

# 'The whole world is my home': An investigation into how a globalised lifestyle, international capital and an international schooling experience influence the identities and aspirations of young people

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**This** article discusses the findings of a study involving the aspirations of students in an international school in Belgium. Aspirations are framed and formed via the interaction and interrelationship of self and social context. The originality of this work is in its emphasis on students' own perceptions of the influences on their aspirations, within a new geographical arena and the social sub-culture of a fluid, semi-transient international group. The findings will add to our understandings of international schooling and might usefully inform pedagogical practices and programmes of professional development for staff in order to better serve students.



## Introduction

Aspiration has been described as the various desires and ambitions held by young people about their futures (Kintrea, St. Clair and Houston 2011: 12) and from the resources available in four domains: place, school, family and individual. Aspirations are multidimensional in nature; from careers to education to financial, familial and social. Aspirations can also be perceived as an emotional state to be affected; aspiring to become something, aspiration as an emotional disposition, an emotional state that can be affected and an emotional state that affects other emotions (Brown 2011: 9). Aspirations shift from fantasies in early childhood to tentative explorations of personal

interests, abilities and values in adolescence (McDevitt, Hess, Leesatayakun, Sheehan and Kaufield 2013: 532).

Education has long been considered as playing a part in the construction or formation of self and identity (Seery 2010: 63). International schools celebrate the number of nationalities represented in their student body and teaching staff but an examination of the discourse surrounding international school students suggests a primitive portrayal of identity (Pearce 2013: 78). International schools are growing in number and attracting greater interest from researchers (Hayden 2011: 214). This project offers a novel approach to examining the identities of young people attending an international school through their own personal lens.

The context for the study is a fee paying international school in Belgium, where, at the time of writing, there are approximately 800 students enrolled and over 50 nationalities represented. International schools are in many respects a well-kept secret, with many completely unaware of their existence (Hayden and Thompson 2013: 3). Suffice to say that since no international body has the authority to adjudicate on whether or not a school may describe itself as an international school, the 'international school' label has to be interpreted cautiously (Hayden and Thompson 2013: 4). In this connection Bunnell (2006: 156) argues that international schools may not share an underlying educational philosophy. MacKenzie (2009: 330) explains that international schools are hard to define but have common characteristics such as; they are mostly established to meet the needs of expatriate

*'The whole world is my home'...*

communities, they have volunteers on their boards, and the language of instruction is predominantly English. This resonates with Jones (2011: 312) description of international schools as catering to elite professional families who have high aspirations for their children and Hayden's (2011: 211) observation that aspiring middle class parents seek a competitive edge for their children in a globalized market.

## Questions

The study aimed to answer the following question:

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**How do a globalised lifestyle, international capital and an international schooling experience shape the identities and aspirations of young people?**

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The researcher also wished to explore the relationships between first world citizenship privilege, parents, international schooling and globally nomadic experiences and the nature of young people's aspirations.

## A review of the literature on young people's identity and aspirations

### Identity formation and agency

Power dimensions within adult-child relationships are heightened in schools where adults involved hold posts of responsibility and authority in relation to students (Robinson and Taylor 2013: 33). Within this adult dominated power structure of the school it has been argued that students exercise agency in their interpersonal relationships (Larkin 2013: 3). The individual agent is powerful, able to take action and to change social structures (Giddens 1984: 15). Agency has a role to play between external forces and internal motivations and people in positions of influence can affect agency.

A major task of adolescence and emerging adulthood is to forge an identity that consolidates one's beliefs,

values, and goals into a coherent story that can be used as a basis for making life decisions and the transition to adulthood (Yeager and Bundick 2009: 424; Malanchuk, Messersmith and Eccles 2010: 97). The relationship between global mobility and identity is also important here as it could involve a loss of attachment, isolation, anger, and acceptance issues (Grimshaw and Sears 2008: 259).

### The shaping of aspirations

For the purposes of this study, the researcher draws upon the already large amount of work done on aspirations and young people.

Aspirations evolve over time as social and personal circumstances change and will shift considerably throughout an individual's life (Hart 2012: 35; Kintrea et al 2011: 13). At ages 9-13 young people begin to evaluate what is desirable, and realistic, for people like them, and start to think about the effort required for and likelihood of achieving desired outcomes (Rose and Baird 2013: 160). Atherton, Cymbir, Roberts, Page and Remedios (2009: 59) state that educational aspirations remain high as young people become more aware of their capabilities. This is supported by Gutman and Akerman (2008: iii) who claim that in general, children's aspirations decline as they mature and their understanding of the world increases and Ferrante (2009: 559) who recognizes that individuals learn from experience and revise their aspirations.

Parents are seen as the most important others in shaping aspirations as they provide the opportunities and support for their children and are a constant influence on them (Strand and Winston 2008: 250). The impact of parenting style, involvement and goals upon children's educational and career choices is strong and familial participation is needed to achieve a positive educational atmosphere (Garg, Kauppi, Lewko and Urajnik 2002: 88).

### The importance of relationships formed in international schools

Personal relationships have been singled out in classical social theory as fundamental to a secure sense of an agentic self, of a place in the social world, and of basic trust in others (Jamieson and Milne 2012: 268). Every

teacher needs to forge positive relationships with students as teaching is one of the foremost of personal relations (Marsh 2012: 161; Busher 2012: 114; Noddings 2012: 771). Qualities such as care, trust, respect and concern for young people are seen by students as key to helping them learn, take risks and persevere (Busher 2012: 114; Aldridge and Ala'i 2013: 49; Lampert 2012: 364). In facilitating these relationships and positive interactions, schools have an opportunity to create what Cook-Sather (2009: 180) calls a "listening culture"; listening and responding to students in an atmosphere of mutual trust.

As previous research suggests, during early adolescence, young people exhibit increased psychological investment in peers groups and dependence on friends for support (Wentzel, Barry and Caldwell 2004: 196). The unique situation of globally nomadic students means that they share a commonality with others of similar experience and as Pearce (2011: 170) explains, develop skills in repeated loss and reconstruction of friendships. Some of these young people struggle with unresolved grief, feelings of isolation and rootlessness due to their transient lifestyles and have ambivalent feelings regarding home and roots (Bates 2013: 88; Fail, Thompson and Walker 2004: 322). This potentially negative impact of mobility was explored by South and Haynie (2004: 316) who linked the character of friendship networks with highly-mobile students. Transient young people's sense of belonging is stronger to relationships than to a particular country (Fail et al 2004: 321).

## International capital and international schooling

Young people's familial circumstances, mobility, exposure to different cultures and socio-economic background allow them to enter what Bates (2012: 263) would call a 'first world citizenship'. This citizenship gives these young people a unique set of competencies, skills and capitals, termed 'international capital' which allows them to thrive in a global environment (Yemini 2012: 162; Bates 2012: 263). This cosmopolitan capital is accumulated while living abroad, visiting and hosting friends of different nationalities, maintaining a globally dispersed circle of friends and relatives and possessing mastery of at least one other language (Veenink 2008: 1092).

These young people are attending international schools due to their parents' globally mobile lifestyles which take them through a sequence of locations and cultural situations. These children have limited opportunity to choose the type of education they can pursue or the form or location in which it takes place (Hart 2012: 279). Whilst relative affluence gives opportunities for travel, first-hand experience of new locations and people, and relationships with people from a range of different cultural backgrounds, the longer term impact can be more profound on these young people (Nette and Hayden 2007: 435; Grimshaw and Sears 2008: 259).

## Data collection and analysis

The study involved interviewing 10 girls and 10 boys (all aged 13-14) individually, on two occasions. Participants for this study came from the students whom the researcher teaches and were from 16 countries. Taking participants from your own student body is an example of what Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2010: 170) define as 'convenience sampling'.

The participants were instructed to choose images of people, places or situations which they felt affected their identity. The aim was to reveal aspects of the life history of the participants using photo-elicitation. The participants were encouraged to describe the images in their own words, to identify the image and to express the emotional meaning of the image for them (University of Leicester 2012: 68). The researcher used one question to begin the interview: 'Tell me about these photos and why you chose them?' During the second round of interviews, a mix of individualised questions to each participant and a set of semi-structured questions for all of the participants were posed. The following are the questions common to all of the participants in the second interview:

1. Tell me about the people in your life who influence you.
2. What do you think an international school gives you?
3. What do you hope to do after you have left school?
4. Tell me a bit about your life outside school.

*'The whole world is my home'...*

5. What does it mean to be successful to you?
6. Is there anywhere you feel you belong?
7. Do you have anything else you want to share or to add?

## Data analysis

1. The researcher recorded and listened to the interviews then manually transcribed the data, word for word. Participants were then permitted to read the transcribed interviews.
2. The transcriptions were read by the researcher a number of times and key words and phrases highlighted for coding.
3. Themes were drawn from the interview data based on frequency of occurrence of the coded issues.
4. Theory was generated from what was grounded in the data.

## Findings

A rich and large range of testimony emerged in this study. Some findings are listed below with direct quotations from the transcripts added. All of the names mentioned are pseudonyms.

### Theme 1: Global citizenry and privilege

The participants in this study all travel, some extensively. This cosmopolitan capital is accumulated while living abroad, visiting and hosting friends of different nationalities, maintaining a globally dispersed circle of friends and relatives and possessing mastery of at least one other language (Veenink 2008: 1092).

Anya: ...we travel to a bunch of different places...so the car is kinda like my mobile home ...I feel like the whole world is my home...

Gabby: ...my favourite thing is probably the travel...like if I hadn't moved to Belgium I wouldn't have met these people and like there's no way I would have been skiing on my 13th birthday in Italy...

### Theme 2: The influence of family

Advice from adults is especially important for younger students and parents loom large in their lives as guardians of their children's learning (McDevitt et al 2013: 544; Wainwright and Marandet 2011: 97). The participants in this study perceive that parents and family have a significant impact on them. This supports the work of Kintrea et al (2011), Strand and Winston (2008), Garg et al (2002) and Cuiting and Kerpelman (2007).

Anya: ...I have a really big bond with my parents cos I know that I can always trust them and tell them about like mostly everything...

Allie: ...still sometimes it's good because on my mum's side...I don't keep secrets from her and yeah, so my mum's like, she's like the best mum ever. She means so much to me.

### Theme 3: Relationships

All teenagers worry, and the thing that worries them most is their relationship with other people (Bainbridge 2009: 216). Relationships with friends, both past and present were important to the participants in this study.

Allie: ...they (friends) mean a lot to me because we shared a lot of things together and I mean nine years is really long...when I came to St. John's it was really hard to separate myself from them...

Osawa: ...then in 2005 we moved to Belgium and it was very sad because I had to separate with my best friends...

### Theme 4: Appreciation

These global nomads have spent time in a variety of locations, changing home and friendships, sometimes regularly and having little geographical notion of 'home' (Hayden 2011: 220). Despite having to leave friends and family behind, participants viewed their nomadic but privileged circumstances with optimism; seeing the opportunities this global lifestyle affords them.

Gabby: ...mostly excited about the language, the aspects of travel and the culture so there are a lot of really great new experiences here...

Minty: ...being an international person I feel like I need a home of the whole world and not have one country and support one football team, I just decided I am for everybody...

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## Theme 5: Country of origin

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The participants shared their feelings of pride and identification with their birth countries and the traditions each respective country enjoys.

Doreen: I really love Norway because so I chose some pictures from the national day, which is the 17th of May and we did that every year and have so many memories with our family and friends...

Jaap: ...this is a picture of my grandma reading a story to us (new) because we have to keep up our Dutch language so she is reading a book in Dutch...

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## Theme 6: High hopes

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The participants hold high educational and career aspirations. In response to the interview question 'What do you hope to do after you have left school?', they responded with the following:

Minty: when I was small I wanted to be a farmer and then I wanted to be an astronaut, like all the dreams, but now I really want to do global warming because it is a problem that is happening

Karl: I would like to be a pilot...

Gabby: ...after I have left school I think I would like to go into politics...I think that's something that coming from an international school could help me with...

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## Theme 7: Other belongings

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Teenagers have to develop an ability to deal with themselves, their world and other people (Bainbridge 2009: 185). Some participants defined where they

belonged as wherever their family or friends are present. This is in keeping with Probyn's idea that belonging captures the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places or modes of being; a sense of connection (Probyn 1996: 19). In response to the interview question 'Is there anywhere you feel you belong?', two participants offered the following responses:

Jaap: ...where people care about you, about me, and who enjoy me for who I am.

Osawa: ...pretty much where there is friends, anywhere there is friends.

## Conclusions

The young people in this study are quite aware of the world around them, have a broad world view and see the benefits a global lifestyle can offer them. Their experience of living in a world of privilege does not limit their ability to see themselves as 'Other'. The participants are aware of their position in society and appreciate their unique circumstances.

They show attachment and appreciation of their countries of birth and friends still living there, as exhibited in the photo-elicitation interviews. The participants see their country of birth as something important to them and part of their identity. They also have what Bates (2012: 263) would call 'multiple citizenships', which are the result of their parents' high level qualifications, giving them access to privileged 'first world citizenship'.

It has been argued that education must raise the quality of a person's life and essential to this are the basic moral feelings of love, trust and thankfulness (Wilkinson and Wilkinson 2013: 108). Although they experience frequent loss of close friends, these young people look forward to meeting new friends and develop strong skills of adaptability and acceptance and being comfortable in many different situations as a result. This resonates with the work of MacMurray (2012) and Pearce (2011) and their work on human relationships and friendships. This recognition that trusting relationships in schools are beneficial means that a caring and supportive school atmosphere can help students who experience these transient lifestyles.



'The whole world is my home'...

The participants in this study are the children of the resourceful and well-resourced (Ball 2013: 112) and speak in an agentic way about their futures. They appear to be confident, optimistic and positive as they express a significant gratitude to their families for affording them the international capital they possess. Their future self-perception is one of expected fulfilment of their goals.

Accepting that the young person's own perception is the young person's reality enforces acceptance and respect for the young person. The participants expressed appreciation over being given the opportunity to talk about their lives in this study. Children in international schools have not been given a voice in a project such as this, which attends to their feelings and insights into the factors that influence their aspirations. This material will not only help these students reflect upon their current and future selves, but will also help those in international schools better understand and serve their students. Furthermore, where international displacements put young people in social environments for which their upbringing did not prepare them, or where they feel a unique pressure to fit in, those who work closely with them can help those young people adjust and cope (Lee and Kramer 2013: 19).

Today's international school students may become the diplomats of tomorrow brokering peace through their ability to empathise and interact with those of different cultural backgrounds (Hayden 2011: 221). This study allowed for young people to relate and share their life histories, and if more of this was encouraged in international schools, a more accepting atmosphere and thereby a more peaceful world, could be created. International schools have a social and educational responsibility to do so. In addition, so much learning for these young people takes place outside the classroom and is not recognised (MacDonald 2013: 52). If we take students' life experiences into account, and well as their global competencies, we can then find new ways of helping them to be part of the solutions to the world's problems.

In order to better serve and empower their students, international school staff have an opportunity to improve upon the practice of listening to and working with this unique group of first world citizens. Research

in this area can also provide an opportunity for current international school students to examine their own lives and aid educators in the development of more effective ways of understanding the lives of young people.



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