, 2011). Yet today the pace and connectedness of change mean uncertainties are intensifying. Economic and technological change is rapid and transforming the world of work in ways that are hard to predict, while climate change and conflict pose existential threats that are reshaping what it means to be a young person (Malone, 2018). The recent proliferation of work on aspiration in research, and also in policy circles, is partly attributable to the conditions of endemic uncertainty (Bauman, 2007) which youth today inhabit. It also reflects an emerging concern among states and institutions with addressing such uncertainty through neoliberal forms of governmentality.

Future uncertainties are perhaps particularly profound in the lives of young people in the Global South. Africa, in particular, is characterised as perpetually in crisis (Abebe and Ofose-Kusi, 2016; Weiss, 2004), but global capital is transforming environments and societies everywhere, meaning that children grow up to confront conditions very different from those they are socialised for (Katz, 2004). As numbers of young people in education grow, the proportion who will attain the careers schools have conventionally prepared them for diminishes (Ansell et al., 2020; Häberlein and Maurus, 2020). Formal sector jobs are increasingly scarce, and it is becoming difficult to anticipate the types of work that will dominate the economies of tomorrow. As Crivello (2015) observes, in the context of Peru, 'For impoverished and marginalized young people whose daily lives

unfold on fragile ground, aspirations are generated within a context of uncertainty' (p. 38). At the same time, through new technologies and dispersing social networks, exposure to alternative ways of living and distant places has potential implications for how young people look to their own futures (Coe, 2012; Lukose, 2009; Nilan and Feixa, 2006).

Uncertainty is not simply an inability to predict the future, associated with the absence of knowledge as to what it will bring; uncertainty is also subjectively felt (Hänsch et al., 2017). Cooper and Pratten (2015) describe 'uncertainty as a structure of feeling – the lived experience of a pervasive sense of vulnerability, anxiety, hope, and possibility' (p. 1). Uncertainty is felt in relation to both near and distant futures (Guyer, 2007), although it is experienced more profoundly in some moments than others (Archambault, 2015).

Young people's responses to uncertainty differ, in part depending on their own social contexts (Jakimow, 2016). Some view it as a source of fear, and this shapes their aspiration. Social mobility may, for instance, be treated with suspicion if perceived to lead to more uncertain futures (Froerer, 2011). Others are motivated by a concern to 'survive' the uncertainties they face (Dungey and Ansell, 2020a; van Stapele, 2021). Many continue to aspire to long-standing socially valued markers of adulthood such as employment, a home, and a family but are frustrated by a long period of 'waithood', not knowing whether these possibilities will materialise (Honwana, 2012; Jeffrey, 2010; Mains, 2013).

Uncertainty is not always negative or constraining though; for some young people, it can be a productive social resource (Cooper and Pratten, 2015), a source of excitement rather than fear. Uncertainty may offer possibility and motivation, with many young people convinced that, whatever happens to others, they personally will achieve their dreams (Cooper and Pratten, 2015; Martin et al., 2016; Oldenburg, 2016; Stambach and Hall, 2017). This embrace of risk by (particularly male) youth, unburdened by adult responsibilities, has been regarded as problematic but can also be seen as generative (Froerer, 2015; Kelly, 2001). Weiss (2009), for instance, explores how young men in Tanzania respond to the economic crisis through hip-hop, generating creativity from uncertainty. For other young people in the Global South, uncertainty is simply 'part of life' (Johnson-Hanks, 2005).

The articles in this special issue focus not only on how young people themselves form aspirations in the face of uncertainty. Governments have long sought to mould the national future through young people, as Cheney (2007) has shown in Uganda. Uncertainties evoke anxieties and moral panic about youth which prompt pre-emptive actions, often focused on children. Fearful of economic stagnation or jobless growth, and the threats they perceive to stem from the associated youth unemployment, governments and other institutions endeavour to equip young people for the unknowable (Dolan and Rajak, 2016).

In what may be understood as a project of neoliberal government, focusing less on reducing uncertainties than equipping young people to respond to uncertainties in productive ways, education systems, nongovernmental organizations and corporations seek to cast young people as imaginers and producers of their own futures. The creation of aspirational entrepreneurs with the vocational skills, self-motivation and flexibility to generate inclusive economic growth is envisaged as a way of taking control of the national future as well as satisfying the demands of restless youth. As two of the papers

in this special section illustrate, some education and training systems have become oriented to the production of such neoliberal subjects who view the future as open and take responsibility for their own success or failure.

Institutional responses to young people's uncertain futures are far from uniform and often contradictory. While there is a growing emphasis on flexibility, young people are nonetheless encouraged to plan, and planning tends to be presented in linear terms. The extent to which young people embrace the idea of planning their futures differs from place to place (Devadason, 2008). For some, planning amid uncertainty is seen as impossible (Johnson-Hanks, 2005). For others, the discourse of aspiration enables them to manage contexts of uncertainty (Jakimow, 2016). However, the idea that one can control the future is very problematic in places where most people feel powerless (Offe, 2001). It is perhaps unsurprising that, as papers in this issue report, many young people adopt the aspirations of previous generations, even in the face of evidence that these will not be fulfilled.

The first two articles in this special section focus on institutional efforts to shift young people's aspirations in the face of uncertainty—to encourage them to aspire to and build entrepreneurial futures for themselves in a world with few jobs.

Rajak and Dolan (2021) describe how corporations, the South African state, and international donors have come together to run programmes for disadvantaged children and youth to develop in them the dispositions and skills required for entrepreneurial futures. Based on ethnographic research including interviews with those involved in operating four such programmes, the authors highlight how the interests they serve are not those of the children who participate in them. Rather they reflect a neoliberal ideology that responds to the failure of the global economy to produce jobs for the majority of South Africans by insisting that people need to create their own jobs (and also jobs for others in their society). A small number of 'promising' children are selected for programmes that will in theory prepare them for these roles. The authors point to contradictions—the need to inspire both individualism and civic duty; a discourse of flexibility and innovation while drilling children in more conventional traits such as punctuality and tenacity; embracing a discursive emphasis on enabling children to respond to the challenges of the world around them while also asking them to disregard the difficulties they face and 'reach for the sky'. Rajak and Dolan argue that such programmes serve to displace responsibility for the nation's future away from the state and onto the shoulders of children, but in so doing the gap between aspiration and opportunity is widened further.

Dungey and Ansell (2020b) also focus on entrepreneurship education, in this case within the formal primary school curriculum in Lesotho. Here, too, the curriculum has the support of global finance and represents a neoliberal response to economic and environmental uncertainties. Their ethnographic study examined how the curriculum was experienced by teachers, parents and particularly by children. While sharing some of the concerns of Rajak and Dolan relating to the inability of entrepreneurship education to deliver on its promise, they found that children did not embrace the new futures set out for them. Instead, the children continued to express a desire for salaried service sector employment as teachers, nurses, police and soldiers which unlike entrepreneurial activities would provide a future of stability in an uncertain world. Yet most children were aware that such jobs are very hard to find and that their own futures were more likely to be based in the rural economy. The puzzle is why they did not see the 'creativity and

entrepreneurship' lessons delivered in school as relevant to such futures. A host of reasons may explain this which the authors relate to Zipin et al.'s (2015) categorization of doxic and habituated aspirations. On one hand, the school curriculum and teachers in particular have not wholeheartedly embraced the new emphasis and continue to encourage the deeply rooted doxa that schooling is preparation for a salaried job. On the other hand, entrepreneurship is taught in abstract ways that do not connect with young people's habituated expectations of daily life, and which draw too sharp a divide between self-employment and salaried jobs in a world where the two are often interdependent means of addressing uncertainty.

The second pair of papers help to explain further why institutional attempts to encourage a new type of aspiration do not succeed. These articles explore how young people adjust their aspirations when faced with challenges, and how they formulate new views of what constitutes a good life, even embracing uncertainty.

Marzi (2021) uses Vigh's (2009) concept of social navigation to explore how young people in low-income urban neighbourhoods of Cartagena, Colombia, navigate their futures. While many of the young people express doxic aspirations towards relatively high-status careers, these aspirations are seldom attainable and certainly cannot be followed in a linear way. Nor are they fixed. Rather, young people shift their aspirations in response both to opportunities that emerge and become available and barriers that cut off particular pathways as they move through life. What remains more fixed are broader aspirations to a 'good life'—having a family, living in harmony, good health, safety, 'quietness' and achieving stability for themselves. Changing occupational aspirations provide a means of navigating an uncertain social environment towards these desired goals. Six years after her original ethnographic fieldwork, Marzi interviewed many of the young people again and only two had achieved the careers they previously said they aspired to (as teachers). The others were nonetheless accomplishing aspects of the good life they had wanted, albeit none had been able to transform their social status.

Johnson and West (2022) worked with marginalised young people in environmentally fragile and politically volatile contexts in Nepal and Ethiopia and illustrate how they too navigate uncertainties by shifting their aspirations. Positioning their research in relation to Bauman's (2007) notion of liquid modernity, they explore how six of the young people in their study responded to uncertainties while also negotiating social norms. Contra Bauman, they found that while creatively navigating challenging and unanticipated circumstances (including, during the research, three states of emergency in Ethiopia and a major earthquake in Nepal), intergenerational expectations continued to shape young people's aspirations. Some did elect to break with family bonds and found alternative peer relationships that could support them as they progressively constructed futures for themselves. For others, however, family relationships enabled them to embrace 'positive uncertainty', shifting their plans in response to the challenges and opportunities posed by post-earthquake reconstruction programmes or opportunities to engage in migration. In some respects, these young people exercised forms of self-motivation and flexibility in relation to changing circumstances that the designers of entrepreneurship education like to imagine, but they did so out of necessity and often at considerable risk of insecurity.

Overall, this collection demonstrates how both institutions and young people themselves respond to increasingly uncertain futures, seeking to impose an element of

control. Institutional efforts to produce flexible creative individuals to a large degree ignore the fact that young people already live their lives in responsive and creative ways out of necessity (see also Jeffrey and Dyson, 2013). The difference is that they promise this can be far more transformative than the evidence suggests is possible.

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