Aspirational Ambivalence and the Imagined Futures of Middle-Class Secondary Students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The rise of malaise, cynicism and disenfranchisement amongst youth has been a widely debated discourse in recent times, especially within the Hong Kong context given recent student protests. In understanding how this collective expression of protest has arisen, this doctoral thesis examines the lives of Hong Kong secondary students, and how their lived experiences influence their perceptions and dispositions of their futures, and their relations to further education and employment. Specifically, the research explores students’ understandings of their schooling experiences in English Medium of Instruction schools in Hong Kong and the broader relational impacts of globalisation, neoliberalism, nationalistic and local identities, middle class familial upbringing, and the nature of English in Hong Kong. The research draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice, together with Arjun Appadurai’s notions of the ‘capacity to aspire’, and Charles Taylor’s concept of ‘social imaginary’, to help make sense of students’ mediations and aspirations for the future. Bourdieu’s relational thinking and his epistemological reflexivity, coupled with the identification of Taylor’s ‘modern social imaginary’ as expressed in the Hong Kong context, and Appadurai’s notion of cultural capacity, informed the methodological approach. The collection of data involved observations and interviews with members of six focus groups across three distinctively situated schools in Hong Kong, together with compilation of publicly available documents produced by these schools. Incorporation of autoethnographic experiences helped to further contextualise the analysis. Analytically, the research shows how aspirational dispositions and logics formed by specific configurations of the broader cultural and social milieu of Hong Kong, middle class familial practices, non-elite EMI schooling experiences, and the place of English in Hong Kong, were complicit - in complex and nuanced ways – in fostering disjunctive dynamics, engendering a sense of ambivalence towards the future for these students. The research is significant because it reveals how aspirational ambivalence has become a dominant logic amongst these students, and arguably contributes to a sense of malaise and collective disillusionment amongst many of Hong Kong’s youth.
Declaration by Author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

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Publications during candidature

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Keywords:
Bourdieu, capacity to aspire, social imaginary, ambivalent aspirations, globalisation, Hong Kong, English as capital, secondary students

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<tr>
<td>EBD</td>
<td>Education Bureau Department (of Hong Kong)</td>
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<tr>
<td>EMI</td>
<td>English Medium of Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMI</td>
<td>Chinese Medium of Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>GNP</td>
<td>Gross National Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>HKDSE</td>
<td>Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>HKSAR</td>
<td>Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOI</td>
<td>Medium of Instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEET</td>
<td>Not in Education, Employment, or Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>New Senior Secondary (Curriculum)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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1. Introduction: Origins of Aspirations

1.1. Personal Narrative

Most primary school students should be acquainted with the genealogic assignment of charting the family tree as an almost ritualistic experience in developing students’ understanding of position and origin. Though a nostalgic memory, drawing the family tree has always kindled a curiosity in me to understand the conditions which spurred close family and distant relatives to make the choices they did in relation to education, career and mobility. Especially considering how my Taiwanese grandparents from both paternal and maternal sides originated from working class backgrounds but rose to the middle class, it was fascinating to observe the diversity of aspirational dispositions and social positions amongst family relations. For instance, I wonder why my cousins Hsin-I and Cheng-En are globally and comfortably mobile and actively exploring discursive experiences, while the majority of my cousins follow closely in parental professions, and some are still very much situated in exploratory states, for periods longer than what is tacitly deemed socially acceptable. And why the majority of my cousins that migrated to Australia ended up as medical practitioners, whilst none of those that stayed in Taiwan accomplished this aspirational feat.

Whilst my father perpetuated the traditional family trade out of duty, familiarity and necessity, both my parents had ideas of raising me and my siblings in a less competitive environment than that of Taiwan, and imagining a ‘better’ life for themselves and the next generation. Motivated by these notions, my parents gave up a successful bakery business in Taiwan and applied under skilled migration initially to the United States where my mother had an aunt; but after rejection, the family was serendipitously accepted into Australia. At night, my father attended English classes for a few months before our departure in order to prepare for the journey ahead.

Life in those early years was awkward for me and my family after our arrival into Brisbane, especially the initial periods residing at the Yungaba Immigration Centre. It was a time when my parents were trying to figure out what to do, especially with their limited local networks
and linguistic skills. Our familiar comfort was trekking across the nearby Storey Bridge to Chinatown to pick up Asian groceries. I remember eating instant noodles every night for the first month until I innocently asked, “Why do we eat instant noodles everyday?” - to which my mum broke down in tears. Subsequently, with the assistance of other members of the ethnic Chinese diaspora living in Brisbane, my parents were able to rent a house, form social circles, and enrolled us into a local primary school where we were given English names under the advice of the principal. Schooling was mostly carefree, but being a minority ethnic Chinese in a largely Anglo-Celtic schooling population was the subject of curiosity and misunderstanding, although this gradually improved as Australia developed multiculturally, and immigrant school children became more commonplace. The journey of learning English for and at school, and the struggle of English within social interactions was a mixture of frustration, anxiety and sometimes hope, especially without the family environment that supported English socialisation. Being included into English as Second Language (ESL) programs felt like a point of humiliation, particularly when my English improved but I was still grouped with students who had just arrived from other non-English speaking countries. There was a feeling of being treated as second-class students by the teachers and other students. On the other side, there was an expectation to learn the Chinese Mandarin language, of which I was a miserable student, and did not come to embrace until later in working life. The Chinese language was a constant reminder of my shortfall, a part of a world that I was denied access to growing up. At various moments I was confronted to write or read, and felt an acute embarrassment from ‘being found out’ that drove me to avoidance of future encounters. There was the oscillating struggle to reconcile hybrid identities, polarised by the familial expectation to cling onto my ethnicity as Taiwanese Chinese, against the desire to conform to a dominant ‘white’ Anglo-Celtic Australia, in language, attitude and disposition. An aspiration to assimilate was encouraged through mediated images and discourses of the Australian ‘way of life’ while growing up, but also pointedly to further reduce schooling experiences of racial vilification, social exclusion and at times, teachers’ denials. One frustrating incident was when a teacher assessing a creative piece of literature I had written doubted its originality, and subsequently marked it as a low pass, implying from my ethnicity that I could not have written the work. Afterwards, I was interrogated by my English teacher on the definition of vocabularies I had used, and in not convincing him still, my barely passable grade for the assignment remained unchanged. Ironically, this failure motivated me to achieve top marks in my English class grades in subsequent years, despite the overwhelming feeling that this learning and achievement was artificial because my practical
applications of English did not improve. This was particularly apparent when I started my career within commercial banking, where specific forms of social communication, which I lacked, were essential for gaining recognition and promotion. In essence, there was a ceaseless adjustment of my relations to both the Chinese and English languages, but generally a prevailing inability to feel the sense of assuredness and comfort towards either language.

However, growing up, my parents bestowed rich imageries of success rooted in educational achievement, including narratives of the success of relatives and friends in relation to tertiary degrees and professional careers. My parents emphasised the importance of academic grades, and employed after-school tutors to assist us with school work, even though I doubted its effectiveness and rationalised that I was simply wasting my parents’ money. The emphasis on education was carried across in the heavy financial burden that my parents chose to shoulder by investing in ‘elite’ private education for all three children. Nonetheless, I felt a high degree of uncertainty towards the end of my secondary schooling about my tertiary studies because there was no detailed discussion with my parents, probably because they did not have experiences with university life. However, the idea of attending university was taken-for-granted, grounded in a common understanding amongst the family and within the local network of the ethnic Taiwanese Chinese community. Furthermore, despite the insistence of my father to pursue a medical degree at the University of Newcastle (Australia), and even forcing me to complete an application form, the attachment to home and the thought of ‘borrowing’ from my parents’ finances made me aim for a local tertiary institution instead. Consequently, I felt this emphasis on education has helped me and also my siblings to voluntarily seek out continuous learning experiences, and especially in relation to considering doctoral research within humanities and social sciences as a viable option. Concomitantly, I imagined that perhaps if I had grown up in a competitive, exam-oriented educational environment such as Taiwan, instead of the relatively carefree milieu of Australia, my sense of orientation and limitation would have been distinctively different. In hindsight, the inheritance from historical experiences and conditions have helped to constitute what Huppatz (2010) called a ‘core of continuity’, which has helped to shape the construction of aspirational possibilities and the choices I have made.

The purpose of sharing this autoethnographic/biographical narrative is as an anecdotal tale about how the imbricating influence of domestic relations, schooling experiences, struggle and dominance over languages, ambivalent identities, and the broader milieu, framed my personal sense of limitation and future opportunities. The frictions from contesting multiple
cultures, loyalties, linguistic expectations and opportunities were similar to the circumstances and experiences of my student participants in the research reported here. There were as well similarities in how they inferred, mediated and reacted, despite the differences in the contextual space. My personal narrative not only situates the origins of my dissertation, but is also intended as a statement of my positionality, marking out the perspective and structure that later discussions shall pursue. In providing this anecdote and outlining my positionality, I am acknowledging, following Bourdieu (1999c), that there is no such thing as ‘epistemological innocence’ in any research, and that the position of the researcher intrinsically influences the research and the researched.

In the next section, I shall demarcate the aims and location of my research study, and briefly chart an overview of the conceptual frameworks and tools employed. Afterwards, I will follow with a contextual introduction to the history, contemporary society and educational system of my research milieu.

1.2. Orientation of Research

The research for this doctorate seeks to excavate how the postcolonial Hong Kong milieu, specifically the interplay between complex forces and discourses of globalisation, neoliberalism, nationalistic and local identities, and familial and schooling relations, constitute the aspirational practices of senior secondary school students studying in non-elite English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) public schools. In particular, I focus on examining how the students mediate and interpret these experiences and discourses. Specifically, the research focuses on how the linguistic relations resulting from English as an official language are imbricated and embedded within this arrangement. This involved Hong Kong students within senior Forms Five and Six (equivalent to Grades 11 and 12 in the Australian context) across three non-elite EMI secondary schools, who were about to transition from secondary schooling into the next stage of their lives. The study aims at providing insights into how students interpreted and mediated these broader and immediate influences in their conception, rejection, perpetuation of, or ambivalence towards aspirational possibilities, rather than attempting to identify or predict specific aspirational outcomes.
In setting out to explore this question, the research draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977b, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) theory of practice and relational approach to make sense of, analyse and reconcile how complex interactional forces were internalised within these students, and that gave rise to the conditions for conscious aspirational negotiation. To better understand students’ aspirations and imagined futures, Bourdieu’s theoretical framework is augmented with Charles Taylor’s (2004) conception of social imaginaries, and with Arjun Appadurai’s (2004) notion of the capacity to aspire in order to encapsulate the collective, normative aspects that undergirded these students’ aspirations. Bourdieu’s relational thinking and epistemological reflexivity are the centrepieces of the methodological approach, complemented by Taylor’s imagination-based approach, and Appadurai’s conception of cultural capacity as the basis for negotiating futurity. The primary instruments for data collection comprise a combination of semi-structured focus group interviews, observations, autoethnographic experiences linked to residing in Hong Kong, and the compilation of schooling policy documents. Based on the data, the thesis focuses on how aspirational dispositions formed durably by middle class familial upbringing conflict with the broader social context and schooling experiences, and how the place of English in Hong Kong is complicit in this conflictual dynamic. The importance of this proposed study is explained in the next section, including concern with how the described aims address an escalating social problem in Hong Kong, and perhaps globally.

On the basis of data analysis, this thesis argues that aspirational ambivalence has become a dominant logic amongst middle class students studying in Hong Kong’s non-elite EMI secondary schools. Discussion and analysis attempts to tell an unfolding story about how aspirational ambivalence was the product of a particular disposition constituted and interacting dynamically through relations with the values of the broader fields of power, familial, language and schooling relations.
1.3. Significance of the Study

Aspiration is a hope or ambition of achieving something. Hart (2013) referred to aspirations as both goal-oriented and concerned with the future of the self or the agency of the self in relation to goals concerning others. Aspirations can be regarded as an act of doing or being, and therefore regarded as an active endeavour that can be undertaken through abstract thinking and developed through verbal, written or other forms of creative and physical expression, but also emergent in more incipient and preverbal processes. Earlier definitions of aspiration restricted aspirations to capacities to make calculated strategic choices. For example, Reay, Ball, David, and Davies (2002) argue that aspirations are complex understandings of the future pathways available to people. Students can access these pathways if they are provided with knowledge and experiences that enable them to make powerful choices (Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000), or take risks discovering for themselves what lies ahead. This capacity is influenced by past experiences of navigating, thinking, and understanding to foster these capabilities (p. 59). Instead of being an individual psychological trait, Appadurai (2004) frames aspiration as a cultural category, and thereby suggests it is contextually grounded in class, family, education etc. Aspirations therefore emerge from a wider inter-subjective and social frame of reference. Aspirations are also affective orientations towards the future (Brown, 2011), particularly in the framing of the ‘good life’, and this affective orientation can be both explicitly express-able and/or less verbalised apprehensions of desire, anxiety, enthusiasm etc.

Broadly speaking, as Archer et al. (2013) argue, the study of aspirations amongst students is important for three key reasons. Firstly, aspirations may form a probabilistic expectation of students’ future educational and occupational trajectory. Secondly, as outlined earlier, aspirations seem to form the focus of educational policy in trying to raise aspirations of socioeconomically disadvantaged students in order to ‘reengage’ with education and vocations. And thirdly, aspirations are ‘of sociological interest – as socially indicative, socially constructed phenomena that provide a means for examining the interplay between agency and social structures within young people’s lives’ (p. 59). As such, Archer and colleagues (2013) emphasise how aspirations contribute to part of the continual social
reproduction of privilege and disadvantage, instead of as a tool for social change and mobility within educational policy discourse.

The research presented is important as it is one of the very few studies investigating how Hong Kong students constitute future aspirations, especially from a critical sociological standpoint. Methodologically, very few studies within Hong Kong have focused on exploring how youths mediate aspirations, and those which are available often use scientific models, behavioural theories and dichotomous constructions with the false belief of mistaking ‘the things of logic with the logic of things’ (Bourdieu, 1991); that is, confusing the theory inferred through \textit{a priori} assumptions, and passing these off as theories derived from social practice.

In terms of local policy discourse, students’ aspirations are pivotal, given the Hong Kong government’s annual policy address specifically concentrates on the need to create opportunities for youth, and paints the territory as an ideal place to foster youth aspirations and talents, emphasising:

\begin{quote}
\ldots a culture of multi-faceted excellence [that] helps nurture young people through education, employment and whole-person development [through] providing diversified learning, training and development, opportunities that match their abilities, aspirations and education levels. Young people should develop a positive approach to life and a sense of social awareness. They should take an interest in the development of Hong Kong and our country and cultivate an international vision. They should attach importance to both individual rights and social obligations (HKSAR Government, 2014a, p. 30).
\end{quote}

The territory’s government further noted the need to pay attention ‘to the children and youths of these [disadvantaged] families. Offering them appropriate support [to] promote upward mobility and break the vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty’ (p. 15). Critically however, there is a dominant economic stance within policy, whereby the prioritisation of economic growth is regarded as the solution to social problems:

\begin{quote}
Hong Kong needs sustained economic growth to address issues such as poverty, housing, an ageing society, environmental protection and the upward mobility of our young people (p. 3).
\end{quote}
Policy initiatives have been framed around an economic rationale, investing funding to create more opportunities, such as increasing local tertiary placements quotas, introduction of Mainland University Study Subsidy Schemes encouraging studying within mainland China, and offering more scholarships for top performing students. These policies seemingly fail to appreciate and address the underlying socioeconomic dynamics and social-structural challenges, which play a crucial role in the shaping of youth aspirational dispositions. The policies are likely to exacerbate these challenges by assuming the imperative of economic growth and ‘rational’ choice initiatives as the solution and way forward, instead of investigating it as part of the problem. Moreover, these policies create an ‘opportunity trap’, where increased educational credentials heighten the competitiveness for jobs, within a globalised knowledge-based economy, where outsourcing to lower wage labour markets is a reality, provoking further senses of insecurity (Brown, 2006). During the period that I researched and wrote this thesis, Hong Kong witnessed unprecedented civil unrest, especially demands for universal suffrage, which the media have generally attributed to the growing inequality due to disparities in income levels. As Nussbaum (2000) critiqued:

The most prominent approach to quality of life assessment used to be simply to ask about GNP per capita, treating the maximization of this figure as the most appropriate social goal and basis for cross-cultural comparison. It has by now become obvious that this approach is not very illuminating, because it does not even ask about the distribution of wealth and income, and countries with similar aggregate figures can exhibit great distributional variations (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 60).

In the last publication of the Gini Coefficient Index¹ for Hong Kong in 2011, the score was 53.7 (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2011), compared to Australia at 30.3 (2008) and higher than Hong Kong’s neighbouring developed economies, with Taiwan at 34.2 (2011), South Korea at 31.1 (2011), and Japan at 37.6 (2008) (United States Central Intelligence Agency, 2011; World Bank, 2008). In defence, the Hong Kong government justified through its economic report that income disparities were a long-term trend, and brought about by demographic changes. However, this economic rationalisation does not help to alleviate the sense of real struggle felt by working and middle class people in their lived experiences,

¹ A measure of the distribution of income or consumption expenditure among individuals or households within an economy that deviates from a perfectly equal distribution, with 0 being perfect equality and 100 being perfect inequality.
especially common perceptions that problems like property prices, cost of living, education and economic cartels have not been satisfactorily addressed by the government. Hong Kong’s trending inequality is illustrative of Picketty’s (2014) description of the constitution of patrimonial capitalism and the oligarchy class, which he argues contributes to the erosion of the democratic order and growing inequality.

The symptoms of this erosion can be seen in the overwhelming number of Hong Kong students involved in the recent ‘occupying’ protests, which attests to disenfranchisement, resistance and weaker attachment to the dominant cultural norms and values, but also points to an aspiration of the youth to (re)imagine and contest for a better future. This challenge is acknowledged by a paper commissioned by the Hong Kong Government Central Policy Unit, that applied the term Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) in describing disengaged youth aged 15-24 who were neither in education, employment, or training, with most recent statistics in 2010 estimating non-engaged youth at 7% of the youth population, or approximately 58,300 youths (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2012). The study of these non-engaged youths showed how most young people disagreed with the statement that ‘Hong Kong is a fair and just society’. The malaise amongst Hong Kong’s youth is apparent from my experiences in working life, through observations of a lower engagement, high job mobility, and a ready willingness to break commitments, for example the cancellation of interviews without prior notice, or simply not turning up to work. Whilst there is a general attitude pointing to how the youth have been ‘spoilt’, I believe instead this is the symptom of an aspirational ‘fallout’ by the youth, from an education system and the associated imagination of education that are gradually failing to inspire the majority.

Relatedly, as Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, and Gale (2013) declared:

> Our theorisation carries the view that structural conditions and relations of current times are those of a *darkly troubled historical era* - likely to be prolonged - in which young people in power-marginalised contexts face uncertain and downwardly mobile prospects for livelihood (p. 15).

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2 In September 2014, Hong Kong witnessed an unprecedentedly large number of protests over the decision by the China’s Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress to disallow civil nominations for electoral candidates to the Chief Executive position before general public voting. This resulted in mass civil disobedience and sit-in protests, and roused Hong Kong’s youth population to political activism – a demographic which was previously considered apolitical.
Therefore, there is urgency in understanding how context constitutes youth aspirations, supported by the voices of students. Educational research on social justice has primarily and appropriately focused on the plight of socioeconomically underprivileged working class students. But I believe there is also a need to illuminate a surreptitious influence besieging middle class students and those from families oscillating between the middle and lower classes that has potential to further polarise and fracture social cohesion, as witnessed by the recent ‘occupying’ protests in Hong Kong. I hope the study can contribute to accelerating the momentum for the re-imagination of future educational policy, by giving recognition to more inclusive and plural forms of social intervention that attempt to reverse or minimise the cycle of social reproduction that has, and will continue to exacerbate further inequality and social unrest. Thus, gaining an appreciation of the Hong Kong milieu that shape these students’ aspirations is a critical first step, with the following section dedicated to this.

1.4. Hong Kong's Milieu

This section begins with an introduction to Hong Kong’s history and society, and a brief description of its educational system. Given the educational system’s status as a postcolonial legacy, the English language features saliently within the lives of these students studying in EMI schools. Subsequently, an illumination of the history of English education and the nature of the English language follows, to provide an appropriate perspective in order to contextualise the educational and social practices embedded within the Hong Kong milieu.

1.4.1. History and Society

Hong Kong is positioned next to the south-eastern Pearl River Delta region of China, consisting of three main territories: Hong Kong Island, Kowloon Peninsula, and the New Territories. Historically, only Hong Kong Island was initially ceded to the British Commonwealth in 1842 following Imperial China’s defeat in the Opium War triggered by China’s confiscation and destruction of opium brought into the country by British merchants. A subsequent war resulted in China further ceding half of Kowloon Peninsula and leasing the
other half, including regions of the New Territories from 1898 for a term of 99 years, which was reinforced by an agreement with the Chinese Communist Government following its victory in the civil war in 1949. Under British colonial administration, and the political campaigns and power struggles within mainland China in the subsequent decades which restricted transborder mobility and induced the severing of cultural roots, Hong Kong developed an arguably unique identity distinctive from mainland China (Fung, 2004). In June 1997, under the Sino-British Joint Declaration signed in 1984 by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the United Kingdom, Hong Kong was handed back to Chinese sovereignty and renamed as Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China (HKSAR), falling under the ‘one country, two systems’ principle. The principle separated Hong Kong’s political system from that of mainland China, allowing Hong Kong to operate under a Westminster common law judicial framework and guaranteeing individual liberties. This right was constituted under a document called the Basic Law, which allowed political autonomy through HKSAR Legislative Council, except in areas of foreign relations, military defence and interpretation by the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of China. The legislative council consists of 60 Members, 30 from functional constituencies, 20 through direct elections in geographical constituencies, and 10 elected by the Election Committee constituency. Functional constituencies grants special interest groups within industries and community sectors, through individual and organisational voting, the means to elect representatives.

Demographically, 95% of the Hong Kong population are of ethnic Han Chinese descent, with the majority deriving from the southern Chinese province of Guangdong (Bolton & Kwok, 1990). Given this heritage, the cultural discourses of Confucianism have real salience by emphasising education as a tool for social transformation (Lee, 1996), with the consequential adoption of a pragmatic or utilitarian approach to learning by students (Bai, 2006). Hong Kong has a population of over seven million people, with an average life-expectancy of 83 years, one of the highest in the world. Per capita income in 2010 was $US32,900 per annum (World Bank, 2011), and population density is one of the highest in the world at 12.8 square meters per person. Given the poor affordability of private housing, public housing constituted 45.8% of all residential housing arrangements as of 2013, composed of 29.3% in public rental housing and 16.5% in subsidised public home ownership schemes (Hong Kong Housing Authority, 2014).
Hong Kong has the seventh largest stock exchange in the world as of September 2014, with market capitalisation of US$2.6 trillion (Hong Kong Exchange and Clearing, 2014), and is a major centre for international trade and finance. Economically, Hong Kong is considered as a service economy with low taxation, labour freedom, efficient regulatory frameworks and free trade, ranked freest in the world by the Index for Economic Freedom, despite recent concerns about higher levels of perceived corruption and undermined public trust (The Heritage Foundation, 2015). As such, the population is described by Sing (2009) as characterised by a deep desire for materialistic attainment; however, the income gap is the highest in the Asia-Pacific with a Gini coefficient of 53.7 measured on gross income, and 47.5 post-tax and post social transfers (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2011).

1.4.2. Education System

Hong Kong’s formal education system was established during the British colonial government, to educate local Chinese pupils. Whilst these earlier efforts focused on educating a Chinese elite, with the construction of high-quality and standardized schools, influxes of civil war ‘refugees’ from mainland China and the soaring birth-rates post-World War Two required the colonial government to transform the education system to cater for the masses (Chung & Ngan, 2002). Statistics showed the population of the territory rocketed from 1.9 million people in 1950 to 6.4 million by the time of handover in 1997 (Mitchell, 2007), equating to roughly an increase of one million people per decade.

Present day Hong Kong schools are split into various types, which include government and subsidised comprehensive schools, subsidised English foundation schools, and private schools under direct subsidy schemes, and regular private, and international schools. The current school format in Hong Kong is made up of nine years of funded compulsory schooling consisting of six years primary education and three years secondary education, referred to as Secondary One to Three. Attendance in the compulsory years for government schools is free, entailing a broad curriculum, and does not require students to choose subjects. These compulsory years are preceded by three years of voluntary kindergarten and succeeded by three years of voluntary senior secondary schooling called Secondary Four to Six; secondary schooling is then followed by vocational or tertiary education. Allocation to secondary schooling was based on results from primary school, which are used to place
students into three bands, with Band One representing the highest academic group. Schooling admittance policy therefore accepts students based on banding, with students in Band One provided the widest choice. Since 2008/2009, public secondary schooling has been made free of charge to encourage students to complete the final three years; however, a government subsidy is also provided for full-time vocational courses available to Secondary Three school leavers. With the implementation of the New Academic Structure for Senior Secondary Education, also called the New Senior Secondary (NSS) Curriculum in 2009, students are required to study four compulsory core subjects of English Language, Chinese Language, Liberal Studies and Mathematics, with two or three electives from a list of 20 subjects, including foreign language and applied learning subjects. Prior to this, the educational system was modeled after the UK system established after the 1944 Education Act, with students electing or assigned streams before commencement of secondary schooling.

The stipulated policy goals of secondary schooling by the Education Bureau of Hong Kong (2015) emphasises the provision of a diverse and balanced education, catered towards different individual needs, and building knowledge, values and skills for further studies and personal growth. Included is also the importance of enhancing students' biliterate and trilingual abilities, and the improvement of learning and teaching environments. At the end of secondary schooling, students complete only one public examination under the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) assessment. Results from school-based assessments also contribute to approximately 20% of the final diploma score. Based on the final results, students could gain entry into post-secondary, vocational or tertiary studies. Exposure to a ranking system with heavy emphasis on competition to enter certain educational establishments and vocations has facilitated a parallel market of private tutoring and cram schools alongside regular education. Burton (2010) suggested this competitive pressure has been a problem for teachers, who have to work to the demands of policymakers who frame educational goals as subordinated to the economic competitiveness of Hong Kong in global markets. Hong Kong however, ranks highly on PISA tests, standing third in mathematics and second in reading and science amongst 65 countries, despite persistent discrepancies across socioeconomic representations (Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013a). With respect to Hong Kong public education’s role in fostering identity, Vickers (2003) criticised the failure of the educational curriculum, specifically history education, in the construction of an appropriate sense of identity, partly from the emphasis on rote-learning and memorization rather than critical analysis. Moreover, many Hong Kong professionals,
including teachers, hold foreign passports gained from Australia, Canada, Singapore, UK and the USA as a safety net prior to Hong Kong’s transition back to China, further exacerbating problems with identity and potentially the messages they transmit to their students (Law, 2004).

1.4.3. English Education

From the period of British colonial rule in 1842 under the Treaty of Nanking until the first decade of the twentieth century, English language education in Hong Kong was an exclusive institution available only to British residents and upper class Chinese citizens, and offered mostly by foreign missionaries. English education was viewed by the early colonised Chinese as an alternative to the Chinese Imperial Civil Service Examinations, and therefore as another vehicle for social and economic mobility (Sweeting & Vickers, 2007). Early attempts by the government to impose English education were cited on moral grounds of ‘improving’ the natives and the moral right of education to both men and women. Nonetheless, the European colonial education policy mindset underlying this, beyond educating the ‘masses’, was to control the population by establishing local elites to serve in the administration of the colonial government. This was achieved by making available a restricted number of prestigious secondary school and university places (Burton, 2010). The administration of Governor Lugard from 1907-1912 established the University of Hong Kong as an English institution with powers to confer tertiary credentials, which resulted in increased demand for English-medium secondary education. Hence early governors like Hennessy stressed the importance of establishing an English-speaking community of Chinese in Hong Kong to improve communication between the government and the community. Ironically, Smith (2005) noted historical accounts of the complexities and reluctance of providing English education in furthering the ‘colonial enterprise’ to women, due to the attractiveness of Chinese girls with an English education to the males in the European community.

While English education was the focus of the colonial government, vernacular education was left to ‘voluntary or private efforts’ (Ng, 1984, p. 69), and received inconsequential financial support and minimal monitoring of instructional activities. Chinese vernacular schools were therefore marginalised and consigned as non-legitimatised institutions (Wong, 2002). This marginalisation was deepened by the refusal of the colonial government to recognise
credentials from local Chinese secondary schools for higher education and government employment. The growth of Chinese nationalism in the wake of the 1911 Revolution in mainland China presented challenges of social unrest and anti-British sentiment, and led to the imposition of government regulation on Chinese vernacular schools. In 1927, Governor Clementi appealed to the vernacular curriculum to re-emphasise Confucian social hierarchy and ‘cultural traditions of the native people to help safeguard foreign rule against the growth of nationalistic feelings among the younger generation’ (Luk, 1991, p. 660). These measures ensured the political legitimacy and stability of the colony.

The post-war decline of Britain as a world power, and the growing unrest in the territory largely composed of monoracial ethnic Chinese residents, exerted pressures on the political legitimacy of the colonial government. Wong (2002) described the hegemonic approach by the government to resolve this crisis by incorporating the Chinese schools under its governance and closer supervision (Pennycook, 1998). The legitimacy of EMI schooling was further challenged when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 1953) published findings that teaching and learning in the vernacular language were more effective than teaching in English, which was predominantly regarded as a foreign language during the colonial era (Bacon-Shone & Bolton, 1998). As such, the government gave schools the authority to decide whether to use Cantonese Chinese or English as their Medium of Instruction (MOI). There were also several attempts by the government between 1946 and 1973 to switch language of instruction in secondary school to Chinese, and attempts in the 1980s and 1990s to encourage students to study Chinese. However, the colonial government was reluctant to restrict access to English as MOI, anticipating resistance and unrest from local parents. Consequently, the adoption rate of English within secondary schools rose from 57.9% in 1960 to 91.7% in 1990 (Lee, 1997). There were several political and economic reasons for the above. Isolationism by China from the early 1950s to late 1970s severely limited the opportunities of secondary school graduates to access traditional avenues of higher education and employment. Moreover, Hong Kong’s rapid economic development within a globalising world provided opportunities for socioeconomic advancement, and the means to achieve this through higher education, civil service and white-collar employment stressed the importance of English (Green & Evans, 2003). This was further complicated by the decline of British colonial power, which weakened the authority of the colonial government’s mandate in Hong Kong to enforce unpopular policy. In 1997, the British colonial lease over Hong Kong expired and political control of the territory was handed back
to the government of the PRC. Shortly afterwards, the postcolonial government implemented a firm guidance policy to reform the MOI in 223 local public secondary schools from English to Cantonese Chinese (the local dialect), increasing the number of schools using the local dialect from 70 to just under 300. The reforms were guided by extensive research showing the pedagogic benefits of employing local dialect in teaching, (Kwok, 1998) with agreement of the pedagogic effectiveness of mother-tongue instruction by teachers, parents and students. Additionally, the policy was guided by research based on the framework of Common Underlying Language Proficiency (Cummins & Swain, 1986), advocating that proficient learners of mother-tongue language (Cantonese Chinese) were better at learning a second language. The Hong Kong Education Commission also found the capabilities of many existing EMI schools as insufficient in properly educating students through English. In an effort to improve standards, policy mandated the qualification of teachers in English proficiency, accountability of schools in monitoring students’ suitability to learn in English, and adequate resources to support students in learning English. This included total immersion in an English environment, meaning the use of English in all curricula (except the subject of Chinese) – with which schools and teachers found it difficult to comply.

Despite these positive intentions, the new government met a fierce policy backlash from parents and students, who felt their sense of entitlement to learn English had been rescinded. Only 100 schools retained their status to continue instructing in English, with 25 schools appealing the decision in response to parents threatening to withdraw students from non-EMI schools, eventually with only a further 14 schools joining. The approach caused fierce debate and led to an Education Bureau Department (EBD) review in 2005 and further ‘fine-tuning’ of policy in 2009 and 2010. These revisions, introduced in 2011 finally allowed schools the flexibility, under ‘professional judgement’, to apply for adoption of EMI or Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) in non-language subjects and extended learning activities, softening the seemingly hostile stance and stringent guidelines binding EMI schools (HKSAR Education Bureau, 2010). MOI applications needed to be approved one year prior to implementation, and were subject to schools maintaining a minimum proportion of time using English as MOI to preserve and enhance English learning environments. Schools were held accountable for MOI implementation, and had to incorporate subsequent findings and outcomes on school websites, and specifically within their School Development Report and Annual Reports. Continuous monitoring was undertaken by the EBD through routine inspections to provide advice and feedback on MOI implementation arrangements (Education Bureau, 2014).
1.4.4. The Nature of English Language

Modern day Hong Kong has a deeply ingrained self-perception of its identity as a ‘meeting place between East and West’ (Wong, 1998), with language playing a significant part in this constitution. The three predominant languages used in the community are Cantonese Vernacular Chinese, Modern Standard Chinese (the national standard language of PRC, alternatively referred to as Mandarin or Putonghua), and English. Cantonese was a dialect originally derived from the area of Guangzhou in southern China, and is the lingua franca of Guangdong Province, but also the official language in Macau. An estimated 98% of Hong Kong’s population verbally communicate in Chinese Cantonese, and common and formal written expressions follow Modern Standard Chinese based on Mandarin (Tsang & Wong, 2004), although this written form is ungrammatical and unidiomatic when spoken in Cantonese. Written Cantonese is sometimes used in print advertisements, popular culture within media, and informal communications such as social media and instant messaging. Only about two percent of the entire population are native English speakers, but English has played a role in both shaping and fulfilling the expectations of the projected modern identity of Hong Kong.

Under the rule of the British colonial government, an English legal framework helped shape bureaucratic institutions based on those of Britain. Commerce, guided by legal structures and government regulations, was therefore reliant on an understanding of English, and this natural progression led to an emphasis on the utilitarianism of the English language. Not surprisingly, despite a majority ethnic Chinese Han population in a Cantonese Chinese vernacular environment, English became like Latin in European medieval society, seemingly granting the holder powers to commune at a different plane of existence and a visible vehicle for social and economic mobility. Indeed, Luke and Richards (1982) described Hong Kong’s population as separately enclosed, socially distant speech communities, divided into Chinese-speaking and English-speaking. This belief has probably strengthened with the emergence of English as the lingua franca of the world, in the context of the end of the Cold War and globalisation – culturally and commercially - coupled with the emergence of English as the leading language of research and scholarship, especially in the fields of science and
technology (Ammon, 2001). Both student and parent reactions to the 1997 language policy reforms were testament to the perceived cultural benefits and status that could be derived from the learning of English. Nonetheless, Lai’s (2005) large-scale quantitative surveys showed how Hong Kong secondary school students associated English as ‘the colonisers’ language’, equating this as the language of power, despite integrative inclinations towards the vernacular Cantonese language. Therefore, although contemporary use of English was generally restricted to specialized professional and academic uses, it was highly visible in code-mixing – the ‘sprinkling of English expressions of various lengths into the speaker’s base language Cantonese’ (Li, Leung, & Kember, 2001, p. 3). Earlier research into code-mixing identified this process as a strategy native Cantonese speakers use to fill lexical gaps, express a ‘Western’ identity, adopt certain images attached to it, and as an emotional buffer in negotiating identities (Luke, 1998; Pennington, 1994; Tse, 1992).

Li et al. (2001) in their investigation of higher education in Hong Kong found that the nature of English in Hong Kong was influenced by two divergent forces. Firstly, Hong Kong’s self-styled ‘world city’ status has translated into an entanglement in the web of globalisation and internationalisation. A casual glance at the presence of foreign firms in Hong Kong gives a sense of the degree of internationalisation and also the sense of future opportunities available to students through a proficiency in English. According to the 2010 Hong Kong Census and Statistic Bureau, 2,353 and 1,285 overseas companies had regional offices and regional headquarters in Hong Kong respectively. Of these, 38% of regional offices and 36% of regional headquarters were companies from English-speaking countries. Possession of strong language skills also places students in a better position with regards to tertiary studies, where English is the primary MOI in most prestigious universities domestically and internationally. Secondly, Li et al. (2001) cite the region’s political, economic and cultural reintegration with mainland China as the reason for advancing the status and use of vernacular Cantonese, and to a lesser extent of Putonghua Chinese, the common mainland dialect. This has implications for further altering the external and internal perception of Hong Kong society as biliterate and trilingual. Lai (2005) argued that English acts more like a foreign language than a second language. As such, secondary school teachers within schools where English is the MOI frequently use Cantonese Chinese to talk to students individually and in discussion of non-academic matters (Evans, 2009). And in classrooms where English communication is used, teachers dedicate more time to offering linguistic support and consequently draw attention away from explaining the content (Ng, 2007). The majority of undergraduate university
students in Hong Kong were even found to have positive attitudes towards non-native English lecturers because of their ability to switch between English and Cantonese to make learning easier, and were perceived to establish stronger connections with students (Ling & Braine, 2007).

Irrespective of how English or Cantonese Chinese is positioned within the educational context, an interesting observation was how both languages have evolved in producing unique varieties of each other. English’s influence upon the local vernacular dialect is evident through how it transforms the ways the local Cantonese dialect is spoken and written. Sui’s (1993) earlier research found Hong Kong vernacular to be a more Anglicised format in contrast to the same dialect used in the neighbouring province of Guangdong where it originated. Specifically, this included linguistic practices of ‘relexification (the use of loan words, regrammatisation (as evident in code-mixing) and rediscoursalisation (evident in code-switching)’ (Pang, 2003, p. 17). Similarly, the variety of locally spoken English in Hong Kong has also been transformed by the vernacular language. Kirkpatrick, Deterding, and Wong (2008) remarked how Hong Kong English was identifiable with a local accent and international intelligibility based on the listener’s attitudes towards the speaker was not impacted negatively. It may be that in the minds of local Hong Kong students, as Chan (2002) argued, these language characteristics constitute ‘linguistic capital’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) that separated Hong Kong citizens from their counterparts in mainland China, allowing them to maintain a separate identity. Hong Kong English has arguably emerged as an autonomous language variety (Bolton & Lim, 2002) albeit with connotations as a ‘dialect’, which imposed an imagined superiority by fostering the native and non-native dichotomy (Pennycook, 1998). Nonetheless, Pang (2003) contended within the educational context, there is an expectation to resist speaking the local variety, with a linguistic purism that pursues a ‘standard’ English. Subsequently, there is a requirement to study how the English language is implicated within the shaping of students’ lived experiences and aspirational imaginings.
1.5. The Research and the Structure of Thesis

This qualitative research seeks to describe and investigate the complex and relational constitution of a particular type of disposition within secondary school students in relation to their perceptions/imaginations of the future. I will outline how this disposition emerges as a result of the specific arrangement of Hong Kong’s colonial past, ambivalent postcolonial present, the place of English in this context, and the destabilising forces of globalisation of a particular kind, which have structured dominant neoliberal values. Theoretically, the thesis seeks to contribute to more richly theorising Hong Kong students’ future aspirations and imaginations through leveraging the conceptual tools of Bourdieu, Taylor and Appadurai. Furthermore, as a qualitative study utilising a mixture of focus group interviews, observations, document analysis and autoethnography, and grounded in Bourdieu’s call for epistemological reflexivity, I strive to impart methodological contributions that highlight plural, theoretically hybrid possibilities for understanding students’ perceptions of their futures. From an empirical perspective, this is one of the first relationally-focused sociological studies conducted into Hong Kong students’ aspirations, and it is my hope that this study will catalyse other critical research within this space.

The study is divided into seven chapters.

Chapter One introduced the research topic, outlined the purpose of the study and overview of frameworks employed. It also provided a contextual description of the contemporary Hong Kong milieu, in terms of history, education and language, which the student participants were situated within.

Chapter Two sets forth the theoretical approaches adopted, with an emphasis on practice theory and the goal of understanding social practices. An introduction to the thinking tools of Bourdieu is presented, with a discussion of field, habitus, capital and practice, and their applicability to the exploration and understanding of aspirations. Furthermore, Taylor’s conception of social imaginary and Appadurai’s capacity to aspire are introduced, with an overview of how these concepts complement the Bourdieusian resources.
Chapter Three delineates the three broad bodies of research literature pertinent to the study. The first body of research focuses on understandings of youth and students’ aspirations towards educational and vocational trajectories, locating the constitution of future imaginations of students around the key themes of familial, class and local social and cultural context. The second set of literature examines the influence of broader forces such as globalisation, neoliberalism, modernity, national identity, the public sphere, and how these inform, enable and form part of people’s expressed and less verbalised aspirations, and dispositions to these aspirations within fields of social power. The final body of literature outlines the research investigating how linguistic relations to the English language mediated and structured aspirations. This chapter also validates the appropriateness of the conceptual resources outlined in Chapter Two, and how the research addresses a significant gap within current research.

Chapter Four provides an outline regarding the methodological approach employed, including issues of relationality, epistemic reflexivity, and how they inform upon the research, with an emphasis on ‘fieldwork in philosophy’. Consequently, I highlight my challenges as a researcher investigating a new and partially unfamiliar setting. The chapter will also outline the complementary methodological approaches of field, habitus and capital, and notions of a social imaginary, and future as cultural capacity, and implications for the approaches to research design, data collection and analysis. The chapter provides an overview of the methods employed for data collection, and a discussion of the nuances and insights arising from the data collection process.

Chapters Five and Six provide insights into how neoliberal and globalisation processes informed upon Hong Kong students’ aspirations. However, this was not a straight-forward process, and reveals significant points of rupture between dominant neoliberal logics (e.g. as advocated, albeit variously, by so many national governments), and vernacular practices. The chapters reveal how the capital accumulated and embodied by these students, as a result of their family experiences in this context, were frequently disjunctive of the broader field of power and schooling, even as they sought to effect compliance with more dominant logics. The chapters reveal the variety of effects of such disjuncture, particularly a sense of ‘aspirational ambivalence’ through how students imagined their futures.

Chapter Five, in keeping with Bourdieu’s call to firstly analyse fields in relation to the broader field of power, begins with an analysis of the broader field of power, and how
globalisation and neoliberalism as expressed in Hong Kong influenced students’ imaginations, and spatial aspirations. On this point, the chapter examines the ambivalent space occupied by Hong Kong from an historical geopolitical perspective, and how ambivalent conditions were shaping students’ spatial aspirations vis-à-vis mainland China. The chapter then investigates how this imaginary parochialised success through competitive struggle and in terms of future economic accumulation, narrowing the aspirational trajectories that are deemed appropriate within middle class familial relations, and producing narratives of hope and anxiety, driven by a logic of class preservation. Chapter Five argues how this logic attempted to appropriate English acquisition as an instrument for cultivating aspirational probabilities through instilling the importance of English within students. Given the prominence of the place of English in influencing students’ dispositions towards aspirational success, the misrecognition of English as a valued symbolic capital within the neoliberal-influenced field is elaborated in detail.

Chapter Six continues the argument of the middle class logic that recognised English as constitutive of the capacity to aspire, but how Hong Kong’s general milieu was incompatible with the development of English language proficiency. The chapter contends that schooling represents the strongest viable opportunities for English acquisition, but at the same time the familial logic that privileges EMI schooling has the cost of devaluing the recognition of CMI schooling. Consequently, middle class families and students were predisposed to EMI schooling as the hopeful cradle for the fulfilment of aspirational possibilities, through EMI schooling’s association with English. The chapter advances by emphasising the contradictions of this imaginary of non-elite EMI schooling via analysis of the disjunctive practices evident in students’ sense-making about their lives, and how these contributed further to aspirational ambivalence. Together with Chapter Five, this chapter highlights how the dominance of English played out in complex, nuanced and problematic ways, harbouring dispositions that were ill at ease and frequently at odds with dominant neoliberal conceptions of what constitutes ‘the good life’.

Chapter Seven summarises the research’s contributions, findings and the implications of these findings. The research reveals the unintended social consequences arising from the nexus of middle class familial strategies, language policy and schooling logics/practices within a postcolonial milieu, as a milieu pervaded by neoliberal influences with regard to aspirational constitution and social justice. The chapter outlines the conceptual/ theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions of the study, and how it seeks to inform practical
understandings regarding students’ aspirational formation within complex social settings, and further research considerations. In closing, I delineate my concerns and hopes related to the findings of this study.

The next chapter will introduce the theoretical concepts of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice, followed by an outline of Charles Taylor’s concept of ‘the social imaginary’, and Arjun Appadurai’s conceptions of ‘the capacity to aspire’, and how the combination of these conceptual resources enable the investigation of students’ aspirations. Bourdieu’s theory of practice is located within his set of ‘thinking tools’.
2. Theorising the Aspirations of Secondary School Students

2.1. Overview

This chapter outlines the theoretical resources used to conceptualise the study and the topic. These resources were also used to frame the data collected, and to assist in providing a conceptually rich analysis of the data. To help understand students’ aspirations, the theorists used are Pierre Bourdieu, Charles Taylor and Arjun Appadurai. These theorists all share a relational account of the social and its workings. Each is concerned with the social and the cultural, and their links to individual practices, and to contested social reproduction. Given the focus on understanding students’ future aspirations in contemporary Hong Kong, each offers very useful perspectives and conceptual tools for understanding the mutually constituting relationship between structure and agency, and past, present and future practices. Additionally, all of these theorists accept a recursive relationship between individual practices and the broader social conditions within which these practices are framed and enacted.

I shall begin with a general introduction to the notion of practice theory, and practice theory’s appropriateness to my current research. This will be followed by a presentation of the version of practice theory developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, with an elaboration of his thinking tools of field, habitus and capital, and the importance of the practice of language in the process of misrecognition. Next, an explanation of Charles Taylor’s conception of ‘social imaginary’ will be addressed, with respect to contemporary theories of globalisation, neoliberalism and modernity. I then elucidate Arjun Appadurai’s notion of ‘capacity to aspire’, foregrounding how culture is implicated in the constitution of students’ future aspirations.
2.2. Practice Theory

Practice theory examines the relationship between ‘specific instances of situated action and the social world in which the action takes place’ (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1243). Practice theory is a way of analysing how individuals or agents negotiate with the structures around them, and offers a more contingent perspective of the world. While there is no unified, coherent ‘practice theory’, there is agreement on three principles as Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) clarify.

Practice theory firstly emphasises that everyday actions constitute social structures recursively. Students who engage in the act of imagining the future can therefore be thought of as engaging in a practice that individually limits or constrains further potential for action in production of an outcome, and simultaneously contributes to the social world and social structures around them. Practices can also create new potentials for expansive action that deviates from dominant social norms, creating dissensus and transformative change within social structures. Secondly, practice theory holds a sceptical view towards dualisms and attempts to map out the dynamic relationships to reintegrate concepts that have previously been partitioned as polar concepts. Examples include conceptual dichotomies such as objective and subjective, determinism and freedom, the individual and society, structure and agency, and conditioning and creativity. Thirdly, there is recognition of the relationality of these processes of mutual constitution, which stresses that phenomena always exist in relation to each other, meaning there is an ongoing constitutive relationship between social orders and human actions. The students’ future imaginaries are constituted through ‘absorbing’ the world around them and from a variety of experiences, different for different individuals, including language acquisition. The consequences of the actions that they take or avoid are that the students maintain or alter the social structures of the world, which in turn influence others and themselves. Therefore, individuals have uneven capacities and motivations to act, which can depend on differential power relations and access to resources (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011).

The emerging application of practice theory has been useful in making sense of ‘third spaces’ (Bueger, 2009) and through its ability to integrate complex relational forces, specifically
Hong Kong’s character as an international city, impacted by national and global pressures. I now turn my attention to how Bourdieu’s version of the theory of practice can be applied to the current research in conceptualising how students engage in the action of imagining their future.

2.3. Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice

The principal reasons for employing Bourdieu’s theory of practice in the current research is due to its explanatory power in mapping out the evolving dynamics of practice of individual students and the social space they occupy in terms of their power relationships. Bourdieu views power as culturally and symbolically created, and incorporates the historical context in the shaping of asymmetries of power (Navarro, 2006). Therefore, Bourdieu’s concepts allow us to consider how power has accumulated through colonial histories, while taking into account the contemporary postcolonial context. As Rawolle and Lingard (2008) put it, Bourdieu’s account of practice is:

…distinctly social and differs from those that treat practice as something best understood in terms of internal mental states, ethically informed actions or rational decision making (p. 730).

Bourdieu was himself engaged with studying the life trajectories of people and the engagement of individuals within the education system. He found that these engagements were characterised by arbitrary pauses or breaks as people transitioned from primary to secondary to tertiary education and into employment. Furthermore, for Bourdieu (1977b), individuals organise their future aspirations taking into account objective expectations of all members of the social group to which they think they belong, which he terms ‘praxaeological knowledge’ (p. 164). This picks up on how the statistical probability of an individual from a particular background going to university, say, frames that individual’s aspirations. However, this social meaning is only valid to the extent that the individuals themselves ascribe to them, depending on their social position (Robbins, 1998). Bourdieu remarked that individuals have a distorted sense of social reality based on the positions they occupy within the social space, due to the acquisition of ‘a set of practical cultural competencies, including a social identity’ (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 42-43). Most people therefore do not question their experiences or their
ways of looking at the social world, nor how probabilities of doing something frame aspirations for doing that thing (Bourdieu, 1990b). Consequently, Bourdieu (1999b) viewed imagination as a critical practice for change because:

Only in imaginary experiences (in the folk tale, for example), which neutralizes the sense of social realities, does the social world take the form of a universe of possibles equally possible for any possible subject (p. 109).

Students’ imagination of their futures were therefore a reflection of the cultural competencies accumulated from past experiences from familial and schooling relations, but also their relative position within their social world and their relationship to this world, which includes other individuals and institutions.

In starting with Bourdieu’s definition of practice, Warde (2004) clarified Bourdieu’s usage into three interconnected associations or senses. The first application is simply the performance or undertaking of a particular activity. Secondly, practice is applied to identify a social organisation formed around a particular activity. Thirdly, the term practice is applied to contrast theory, which recognised and privileged practical reason, against theory based only on the scholastic point of view. These three instances of practice are evident in how students engage in the practice of imagining the future. It also implies that practice is defined spatially and temporally, i.e. imagination of the future is an endeavour towards space and time, from within the boundaries of space/time.

Bourdieu (1984) captures the dynamic of practice through his thinking tools of habitus, capital and field, the relationships between which can be represented by the following formula:

\[ (\text{Habitus})(\text{Capital}) + \text{Field} = \text{Practice} \] (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101)

Simply put, the equation illustrates how practices are constituted by the relationships between the objective social structures interacting with an individual’s subjective dispositions, and are constrained or enabled by the resources available to them. A discussion of the concepts of practice, habitus, field and the various forms of capital will be expanded in the following sections to explain how this dynamic relationship operates within the social context of secondary school students engaging with the broader Hong Kong milieu, middle class familial relations and EMI schooling practices, and how these contexts influence their capacity to imagine their futures.
2.3.1. Field

Objective social space as described by Bourdieu (1992) is integrated in his concept of ‘field’. Bourdieu defines field as a structured social space with multiple, overlapping, blurred, fluid boundaries which possess systems of differences. Fields are quasi-autonomous and each field is ‘bounded by its own logic of practice outside of an overall societal logic’ (Lingard & Christie, 2003, p. 322), which includes institutionalised rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments, legitimate opinions and titles. The structure of fields and its own ‘rules of the game’ create systems of social positions that impose themselves upon the occupant, either individual agents or institutions. The social positions occupied by the individual agents and institutions residing in this field determine the degree to which interaction and struggle for power takes place. Fields therefore have a definable and contingent history of development, and the emergence of a field is characterised by recognition by the agents of its history. As Bourdieu (1998b) puts it:

A field is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies (pp. 40-41).

According to Bourdieu, collective social identities and a shared belief in the logic of the field are more likely to transpire the closer the proximities of social space occupied between individuals (Jenkins, 2006). The term ‘illusio’, defined as the participants’ belief in the legitimacy and value of the capital which is at stake, results in the field becoming an internally contestable social space (Lingard & Christie, 2003), which ‘contains’ points of interaction and struggle, where the strategies of the agents are concerned with preservation or improvement of their position in the field. Hence agents will adopt competitive strategies and orientations with and against others to gain the stakes associated with the field. Bourdieu (1990b) argues that shared belief in legitimacy relating to power relations can have no necessary basis, which he refers to as ‘cultural arbitrary’ and this can be the basis of
‘symbolic violence’ when these power relations are posited as necessary. In effect, this situation allows certain groups to maintain privileged positions and dominate over others through this misrecognition. It is then through what is termed *doxa*, tacit presuppositions or what is taken to be self-evident, that the operations of fields set limits on social mobility within the social space and impose limitations on what is accepted as appropriate (Bourdieu, 1984), including setting the tone for what can be imagined and potentially consecrated. Doxa is the forgetting of limits that have given rise to inequality and the ‘adherence to relations of order which, because they structure inseparably both the real world and the thought world, are accepted as self-evident’ (p. 471). Therefore, doxa encapsulates traditions such as Confucian expectation of filial piety and relationship/logics that powerfully influences student aspirational thinking. The practice of consecration thereby gives an individual a special endowment and, within the educational field, facilitates the investment of resources denied to other practices (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). In aspirational terms, norms and conventions within fields are, as Berlant (2011) contested, ways in which people reduce complexity to simplicity, as aspirational anchors for people whose relations to the world are loose and destabilised.

The interaction between different fields can be observed by making a distinction between the autonomous pole of a field, that which is independent and removed in relation to the rest of society, and heteronomous pole of the field, which is closely related to the rest of society. Bourdieu recognised how positions in the field are shaped by the tensions between these two poles and how the power of dominant fields like the field of power and the economy can pervade weaker fields, thereby structuring them (Wacquant, 1989). An example is how the increased influence of economic globalisation on infusing neoliberal logic into the heteronomous pole of the educational field has resulted, for example, in conformity of school accountability according to quantitative measures, and an attitude of educational commoditisation (Webb *et al.*, 2002).

The dynamics and power relationships within fields are therefore a powerful force in instilling certain durable and transferable dispositions into the agents and institutions residing inside this space. An explanation of these dispositions contributes to a partial understanding of how students imagine their own futures.
2.3.2. Habitus

Bourdieu (1977b) borrows the Aristotelian concept of habitus to describe how the social world works through the body. Habitus\(^3\) is defined as a set of dispositions, mental structures or strategies created from internalising the social order or structure or field which individual agents or the collective live in (Eriksen & Nielsen, 2001). It is acquired through one’s experience in different life dimensions, including family life, education and various social, economic and political contexts. Bourdieu (1984) ascribes three meanings to habitus, which are pertinent to how students imagine the future. Firstly, it is inherent in the mental sense and perceptions. Secondly, it is expressed in durable ways through biological inscription, which has implications for individual’s interactions with each other and the environment, manifested and embodied in ways of speech, movement and action. Lastly, it appears in individuals’ interpretation and orientation to sensory experiences (Jenkins, 2006).

Habitus is constituted as the bodily inscription of a nexus of practices, characterising the social habitats in which an agent is immersed, which Bourdieu describes as ‘a socialised body: a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world (Bourdieu, 1998c, p. 81). The habitus is expressed at the level of the body or what Bourdieu refers to as *hexis* to describe how social agents carry themselves in their world, through gestures, postures, gait etc (Jenkins, 2006). Therefore, bodies are ‘mnemonic devices’ that in interaction within institutions and fields, tend to reproduce dominant cultural values in the play of ‘social distances [that] are written into bodies…into the relationship to the body, to language and to time’ (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 128). Habitus can also clash with dominant values, even if in the process values ‘win’ by sorting and selecting the agents into a less powerful social positioning. Habitus may impact on how students approach learning, choose a preference of study and form images of the future. Additionally, habitus is collective when it disposes students to certain shared actions such as taking exams, entering classrooms, attending tutorial classes, or writing assignments (Webb *et al.*, 2002). Future imaginings can hence be thought of as embodied, contextual and historical and can be shared with other students.

\(^3\) I shall endeavour to use ‘habitus’ (and ‘capital’) to represent both the singular and plural form, instead of ‘habituses’ (and ‘capitals’).
Importantly, habitus is activated only in relation to fields, and can produce differing practices, stances and gradual transmutations based on the state of these fields. As Bourdieu (1990a) states:

…habitus, as the product of social conditionings, and thus of a history (unlike character), is endlessly transformed, either in a direction that reinforces it, when embodied structures of expectation encounter structures of objective chances in harmony with these expectations, or in a direction that transforms it and, for instance, raises or lowers the level of expectation and aspirations (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 116).

Social reproduction of thoughts, perceptions and ideas in the educational context therefore takes place in the habitus of students as they interact with teachers, different subject disciplines, the bureaucratic structure of the school and its relations with other schools and state agencies that support it, the class relations of different students, etc. The ways of perceiving, thinking and acting that are valued or discouraged are therefore absorbed and embodied within the individual’s sense-making apparatus, constituting the practical reason of their habitus, and thereby reproducing values and relations within students (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The degree of reproduction of social structures depends on how close the habitus of the family life corresponds to or is homologous with that of the school. For example, students in less powerful social-structural positions can feel themselves ‘out of sorts’ with schooling environments, and vice versa. Habitus can be classified in terms of its malleability, with the primary habitus forged through implicit learning from familial socialisation, and secondary habitus accumulated through education and other implicit and explicit pedagogic experiences, transplanted upon the primary habitus, with arising tensions and disjuncture between the two (Wacquant, 2014). Bourdieu (1998c) argues students from privileged backgrounds have a certain habitus that advantages them in adapting within the school environment more effortlessly – what he terms a ‘practical sense’ or ‘feel for the game’ - compared with students from more disadvantaged backgrounds and who may find the school environment unfamiliar and discomforting. Indeed, Bourdieu’s analysis of the French educational system showed that children from privileged social class positions tended to aspire to similar positions to their parents, whilst those who lacked privilege tended to remain in relatively dominated positions.

The presence or lack of this ‘practical sense’ and sense of validation therefore predisposes individuals towards and away from certain practices, such that cultural groups are more likely
to make ‘a virtue of necessity’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 373) than attempt to achieve ‘what is already denied’ (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 54). The degree of this social reproduction plays a part in shaping aspirational imaginations, as it has the potential to durably instil within the habitus certain forms of ‘possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions’ (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 54). This is the coming together of statistical probability and individual aspirations.

Bourdieu (1990a) postulates that repetition of habitus reinforces the social structures of the world and dictates the social space an individual occupies. Relational structures of the field therefore do not exist independently, but are reinforced by habitus in the process of mutual constitution. Although habitus operates in relation to a social field, it can produce very different practices depending on circumstances in the field, controlled through expectations and aspirations, or transformed by ‘awakening of consciousness and socioanalysis’ (p. 116), which has implications for placing imagination as the locus of imaginative pioneering of new future possibilities. As Rawolle and Lingard (2008, p. 731) put it, ‘the environment provides the stimulus for the expression of predispositions’ and therefore highlights again the interrelationship of field and habitus. This is the heart of Bourdieu’s relational methodological approach.

The habitus and resources of the agent, such as the capital resources they hold, allow the agents to take a position in the field or, metaphorically speaking, participate in the ‘game’. Students enter the educational field and graduate with unequal attributes or ‘configurations of capital’, gained through the habitus formation, which makes them better or weaker players in the game and confers an advantage or disadvantage in terms of determination of future life trajectories. An explanation of the types of capital is useful in comprehending this process.

### 2.3.3. Forms of Capital

In addition to habitus and position in the field, the availability of the appropriate resources or what Bourdieu (1986) terms as the configurations and volumes of capital can predispose and enable students to aspire to certain imaginative practices, or constrain them by making it seem ‘out of place’ to do so. Bourdieu classifies capital as ‘accumulated labour in its materialised form or its incorporated, embodied form, which when appropriated on a private,
i.e. exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour (p. 241). Through its effects on habitus, Bourdieu argues that the structure of the distribution of different types and subtypes of capital influences the structure of the social world at any given moment in time. This creates constraints that govern the probability of success for given practices.

Capital is present in various forms: economic, social, cultural and symbolic. Economic capital refers to what is immediately and directly convertible into money, in an objectified form such as income and property. Economic resources evidently enable students to have greater global mobility, the ability to attend prestigious educational institutions and even the ability to engage in non-commercial production, thereby broadening their imaginations of what is possible. Subsequently it enables, in a limited way, conversion to other forms of capital, with the constant accumulation providing a sense of distinction when recognised as valuable (Bourdieu, 1984).

One such conversion through investment in education is to yield cultural capital, which is defined as the embodiment of dispositions and aptitudes such as familiarity with formal language, highbrow culture, cultural goods, or in the institutionalised form such as credentials, degrees, public awards. The concept of cultural capital was developed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) within the context of their educational research within Reproduction, where they highlighted the importance of the roles of both schools and families in the generational transmission of knowledge and reproduction of class structure. Bourdieu (1986) states cultural capital exists in three forms: the embodied state, objectified state and institutionalised state. The embodied state is a form of enduring disposition, consciously acquired or passively inherited, usually through the process of family socialisation. It is not transmissible instantaneously and therefore requires an investment over time, varying also to a great extent depending on the period, the society and the social class of the individual. Mastery of, and relationship to language or linguistic capital, such as English in Hong Kong, is a form of embodied cultural capital. Objectified forms are material objects such as literature, artistic works, instruments etc. and actors can appropriate these goods both for economic capital and symbolically conveying cultural capital. The institutionalised state is objectified in the form of academic or educational qualifications and credentials, and conferred by institutions.

Given formal education can provide embodied and institutional cultural capital, schooling determines to a great capacity the value of an individual due to its increasing requirement for
entry into a field of employment and conversion to economic capital. An important point is also that cultural capital depends on shared recognition of this value. A student therefore in aspiring to study a certain qualification is required to understand the value that can be derived from the cultural capital, such as occupational availability. To Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), inherited cultural capital in understanding the fluctuations in the value of academic qualifications is critical because it enables the student to maximize her/his return through the academic or labour market. This also includes the sense of knowing when to change disciplines and careers, and switch into those with a future, should the market change (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 142).

Within Hong Kong, social and even Anglo-Christian religious affiliations have practical consequence on entry into certain educational institutions required for acquisition of valued cultural capital. Furthermore, consecration can be unconsciously accorded by the school towards the student based on familial affiliations from knowledge of the parent’s social status. These networks and connections that may be institutionalised through the acquaintance in systems of noble title, or becoming a member in a social group are defined as social capital (Jenkins, 2006). Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’ (p. 248). From this perspective, acquisition entitles membership into a group and such membership has benefits. Elite schools often see this development of social capital as one of their ‘market’ advantages over other schools. Manners, bearing, pronunciation can therefore be ascribed as forms of social capital. From a practical sense, values derived from these forms of capital are dependent on the size of the network of social connections, but only to the extent that the agent can effectively mobilise these contingent relationships and how much capital is possessed by the agents that reciprocate. Consequently, it is subject to the risk of ingratitude, given the exchange to produce social capital has a high degree of concealment and hence a possibility of the other party not recognising the exchange (Bourdieu, 1986).

Conversely, forms of capital can also be ‘misrecognised as arbitrary truth and recognised as legitimate’, allowing the holder to exercise power (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 112). This form of capital is known as symbolic capital, identified as resources available to an individual on the basis of honour, prestige or recognition and is defined as capital perceived through socially inculcated classificatory schemes, acting as an authoritative embodiment of cultural value. The outcome of misrecognition in application to future imaginations entail the likelihood of
students from less privileged backgrounds misrecognising the ‘naturalness’ of sensed limits on future pathways and options available to them (Webb et al., 2002). It is then easy to see how this misrecognition can easily extend to students’ relationship to the English language.

2.3.4. Practice of Language

The concepts of habitus, field and capital can be applied to examine the process of learning, acquiring and articulating the English language. Bourdieu contends that the practice of language constitutes the world and/or determines how we understand it (Webb et al., 2002). Hence each field, including education, has its own set of discourses and language styles that focus on what is valued, what can be questioned, and the ideas thought:

Even the simple linguistic exchange brings into play a complex and rarefying network of historical power relations between the speaker, endowed with a socially specific authority and his audience who recognises his authority in varying degrees, as well as between the respective groups to which they belong (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 118).

These specific authorities, being schools and classrooms, carry out symbolic violence in marking out a cultural arbitrary on which forms of language are valued or reaffirmed, with unacceptable forms frowned upon. Bourdieu (1990a) theorises that the value and power of language are relatively open to re-negotiation, depending on the dynamics of what he terms ‘reconnaissance’ or recognition, and ‘connaissance’ or knowledge. Recognition, working through the habitus, imbues language with dominance and legitimacy, thereby accentuating distinction. The social-historical conditions that gave rise to this value and power can be ignored when people have idealised views of linguistic practices (Bourdieu, 1991). It is not surprising then how the link between Hong Kong’s historically-constituted romanticised views of English and legitimation are played out when a population of Hong Kong parents insist their children attend EMI schools, hire private foreign English tutors to teach acceptable forms of English (i.e. the non-local variety) or even hire foreign domestic helpers who speak English in the hope it will provide a competitive advantage in future aspirational endeavours.
This legitimisation of the English language and its discourses in Hong Kong can be classified by what Bourdieu (1977b) calls ‘authorised language’. This means what is expressed in the language commands attention, and is authorised and recognised over the group it exerts power through giving the capacity to ‘objectify unformulated experiences and make them public…in offering the means of experiencing experiences usually repressed’ (pp. 170-171). This constitution of social experiences through the discourse enabled by language is particularly pertinent in the following section’s discussion around the concepts of social imaginary, terms of recognition and the capacity to aspire.

2.4. Social Imaginary and Globalisation

Bourdieu remarked how individual and collective practices always carries a background understanding within a wider context, ‘the pre-reflexive framework in our daily routines and social repertories’ (Steger, 2009, p. 13). However, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus has been criticised as ‘too glacial’, i.e. too self-cohesive and self-conservational within contemporary populations and not conducive to picking up on the rapidity of change today. Subsequently, this critique calls for the re-conceptualisation of a more ‘liquid’ habitus to take into account of contemporary globalising conditions. Being open to the forces of internationalisation, and globalisation, Hong Kong students’ imaginations of the future are informed and shaped by the direction of an evolving modernity, simultaneously contesting and incorporating a hegemonic ‘Western’ variety. The concept of social imaginaries therefore extends upon Bourdieu’s more nation-based conceptual tools and gives greater emphasis to the imagination as a potentially creative force, not simply a reproductive one.

In order to discuss the concept of the ‘social imaginary’, it is critical to consider how such an imaginary applies to ‘Western’ modernity and link it to the concept of moral order. Taylor (2004) uses the term ‘social imaginary’ to describe the ways in which people imagine their social existence, their relationship with others, the normal expectations we have of each other, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. This is a differentiation between social theories because it tries to understand how social surroundings are imagined by ordinary people, not through theoretical terms, but through the images, stories and legends they inherit and possess. Through comparing differences and similarities
of these narratives, images and stories, ordinary people employ the normative imaginations as a fundamental capital in their struggle and mediation to make sense of their lives, how they define themselves in relation to others, and informing on the aspirations and decisions they make (Wildermuth & Dalsgaard, 2006).

As a social imaginary is also usually shared by a large group of people and sometimes by the whole society, this common understanding provides a shared sense of legitimacy of common practices, enabling collective practices that constitute social life. It can be applied to make sense of what collective ideas exist between the students and potentially extending to parents, the school institution and society as a whole. Social imaginary implies a set of self-understandings, background practices and horizons of common expectations that give people a sense of shared group life, although not always articulated. Social imaginaries are therefore ‘a series of interrelated and mutually dependent narratives, visual prototypes, metaphors and conceptual framings…acquir[ing] additional solidity through the social construction of space and the repetitive performance of their assigned qualities and characteristics’ (Steger, 2009, p. 13).

Taylor (2004) argues this understanding is both factual and ‘normative’ because there is a sense of how things go and how they ought to go, which implies an implicit ability to distinguish what practices would be invalid and recognition of what is ideal. The concept of moral order is used therefore to define a set of explicit ideas that help to explain how society should act and why the social world is arranged as it is. Taylor argues this understanding presumes a wider grasp of our whole predicament, being how we stand in relationship to one another, how we got where we are, how we related to other groups and to power. Therefore, social imaginary occupies a fluid middle ground between the notions of habitus as embodied practices, and orthodoxies of truth and the taken-for-granted doxa of the field within Bourdieu’s thinking tools, in that it is both constitutive and constituting. The social imaginary therefore contains an image of moral order that ‘imbues embodied practices and the accompanying cultural forms with meaning and legitimacy’ (Gaonkar, 2002, p. 11).

Taylor expresses social imaginaries in three forms, which are consequential for students’ framing of their future imaginations: the economy, the public sphere and popular sovereignty. Firstly, civil society constitutes itself in the economic sense through what Adam Smith (1776) called the ‘invisible hand’. Secondly, a similar process of self-constitution happens within the public sphere, drawing on the works of Habermas (1989) and Anderson (2006), through
individual practices of exchanging views and knowledge. Examples are via media, newspapers, journals, associations, internet, discussions and other forms of media. Taylor (2004) points to how the constitution process within the public sphere is simply a discussion of itself, and although outside of the state or ‘representational’ culture as Habermas (1989) coins it, still plays a critical legitimising role on the field of power. Here, we can return to Bourdieu’s (1977b) remarks that ‘the truth of doxa is only ever fully revealed when negatively constituted by the constitution of a field of opinion’ (p. 168). Student-shared aspirations and future imaginaries play into this effect of legitimisation and the possibilities are ‘collective actions at the disposal of a given sector of society’ (Taylor, 2004, p. 107). And with application to language, Taylor cites language as a powerful device in which human cultural creativity constitutes the social world and the individual self. Finally, with popular sovereignty, people understand themselves to be a self-constituting group, independent of any formal political constitution.

Taylor’s ideas on the constitution of modern society can be further informed by the idea concerning the shift from a disciplinary society, characterised by a linear passage through various institutions, to a control society, highlighting the evolving importance of imagination as a social practice. Deleuze (1992) argues that proliferation of mechanisms of control, such as reports, databases, passwords, records etc. is leading to dissolution in disciplinary knowledge and body-discipline. The shifting emphasis is designed to minimise social risk; however, the result of keeping individual information accessible at any instance is leading to the deleting of borders, breakdown of disciplinary institutions, including the breakdown of boundaries between the private and public sphere which ‘destabilizes any notion of place’ and causes a global diffusion of dominant interpretations (Hardt, 1998, p. 147). On this point, Bauman (2000) reinforces Deleuze (1992) and Hardt (1998) by pointing to modernity’s dual, ambivalent nature. On the one hand, there is the desire for order, through a need to domesticate, categorise, and rationalise the world in an effort to control, predict, and understand. On the other, there is the desire for radical change, and the overthrow of traditional forms of culture, economy and relationships. This transformation, from a more solid modernity to a ‘liquid society’ or ‘liquid modernity’ as Bauman (2000) describes it, is ‘dismantling the traditional order, inherited and received; in which ‘being’ means a continuous new start’ (p. 20). Consequently within this liquid modernity, the construction of self-identity through a spatiotemporal perspective is increasingly impossible, with a gradual transformation of individuals as ‘pilgrims’, in search of deeper meaning, into ‘tourists’, in
search of multiple but fleeting social experiences. Within the educational context, forces of immanence such as networks are gradually being repositioned and replacing the disciplinary transcendence, implying greater subjectification, with the strengthening of the importance of both action and continuous assessment (Veiga-Neto, 2008). This is encouraging many students to become more flexible and strategic in their practices in order to overcome this societal desire to control future events, with a possible fallout being a disconnect between what students anticipate will happen and ‘uncontainable events’ (p. 140). Consequently, the possibility and necessity imposed by a ‘liquid’ modernity allows for the changing social world to be read anew by young people. This locates aspirational formation outside of the reproductive profundity of positional history stored in habitus.

With regards to these globalised control societies, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) critically remark how neoliberal ideology as the dominant influence within the globalising social imaginary is narrowing the individual’s interpretation and their imagination of possible future lives. Rizvi (2006) argues the global distribution of neoliberal manifestations in policy is due to the increased momentum in the circulation of ideas and ideologies brought about through advances in transportation, information and communication technologies, albeit asymmetrically distributed. Kenway and Fahey (2009) among others note critically how economic globalisation contains an implicit neoliberal economic logic of globalise or perish. The resonance of this logic is especially relevant in the Hong Kong context, given its geopolitical vulnerability as a non-sovereign city-state, dependent on global finance and corporate interests that are implicitly and sometimes explicitly neoliberal in orientation. The influence from a policy perspective, as Rizvi and Lingard (2010) point out, is how certain values such as efficiency and free choice are emphasised above other values such as equality and learning for the sake of learning, resulting in marginalisation of broader practices of curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation, and an emphasis on high-stakes assessment and rigid accountability regimes. Within the classroom, Greene (2000, p. 271) remarks how this has resulted in ‘an untroubled positivism (an unexamined split between facts and values) and points to Bourdieu’s (1998a) claim that the media imposes this acceptance that democracy is best secured by neoliberal ideals. As stated earlier in the introduction, educational policies appear to be subjugated under economic competitiveness, an example of where dominant fields of power are structuring the weaker fields through the heteronomous pole. It is therefore interesting to consider to what degree the students within the current study can imagine a divergent identity within the milieu of imposed dominant values, and to imagine
and construct the ‘cosmopolitan citizenship’ called for to think locally and globally (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 202) in this process.

The hope for a divergent imaginary is remarked by Appadurai (1996) in how he frames imaginary’s emergence as a social practice:

The image, the imagined, the imaginary - these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is somewhere else), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. This unleashing of the imagination links the play of pastiche (in some settings) to the terror and coercion of states and their competitors. The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order (p. 31).

Appadurai (1996) reinforces how imaginaries have been sequestered into the logic of ordinary life, and forming part of the quotidian mental work of ordinary people and their everyday practices, including aspirational practices. Appadurai (2004) further contends how living imagined worlds allows us to contest and subvert orthodox meanings through our imaginaries, therefore opening up the possibility of reshaping our society and the future. Here, he refers to the power of imagination to rearrange the pre-existing moral order, and transform reproductive and sedimented structures:

…the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighbourhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labour prospects (Appadurai, 1996, p. 7).

Similarly, Rizvi (2014) states that social imaginary:

…exists through representations or implicit understandings embodied in existing discursive and material practices. But it is also the means by which individuals and
communities are able to understand their identities and their place in the world, and are able to suggest transformations of the prevailing social order (pp. 131-132).

Social imaginaries and imaginaries more broadly are therefore spaces of contestation, which are neither purely emancipating nor disciplining, and where the global could be annexed into individual and collective modern practices. This capacity for change through imagination is further explored in Appadurai’s notion of capacity to aspire, elaborated in the next section.

2.5. Capacity to Aspire

Whilst Bourdieu’s thinking tools focus primarily on understanding reproduction, Bourdieu (1990b) also alluded to the possibilities for change that can be realised through ‘transformative awakening’, with implications for exceeding the ‘realistic’ calculations of habitus. Appadurai’s framework for understanding aspirations therefore complements, stretches and extends Bourdieu’s theory of practice by explicitly situating spatiality and bringing future orientation into cultural accounts of aspiration (Gale & Parker, 2015). This theorisation is conceptualised using Taylor’s (1994) notions of the ‘politics of recognition’ in understanding the imbalance of aspirational opportunities available to different groups, and Hirschman’s (1970) ideas on relations to collective identification and satisfaction. Appadurai (2004) forms the idea of ‘capacity to aspire’ as a practice that is built, describing it as the ability to ‘read a map as a journey into the future’ (p. 76). He theorises how mobilisation of linguistic vehicles can be used to challenge and push the boundaries of the status quo to imagine what was previously unimaginable. Appadurai leverages Hirschman’s (1970) proposition that individuals participating in cultural affiliation can undertake practices of loyalty, exit or voice. Capacity to aspire as a complex cultural capacity survives and is nurtured through the exercising of linguistic devices or ‘voice’, which is characterised by ‘practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation’ (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69). This in turn creates precedents that constitute exploratory spaces for students to aspire and changes the terms of recognition on what is possible. Consequently, aspiration is not an individual trait, but a spatial capacity borne out of relational interaction within social life.

Appadurai (2004) argues that capacity to aspire is strengthened by social, cultural and economic capital, and the availability of navigational information that is not equally
distributed. Those with better resources and power have a better capacity to aspire through relatively greater opportunity for exploration of the norms and axioms within society, sharing this knowledge more routinely with one another, and the ability to make better sense of the complex relations between the means and the ends inherent from a wider pool of experiences. Of this, Appadurai (2004) remarks that:

The more privileged in any society simply have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically, and to share this knowledge with one another more routinely than their poorer and weaker neighbours. The poorer members, precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practice the use of this navigational capacity (in turn because their situations permit fewer experiments and less easy archiving of alternative futures), have more brittle horizons of aspirations (p. 69).

Accordingly, access to various forms of capital, including via familial, schooling, local communities and daily experiences can provide a favourable advantage for students to read and navigate the maps of future and, through more frequent articulation, cement this recognition as realistic and possible. This includes instilling the confidence to explore unmapped terrains or possibilities. For the privileged elite, ‘desire tends to inform possibility: what is imagined is simply made possible’ (Sellar & Gale, 2011, p. 129). In contrast, those with limited resources tend to have more fragile horizons of aspirations because of their ambivalence to dominant cultural values. This ambivalent disposition may contribute to limited opportunities to exercise this ‘voice’ within the status quo, resulting in a move towards ‘loyalty’ and ‘exit’, as well as, perhaps, apathy, rebelliousness or creating/seeking alternative forms of emergent expression.

Gale and Parker (2015) further the concept of aspirational spatiality by referencing the terminology of ‘map’ and ‘tour’ derived from de Certeau (1984), and differential engagement in navigating topological and topographical terrains (Lury, Parisi, & Terranova, 2012). The analogy of tour knowledge is the operational knowledge provided by a guide of the social and physical space, but only provides a vague and limited understanding based on a pre-determined route. This vague knowledge implies the potential for misrecognition, and the possible abandonment of aspirations in the face of unfamiliar obstacles and changing conditions. This is in contrast to map knowledge, which is familiarity with the bigger picture, whereby students have the capacity to take alternatives routes depending on changing
circumstances, with an ‘appreciation of the end from the beginning’ (Gale & Parker, 2015, p. 90). Similarly, topological engagement involves deeper understanding of connections and exploration of the map, whilst topographical engagements are based on pre-determined routes, thereby suggestive of more fragile horizons of aspirations. Differential forms of knowledge and engagement are therefore linked to the forms of capital acquired and made available within the broader and local cultural and social milieu, including domestic and schooling relations to which the students are situated.

Therefore, the potential to conceive a new futurity can emerge from capacities to aspire that are not merely capacities inhering in capital inheritances, but in a basically human capacity to imagine.

2.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a discussion of how the constitution of students’ future aspirations could be approached through the application of Bourdieu’s theory of practice, augmented and extended by Taylor’s conceptions of the social imaginary (and the work of associated theorists), and Appadurai’s capacity to aspire.

Bourdieu’s central concepts of field, habitus, and capital have been considered and their interrelations outlined. These concepts foreground the importance of practices as both constituted of and constituting the broader social conditions within which they are enacted and practised. The habitus is a mnemonic device and the embodiment of past experiences evident in the forms of capital accrued, and grounded and evoked by location in particular fields. In the account of Bourdieu, while there has been recognition that his work has largely focused on reproduction, there has been much less focus on the production of the social and the cultural, and social change. It has been suggested in this chapter that habitus and practices are both constituted and constituting, and this allows for the possibility for change; that is, there is not a necessary relationship between probability and aspiration. This understanding of practices and the arguments of this chapter that Bourdieu can assist us in the understanding of change resonates significantly with Appadurai’s future oriented capacity to aspire. This capacity foregrounds nascent and future practices, and how these might reconstitute the social; that is, they make it possible to ‘elaborat[e] the implications for norms for futurity as a
cultural capacity’ (Appadurai, 2004, p. 61) that expands on Bourdieu’s reproductive and conception of a habitus-based aspirational framework.

Furthermore, Taylor’s concept of a ‘social imaginary’ conceptually complements and furthers Bourdieu’s field, habitus, practice relationship, and Appadurai’s future oriented capacity to aspire. Taylor sees the social imaginary as framing the social experience, but also framed by the social experience. There is a sense in which what is understood as the broader social imaginary is actively brought into existence; that is ‘imagined’, as a part of people’s everyday being. We might say then, the social imaginary is constituting and constituted. Furthermore, these social imaginaries are not expressed ‘theoretically’, but are instead ‘carried through images, stories and legends’ (Taylor, 2004, p. 23), which might be understood as the distillation of people’s everyday experiences and practices. Taylor’s notion of the imaginary is used in my analysis to complement both Bourdieu and Appadurai’s concept of the imagination as an important element of agency. This melange of intellectual resources will be used later in this thesis to interrogate the data that were collected, and provide insights into the focus of the study.

Drawing on the research literature in the field of aspirational studies, I attempt next to outline some of the discourses that researchers have developed regarding how students constitute and mediate their imagined futures. This includes a focus on how the theoretical frameworks discussed in this chapter were deployed methodologically in helping to construct the approach for data collection and subsequent analysis.
3. The Literature: Reviewing Aspirations

3.1. Overview

This chapter will provide insights into how relevant literature conceptualises students’ mediation and negotiation of future aspirations within the broader milieu, familial and schooling relations. The chapter presents research literature in three distinct ways relevant to the current study. The first body of research focuses on understandings of youth and students’ aspirations towards educational and vocational trajectories, locating the future intentions of students through their influences and articulations. The themes revolve around the role of familial, class, and local and social contexts in aspirational constitution. This includes discussion of ‘critical sociological literature’ (Sellar & Gale, 2011) regarding the formation of people’s expressed aspirations and dispositions to these aspirations within fields of social power. The second set of literatures focuses on the role that globalisation, modernity and neoliberalism plays in shaping students’ aspiration, including the role of the media in this process. The final body of literature outlines the research investigating how linguistic relations of the English language mediate and structure aspirations. Overall, the review provides an understanding into distinguishing what has been done from what needs to be done, identifying important areas relevant to the topic, and further rationalising the significance of the research problem at the heart of this research (Hart, 1998).

Literature on adolescent aspirational trajectories and future education or occupational decision-making within the social sciences has traditionally focused on quantitative, positivist psychological studies, rational individualistic theories, or structuralist perspectives focused on social structures at the expense of ignoring individual agencies. For example, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) criticised career decision-making theories such as trait theory, development models and social learning theory, and highlighted how these models were inherently individually based, largely reliant on principles of technical rationality, and arguing that ‘the prime factors determining choice remain within the influence, if not the control, of individuals, present[ing] a model of planned decision-making as the realistic ideal
to be worked towards’ (p. 32). Whilst acknowledging the insights of these efforts in identifying relations that influenced adolescents’ aspirational practices, the models advanced were unable to depict contingent circumstances, and the complex dynamics present within the fluidity of contemporary societies, including global cities like Hong Kong. The choice of a relational sociological approach was more capable of encapsulating the recursivity between individual and more socially constituted understandings of the parental and schooling practices associated with living in Hong Kong, and the salient, interconnected relations of broader fields of power, expressed through global, national and local policies and discourses, and how these impressed upon student trajectories. As such, the review also seeks to discredit aspirational constitution and decision-making as premised on individualistic or deterministic rule-based models.

3.2. Aspirational Trajectories

I begin by examining part of a large body of literature into how students’ perceptions of their options and future life-chances are affected by their life experiences, and the embedded cultural milieu influencing their aspirations and dispositions. The key themes of the studies identified centred on the influences of family, socioeconomic class, social and cultural context, and the activation of aspirational possibilities made possible by contingent circumstances and events.

Sociological studies into the formation of Hong Kong or Chinese students’ aspirations and conceptions of the future are surprisingly few. For example, a recently published qualitative dissertation based on a wide sample examining aspirations of vocational choice and interest among secondary students in Hong Kong by Wan (2013), took an individualistic psychological approach by relying on Social Cognitive Career Theory. The study was overtly predictive and deterministic in its analysis and findings, and did not attempt to understand how students’ ‘personalities’ were constituted, and how this process was deeply socially embedded. Another study was undertaken in neighbouring Guangdong Province of China, by Creed, Wong, and Hood (2009), who employed a large-scale quantitative survey of senior secondary school Chinese students investigating career decision-making, and the reconciliations and discrepancies between aspirations and expected probabilities of
aspirational success. The study concluded that students’ generally aspired towards narrow bands of occupations, with expectations that were lower than aspirations, and emphasised the role of ‘perceived barriers’ on limiting aspirational expectation, that could be overcome through confidence, skill, or knowledge. Despite the lack of elaboration over what constituted these perceived barriers, there was acknowledgement of how a more complex, multidimensional conceptual study, including relevant social and familial influences, would illuminate this field.

More pertinent literature includes a study by Alloway and Dalley-Trim (2009), analysing the articulations of rural secondary school students within 13 rural/ regional communities across Australia in understanding aspirations. Although the research settings contrasted distinctly with the hyper-urbanity of Hong Kong, the research was more relevant to my study because it identified student aspirations across what the researchers categorised as the personal and social dimensions, and how students described aspirations under economic considerations, anxieties of spatial mobility, familial attachments, schooling quality, and limited work and educational opportunities. The findings are useful for considering the similarities and differences in how Hong Kong urban students framed, reacted and mediated these dimensions, in spite of the diverging contexts and circumstances. Alloway and Dalley-Trim (2009) found that ‘close-knit’ familial dominance within rural communities resulted in restricted aspirational mobilities. Furthermore, the study identified a minority of students who were ambivalent and apprehensive about the futures they imagined.

Earlier relational models were proposed by Ball (1981), and Woods (1979) looking at how British youth undertook the educational decision-making process with regards to course selection. The researchers concluded how students’ decisions resulted from individual perspectives, and cultural presuppositions, and how both conscious and unconscious perspectives acted as constraints on these choices. As a result, these studies established the theoretical and methodological applications of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977b) within aspirational and decision-making research, and further highlighted the reproductive elements within these choices. Research undertaken by Gambetta (1987) of Italian youth transitioning from compulsory education into university reinforced this notion, by proposing decision-making as the imbrication between the students’ capabilities limited by structural constraints, their preferences, and the conditions that shape these preferences and intentions. The mismatch of organisational values against individuals’ ‘background’ therefore led students to the choice of ‘jumping’ into what was perceived to be ‘worth jumping’ into - akin to Bourdieusian notions
of illusio. Okano (1995) applied these models within the Japanese context to propose how educational decision-making was the interaction between an individual’s ‘internal schema (or culture), but neither static or deterministic’ (p. 45), and institutional structures, developing a rational model of decision-making within boundaries of constraints, filtered by an individual’s habitus, and subjected to change through socialisation with other agents. In overcoming the critique of habitus as cultural determinism, Okano (1995) stressed the contingency of aspirations, through class or family-specific collectively shared experiences, schooling process, and socially random individual experiences that exposed individuals to the wider world beyond immediate social environments.

Later studies outlining how aspirations were activated via contingent circumstances included Clegg and Stevenson’s (2011) investigation into how extracurricular activities such as paid part-time or volunteer work affected students’ orientation towards imagining their future employment. The study interviewed 61 ethnically-mixed students entering undergraduate tertiary studies, some of whom had previous work experiences and caring responsibilities. Findings showed that some students, especially those from working class families forced to work out of economic constraints and other contingencies, were firmly invested in creating a strong self-identity in the present, and did not find their inability to elaborate or act on an imagined future a problem. In applying Bourdieu, Clegg and Stevenson (2011) also found how embodied social and cultural capital was key to how extracurricular participation shaped students’ imaginations of their future possible selves.

A look into how aspirations were constrained or enabled by family can be found in the UK study interviewing 16+ year old young students on aspirations by Ball, Macrae, and Maguire (1999). The study noted the possibilities of choices within the respondents’ age group were much more constructed and constrained by the young people’s educational pasts than they were by promises or anticipations of the future. Decisions about the future seemed mostly unresearched and ill-informed amongst these youths. However, the perceptions of constraints on what could be pursued or was not realistic appeared quite rigid and followed the aspirations and strategies generally embodied within the family habitus. Ball et al. (1999) revealed there were two groups of students who showed most stability in their future images. The first group were students who had a sense of self-identity rooted in education, with positive attitudes towards learning and who could talk reflexively about themselves as learners. These students came from families who were supportive, directive and possessed an educational inheritance. The second came from students with strong and clear vocational
commitments by virtue of being embedded into vocational sub-culture through part-time work, training, clubs, and extracurricular activities. Conversely, students with disrupted family lives (parental separation, alcoholism, and parent incarceration), heavily constrained economic circumstances, and disjointed educational history were found to either have unclear senses of their futures, short-term outlooks or unstable constructions of the future images that were usually negative. Those students that did not enjoy the familial resources of an educational inheritance, were, for example, children of immigrant parents with unstable learning identities not firmly rooted in academic success. Learning was perceived as a challenge, and their imaginations of the future were uncertain and passive, defined by what Evans and Heinz (1994) referred to as ‘step by step’ behaviour – as evidenced when they examined English and German youths transitioning into adulthood. Influence from formal intermediaries such as career officers and teachers also helped encourage students to pursue certain routes, although family effect seemed to strongly outweigh other interventions.

The importance of family and familial-based social interactions as key arenas in forming aspirational choice, as opposed to the relative distrust of other forms of widely available representation, were revealed by Vincent and Ball (1998). The researchers highlighted that familial-derived ‘grapevine knowledge’ that was socially embedded - but unevenly distributed within networks and localities, and leveraged strategically by families from different cultural groupings - was viewed and accessed more reliably in terms of aspirational decision-making. This ‘hot’ information on educational pathways came from family experience or knowledge from social networks ‘based on affective responses or direct experience’ (p. 380). ‘Cold’ information was transmitted by schools as official knowledge, such as school policies, list of activities, examination results, which were more abstract and treated with distrust and confusion. Vincent and Ball (1998) emphasised the spatiality and social aspects of the aspirational landscape, dependent on positions and networks, with ‘local structures of feeling’ produced by class, culture and routine social practices (Taylor, Evans, & Fraser, 1996). This social embeddedness of choice highlights the fallacy and limitations of studying students’ aspirational choices out of social context, or desocialising choice-making as individual rationality, adding credibility to relational studies that locate aspirational constitution within the social milieu.

In proposing a model for understanding the structure of aspirational choices through building on earlier studies, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) drew upon rich, multidimensional
descriptions and interpretive analyses of British youths entering vocational educational training (Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson, 1996), applying Bourdieu’s notions of field and habitus in deriving a model for how the aspirational decision-making process took place. The researchers pointed out that opportunities were simultaneously subjective and objective, constantly changing as individuals integrated new information, attempting to avoid traditional literature describing career pathways as dominantly socially-structured pathways or purely psychologically driven by the individual. The researchers proposed that decision-making on career emerged through a pragmatic rational process within the individual’s habitus or culturally-derived ‘horizons of action’ (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997), rather than a systematic process. Horizons of action were defined as the ‘arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made’ (p. 34) with an interrelation between the perceptions arising from schemata filtering habitus, and the opportunities available. This was based on partial information located in the familiar and the known, which could not be separated from the context of family background, gender, culture and life histories of the pupil. Instead, the social and cultural milieu formed part of a temporal continuity that was grounded in history, present and a sense of likely future, and was related to the actions of others. This was used as an argument for why young women may be more likely to factor in domestic circumstances than young men (Gaskell, 1992), and how positions of social class, gender, and race influenced the possibility of choice.

Furthermore, decision-making seemed to be based on a complex system of the interactions with others within the educational sub-field, where there is negotiation, bargaining and struggle to construct the future. As the future is unknown, Hodkinson et al. (1996) argued there was a high degree of instability and unpredictability, with stability most evident within A-level students and those choosing to pursue university studies. Hence instability of future images was the rule rather than the exception. Hodkinson and Sparkes incorporated Giddens’ (1984) concept of discursive consciousness or ‘what we can articulate’ as a component of habitus and referred to individuals undergoing periods of routine and unpredictable ‘turning points’ located within the field and the macro-contexts which consist of dimensions of social, political, economic, cultural, geographical and historical settings. Turning points were classified into structural, self-initiated and forced. There was an emphasis on the fortuitous aspect, or ‘happenstance’ (Baumgardner, 1977, 1982; Miller, 1983), with decision influenced by the person’s sense of limits, and sentiments. Hence job availability in a certain field does not guarantee the individual will perceive specific opportunities as they arise as appropriate.
Furthermore, Hodkinson and Sparkes referred to Strauss’ (1962) work on ‘turning points’ to describe the accumulations of out-of-the-ordinary experiences in the schemata of consciousness, which incorporated mismatches between pacing and timing, and between individual motivations and broader structures and discourses, which can result in transfers of knowledge between the practical and discursive consciousness (Chinn & Brewer, 1993; Haugaard, 1992). This distanced aspirational choice from the notions of determinism implied in metaphorical terms such as ‘trajectory’, and advanced the model of Okano’s rational decision-making model that incorporated institutional structures and socialisation processes.

Subsequently, Ball et al. (1999) in investigating the imagined futures of post-16 adolescent students, looked at the interplay between individual agency and inculcated dispositions, and the role of family, schooling and labour market changes, confirming the conclusion of Hodkinson et al. (1996) that aspirational choices did not resemble policy assumptions based on calculative, individualistic, consumer rationalism models in most cases. The introduction of the term liminality (Bettis, 1994) was a relevant descriptor of the state of being of adolescences, which Bettis described as a ‘synergistic concept in that characteristics of the macro- and micro worlds play off each other’ (p. 108), emphasising the constant, internal mediation, internalisation and relative instability of youths’ aspirational imaginations. Bettis (1994) elaborates that liminal states emerge from postmodern urban complexity as ‘the fragmentation, loss of community and de-industrialization of cities, along with the post-industrial plethora of images, focus on consumption, and changes in types of employment’ (p. 107). The concept emphasises the ‘uncertainty in which these students exist, both in their daily lives and in the economic and social context of the city and society in which they reside’ (pp. 110-111), and how the broader social context powerfully structures aspirational orientations. This notion of liminality within aspirational research is congruent with Bourdieu’s relationality, and a relevant descriptor in the context Hong Kong, including policy reports that cite youths’ aspirational ambiguity as a ‘rite of passage’ (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2012), but with little acknowledgement of the complicity/complexity of this ambiguity with broader structural movements.

This state of liminality can be witnessed in a longitudinal survey study measuring career aspirational outcomes of 16 year old to young people after twenties undertaken by Staff, Harris, Sabates, and Briddell (2010), which found that those with uncertain occupational aspirations characterised by ‘aimlessness’ showed significantly lower hourly earnings relative to those with uncertain occupational aspirations but engaging in ‘role exploration’. The study
argued that students who engage in exploring educational and career pursuits without a purposeful end-goal may show prolonged schooling without completion of degrees and consequently fall into low-quality and low-wage jobs. The conception of navigating aspirations (Appadurai, 2004) is applied in the context of role exploration, and how socioeconomic backgrounds constrain the capital required to undertake this liminal phase meaningfully.

The social context studied by Ball et al. (1999) was similar to the outer-suburban fringe city of an Australian study by Sellar and Gale (2012), which comprised interviews with more than 30 upper primary and lower secondary public school teachers and how the teachers influenced the formation of aspirations. Low student academic achievement, multi-generational unemployment and lack of family experience in post-school educational and occupational pathways were cited by the teachers as sources of low aspirations. The study showed how teachers were tempering the risk of disengagement with schooling by acting as intermediaries through emphasising education as the process for economic aspirations – encouraging materialistic aspirations to appeal to a consumption mentality. Sellar and Gale (2012) noted how the latter practice poses the danger of basing ‘high’ aspirations on the logic of consumption and economic ownership, but also pointing out the pervasiveness of neoliberal logic within education policy. Findings of the study are conceptually applicable within the Hong Kong context, whereby the pervasive logic of materialistic aspirations were cited (Sing, 2009).

Embedded within the nexus of family and the broader social context are also issues of class in identifying the nature of students’ aspirational trajectories. Research has focused on how class habitus and culture are implicated in senses of limitation with regards to upward mobility. As an example of how social class influences aspirational motivations towards occupational careers, Huppatz (2010) carried out in-depth interviews of women tertiary students in caring. The study demonstrated how working class women entered caring professions as a means of upward mobility and stability, whereas for middle class women, the motivations towards the caring profession were framed as congruent with their class histories. The study highlighted the applicability and dynamism of Bourdieu’s theoretical tools in analysing the difference between working class and middle class students’ aspirations. Relatedly, Archer and Yamashita (2003), through interviews and focus groups of a cohort of 20 inner London working class students, attempted to explain how complex social and institutional factors, such as masculine imageries, policy discourses, school physical
environment, and surrounding landscapes, shaped students’ aspirational identities, and the sense of students’ limitation. In later studies, Archer et al. (2013) investigated aspirations of 12 and 13 year old secondary school students, confirming the importance of socially advantaged middle class family backgrounds in students’ exercise of social capital and cultural capital as (re)sources for locating aspirations. The research drew on earlier theorisation of family habitus (Archer et al., 2012), and how this collective identity was imparted to students through a practical feel of the world, which guided and shaped what feels ‘appropriate and right’ aspirationally. The family was described as a central nodal network that bestowed navigational resources, fortifying Appadurai’s (2004) conception of capacity to aspire. The students interviewed by Archer et al. (2012) showed higher degrees of circumspection and uncertainty regarding their aspirations compared with the students investigated by Croll (2008), where there were widespread notions of meritocracy and confidence, attributing this to the possibility of how a changing context has made young people become more ‘realistic’. Through their findings, Archer et al. (2012) also challenged the notion within the UK educational policy of a ‘poverty of aspirations’, emphasising the need to move away from ‘high’ aspirations to initiatives supporting diversifying aspirations.

In this vein of diversifying how aspirations are theorised, expanding the application of conceptual tools is a critical step. As such, whilst critical sociological research has focused primarily on more methodologically established studies based on doxic aspirations, ‘grounded in populist-ideological mediations’, and habituated aspirations, ‘grounded in biographic-historical legacies and embodied as habitus’ (Zipin et al., 2013, p. 231), Zipin, Sellar, and Hattam (2012) and Zipin (2013) have advocated for studies into constitutions of emerging aspirations. This contribution is derived from the funds of knowledge approach (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), which supports curriculum construction based on culturally familiar resources of the family and local community, thereby reducing symbolic violence from dominant cultural capital and challenging ‘the exchange-value power by which competitive academic curriculum selectively privileges cultural capital embodied in elite social-structural positions’ (Zipin, 2009, p. 317). In addition to Bourdieu, Zipin et al. (2013) draw on the concept of ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams, 1977) and Appadurai’s (2004) conceptions of culture and capacity to aspire, in critiquing approaches to culture through ‘habitual past tense’, instead of ‘elaborating the implications of norms for futurity as a cultural capacity’ (Appadurai, 2004, pp. 60-61). Zipin et al. (2013) point to the need for what
they term ‘educative capacitation’ to activate agency to (re)imagine relations, and in the process, transform local communities.

Similarly, in a recently published study investigating the aspirations for higher education of secondary school students from disadvantaged backgrounds in regional Australia, Gale and Parker (2015) advance the conception of ‘emergent aspirations’ (Zipin et al., 2013) and how it can find expression within dominant relations. Gale and Parker (2015) applied Appadurai’s (2004) notion of navigational capacity and terms of recognition to supplement the Bourdieusian accounts of aspiration based on the ‘doxic’ and ‘habituated’ (Zipin et al., 2013). The research expands on the concepts of spatialisation in accounting for instances where ‘cultural groups pursue future[s] that are potentially at odds with their pasts and from other cultural groups’, explaining aspirational capacity in terms of differential resourcing via map and tour knowledge (de Certeau, 1984), and differential engagement in navigating topological and topographical terrains (Lury et al., 2012). Elaboration of these terms was provided in Section 2.5. These examples are demonstrative of deploying a combination of different theoretical concepts to aid in reframing the approach to the study of youths’ aspirational trajectories.

As shown, the evidence for the influence of family, class and social milieu within aspirational development is extensive, accentuating how the aspirational ‘call’ is activated through varied social circumstances. Additionally, literature presented showed how the dominant values and logics from the broader field of power can pervade and structure these social forces. Consequently, in the next section, I focus on a sample of studies showing the dynamics of broader national and supranational social imaginaries within aspirational formation.

3.3. Social Imaginary and Aspirations

In looking at how the social imaginary influenced student and youth aspirations, I now turn to relevant literatures investigating how contextual forces such as globalisation, modernity and dominant neoliberal values influenced and are mediated in the constitution of aspirations. I also point to studies outlining how the perspectives gained from media representations shape the social imaginary that informs aspiration building.
Biggart and Furlong (1996) showed how familial and social class, objective contextual structures, and values imported from globalisation were mediated by 16 year old upper secondary school students. In interviews with these students from working class families in Scotland, Biggart and Furlong (1996) found these youths were conflicted about aspirations regarding higher education, due to attitudes inherited from families in relation to imagining themselves in an academic environment, and the need to conform to the working class culture of their peers and family groups, revealing the ill at ease feeling within university academic environments, confirmed in later studies by Reay (2001). Furthermore, inflation in educational qualifications and restricted labour market opportunities also fuelled this scepticism and ambivalence. However, the study argued that the rise of individualism as a value amongst youths was cited as a norm, contributing to a resistance against these collectivist conventional familial and socioeconomic attitudes, such as working class youth cultures of leaving full-time education. The new norms are reflective of the emergence of a very different social imaginary, arising to contest the traditional imaginary, and changing the dynamics of aspirational mediation. Biggart and Furlong’s study draw similarities to a one-year anthropological ethnography of high school students in the Manus Province of Papua New Guinea, where Demerath (2003) investigated how the identity norms circulated within the peer network utilised the egalitarian values transmitted from the village tradition to contribute to ambivalent attitudes within the students towards investing in education. Against a background of provincial unemployment and declining provincial academic achievement, the village was held as ‘a moral reference point to restrain more individualistic ambitions and to encourage appropriate sharing behaviour’ (pp. 141-142), while simultaneously rejecting traditional authorities to do well academically. This was despite students expressing a desire for a ‘modern’ individualistic lifestyle internalised through formal schooling and imported from media and religion. Demerath (2003) employed Appadurai (1996) in noting how these local students utilise imagination and resilience to configure local and global relations. Demerath (2003) draws the conclusion that the valued futures of young people have become more subjective, determined more by direct experience and relationships entered into by choice, and less by inherited collective values and the web of relationships.

In looking at the mediation of neoliberal discourse, an interesting interview study of young Indian men and women by Vijayakumar (2013) uncovered how aspirational conceptions were formed within a globalising, neoliberal knowledge-based economy, juxtaposed with traditional familial values and expectations. Using the concept of habitus, and the language of
social imaginaries, the research highlighted how Indian women used aspects of domesticity to contest the pervasive neoliberal and individualistic doxa, whilst at the same time employing neoliberalism itself to challenge domesticity, in order to create a space for aspirational manoeuvre. In contrast, Stahl (2012) investigated masculine identities in relation to neoliberal values in a purposive sample of white working class South London boys between 14-16 years old and their conceptions of aspirations and the ‘good life’ through a mixture of interviews, focus groups and visual methods. Stahl (2012) found masculine construction within the dominant neoliberal context promoted subjectivities of individualism, status-based and consumer aspirations, revealing a tension between dominant neoliberal expressions and identity. The study argued students were forced to undertake identity work, similar to Reay’s (2001) students, who had to reconcile between maintaining a sense of one’s authentic self, against the feeling of transgression from upward mobility. Additionally, Stahl (2012) showed how aspirations were sourced from a nexus of learner and social identities, saliently influenced by neoliberal educational discourse and imaginaries of the good life.

The importance of identity is exemplified in the study by Baker and Brown (2008) looking into how national and historical myths, folklore and genres popularised within the Welsh milieu, especially the culture grounded in ‘teacher and preacher’, inculcated the habitus with a sense of entitlement to university education within rural, working class families. The study found the participants’ ‘aspirational habitus’ was constituted by a rich blend of imagery and symbolic resources associated with being ‘intellectual’, and thus imbuing the notion of belonging to university life. The arising opportunities for tertiary studies subsequently mobilised the students’ confidence to fulfil aspirations in further studies, despite glaring realisations of economic disadvantage, coupled with the absence of aspirational roadmaps from social capital. Baker and Brown (2008) illustrated how culture embedded within the broader national discourse and identity activated youths’ aspirational confidence. The influence of national discourse and policy on young people’s aspirational emotions are also addressed by the work of Brown (2011) exploring the emotional landscape of youth aspirations. Brown theorises how aspirations can be regarded in various ways associated with emotions: as an affective orientation of the future (aspiring to become something); as an emotional disposition intertwined within a diversity of other emotions and affective states; and as an emotional state that can affect and be affected by other emotions. This means emotional dispositions within the aspirational context have the potential to manifest as a mixture of emotions, such as excitement and fear. Brown (2011) contends that young people
generally aspire towards lives that enhance relationships, comfort and security, rather than disrupting relationships with familiar places and people. The study has implications on how social spaces, policy discourses and initiatives shape young people’s aspirations, through acting on emotions, and how the concept of habitus is potentially methodologically useful in understanding this process.

Contextual events, and the diffusion of images and discourse through the public sphere influence aspirations, as evidenced in face-to-face interviews carried out by Ono (2003) on the futures expressed by 52 and 27 university communication degree students in Taiwan and Hawaii, respectively. The study employed in-depth face-to-face surveys to ascertain what the participants’ viewed as positive and negative future images, and analysed values and social norms inherent in their statements. Ono (2003) was concerned with uncovering the sources of images, and found how future images were dominated by global issues and extrapolation pre-determined by historical and current events, showing a lack of recognition of alternative futures. Future image construction was found largely to be dependent on the messages transmitted by electronic media – although the sample selection of communication students could have biased the participants’ accounts. Temporally, Taiwanese students had more immediate concerns about their personal futures, compared to students in the United States, who tended to have more distant concerns about their personal future. Ono (2003) argued heightened tensions with mainland China served as a powerful context in the negotiation of this imaginary, and because the study was conducted prior to the events of 9/11, the trauma of this subsequent event and saturation of media coverage to the event could have radically altered students’ image construction in the United States. The media’s role was explored further by Wildermuth and Dalsgaard (2006), looking into the intersection between everyday life, media and modernity, and how Brazilian youths from lower socioeconomic backgrounds led plural lives, simultaneously within family, peer-groups, school or work, enlarged globalisation, and ‘reality symbolic significance that include(d) the world of media representation’ (p. 27). The research emphasised the centrality of the public sphere in providing multiple frames of orientation and reference, but also of creating a fear in youths of missing out on opportunities, in addition to frustrations of pursuing contradictory or unattainable dreams and ambitions. From an aspirational perspective, the research showed how popular and dominant discourses of aspirations, transmitted via media, induced ambiguities and indecisions within disadvantaged youths, because these youths lacked the capital resources to navigate the hegemonic values and overcome the symbolic violence.
imposed upon by mediated constructions. As such, the role of the media in legitimating and sustaining the social imaginaries annexed by students in the constitution of aspirations is of considerable relevance, especially in relation to the framing of local identities among young people in Hong Kong, and perspectives and tensions towards mainland China.

As witnessed, the body of literature presented in the last two sections highlights the multiple methodological approaches, conceptual resources, empirical sites and foci within the investigation of students’ aspirational formation. In the next section, I move to investigating the research marking out how the English language influences aspiration, given the centrality of English in the research presented here.

### 3.4. English Language and Aspirations

English language as a cultural and symbolic capital can enable or limit a students’ sense of possibilities, especially in a postcolonial context such as Hong Kong. A useful starting point is to examine Norton’s (2001) research into identity construction and language learning and how the English language possibly plays a role in students’ imaginations of their futures. Norton employed Anderson’s (2006) analysis that nations are no longer conceived in blood, but imagined in language and that language has become a locus of social organisation, power and individual consciousness, and a form of symbolic capital. Language learners have fluid temporal and spatial identities which are reproduced in social interactions. Borrowing Bourdieu’s (1977b) ideas of linguistic exchange, Norton (2001) attributes learners’ investment in the language to being motivated by the understanding of acquiring cultural and symbolic capital. Therefore accumulation of English provides the learner a social identity that potentially offers a positional advantage.

In applying Norton’s theories, Gao, Cheng, and Kelly (2008) undertook a small-scale exploratory ethnography into an English club established by mainland Chinese research students studying in a Hong Kong university. The establishment of the club was a response to limited opportunities for students to converse in English. The seven participants in in-depth interviews expressed the benefits of English language, which included the ability to communicate ideas that are unlikely to be discussed using the Chinese language, a better capacity to articulate a vision of the future and better command of English – with its
connotations of higher social class or emerging urban bourgeoisie lifestyle. The researchers found learning English enabled participants to pursue non-linguistic goals. Another longitudinal study by Gao (2008) of another group of Chinese undergraduate students in Hong Kong affirmed the importance of socialisation with family, peer, teachers and other assisting networks in internalising the discourse of education’s contribution to upward social mobility, which then forms part of their self-motivational discourse in the learning of English. Similarly, in interviewing international students at universities across the UK, Welikala and Watkins (2008) found learning English by international students was seen as a way of empowering themselves and enabled them to question and negotiate ‘Western’ knowledge practices. This was achieved by students through using English to legitimise particular ways of constructing knowledge. Welikala (2008) goes on to argue that this way of being, and cultural ways of knowing allows English to maintain its linguistic power over other languages.

In relation to how English shaped imaginations of identities within a globalising context, in a Hungarian study, Miklósy and Medgyes (2000) mapped a change in attitude within its citizens towards English, after alignment to the European Union and opening up of their markets to globalisation. Interestingly, this change in attitude was firstly prominent through the public sphere via media discussions on the lack of language competence of average Hungarians, publication of job advertisements in English and the proliferation of language school and tutoring advertisements. The result was a transformation in the habitus of the general public and a re-imagination of themselves as sophisticated multilinguals and participating members of the European Union. However, a later study by Biava (2001) also highlighted the fear that English may come to contaminate and displace one’s own language, reflective of a postcolonial ambivalence as the condition resulting from the absorption of the dominant linguistic device through mimicry (Bhabha, 1994). The example is demonstrative of how neoliberalism and redefining national boundaries influences other fields of public discourse and transforms the habitus of agents, which sustain the imagination of speaking English, despite ambivalence. The postcolonial legacy of the utility of English in Hong Kong government institutions and the field of business and law resonate with such practices.

In Hong Kong and amongst English speakers of other non-European ethnicities, a challenge exists around the legitimacy of English speakers. English capacity amongst European immigrants in Anglo settings is contested less significantly than by racialised newcomers. An ethnographic study of ESL students by Miller (2000) looking at socialisation into a
mainstream Australian high school, showed how white and fair-haired Bosnian students assimilated quicker, established more friends with English-speaking students and used a wider range of English discourses. This was in comparison to dark-haired Chinese students, who remained isolated from the mainstream and felt discriminated against because their peers and teachers did not acknowledge their legitimacy with English compared with the European immigrants, who physically resembled Caucasian Australians. Indeed, this reflected my own personal experiences growing up in Australia. Creese and Kambere (2003) found the same problem through their focus group interviews with highly educated African women about their experiences with employment, housing, settlement services, mothering, changing gender relations, language and policy concerns. A common theme that arose was the importance of accent in shaping the external perceptions of an individual’s language competence. The intonation of voice is automatically linked to racialised features, with the individual marked as ‘Other’ (Said, 1978). Interestingly, an English-centric imagination can stem from those outside of the mainstream, as was the case in Norton’s (2000) study of Chinese/Vietnamese in Canada who expressed the ‘perfect Canadian’ is one with Caucasian features and English-speaking. Younger generation Vietnamese who wished to conform to mainstream were told by their older generation they would never be ‘perfect Canadians’ and were rejecting their heritage. These examples illustrate a more limited and limiting imagination amongst ethnically diverse legitimate English speakers, and are illustrative of Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence.

Stuart Hall’s (1992) point about the media’s importance in legitimising identities is also salient, and, with respect to race the silences are highly meaningful because this lack of commentary can signal what is not valued in mainstream society. In an analysis of the history of English print media in Hong Kong, Chan (2000) outlined how English-language media historically held a disproportionate influence and conferred symbolic capital of authority and cultural capital on its readers, citing examples of the practice of holding the paper read by every top manager in major companies while taking public transport. It was also explicit in serving the interests of the field of power by working with the local colonial government and associated establishment to shape public opinion. This historical context no doubt helped shape the imagination of the local population. Chan (2000) also notes how the lack of critical English-language media in Hong Kong and the subscription to a master narrative limits the international imagination towards Hong Kong. This is not to say all newcomer speakers are looking to imagine themselves as speakers of Standard English. Studies by Ibrahim (1999)
and Bailey (2000) show how African students and Dominican Americans adopted African American English, with the latter group also using Spanish to differentiate themselves. Similarly, Hong Kong draws upon the local Cantonese dialect, sounding more Anglicised, with code-mixing in English acting as a point of differentiation. Such language differentiation acts as a marker of distinction compared to the mainland neighbouring province of Guangdong that uses the same dialect.

Following on this point of English as a form of distinction, studies from Japan show how the learning of English can also allow learners to transcend gender patriarchy and the opportunity of imagining a different gendered identity option for themselves in a society that exerts strong pressures upon women to conform to selected gender roles (Kobayashi, 2002). McMahill (2001) revealed how English in Japan is linked to feminism and a language of empowerment. In a study examining how schools imagined futures for their students, Kanno (2003) focused on four contrasting schools in Japan and showed marked differences in how these schools presented visions of community. This was evident in how schools prepared the students and hence influenced their future trajectories. The study found a main difference in preparation was how the school prioritised the learning of language, and the extent to which culture was disseminated as part of the curriculum. The international school that emphasised the power of English as the language to connect to the ‘West’ gave the students a future image of growing up being part of an elite international society. This value was transmitted through instruction in full English (except for Japanese language) and cosmopolitanism established through a curriculum rich in multicultural materials. It is not surprising then that this international school was dominated by children from higher socioeconomic groups and located in a wealthy expatriate community. There is a reproductive theme within the expectation of students that they will follow in their parents’ footsteps, and an understanding that the majority of students would advance overseas to undertake tertiary education. Accordingly, Kanno (2003) found about 75% of these students attended American universities. There was also an attitude, particularly amongst non-Japanese students, but also expressed by the teachers in the school, that Japanese is of little relevance.

In comparison, private and public schools presented an inward or regional focus and generally prioritised Japanese or local language literacy over English, and provided the students with a vision of advancing to a Japanese university and pursuing a career in a Japanese or Asian-based organisation. Children in these schools showed high passivity in competence in English in that although there was little difficulty understanding English,
speaking was usually a challenge because of the instructional approaches the school employed. This often led to reticence to speak English as the students progressed, and students questioning the reason for the need to learn English. Kanno (2003) also talks about the role of schools in imagining a future for their students and what they will grow up to be, and the communities they will join in the future. She points to schools’ collective visions of imagined communities for students, conveying images of a society where they have a powerful role, and how this can play a powerful role in pedagogical policies and practices by enabling students to perceive the school as an instrument for enabling the future image. These Japanese studies are relevant re the Hong Kong context in understanding the contesting imaginaries associated with English and the Chinese vernacular, and its implications for social class enrolment preferences.

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter outlined a wide corpus of literature to demonstrate the complex and multifaceted nature of how youth and students’ aspirations are understood by researchers. The first body of research explored the influence of family, socioeconomic class and the immediate social and cultural milieu in aspirational construction. Familial background, knowledge, networks and practices were found to be central as navigational reference points in the construction of aspirational dispositions amongst students. This was mediated by both the class, and the social and cultural contexts, that included schooling, labour market conditions, historical and policy discourses etc. Findings outline the instability of aspirations and the provision of happenstance and contingent conditions as ‘turning points’ (Strauss, 1962) within aspirational (re)orientation. Whilst aspirations could be classified into ‘doxic’ and ‘habituated’, there was also a sense in the literature of the importance of understanding ‘emergent aspirations’ (Zipin et al., 2013). The presented literature also revealed the notion of aspirations based on a rational, individualistic model, and gestured towards the limitations of such an approach.

The second body of literature was selected to illustrate how broader logics and values such as globalisation, modernity, national identity, and neoliberalism played out in shaping students’ aspirations. The literature also placed attention on how public discourse via media
representations influenced such aspirations. The final set of literature focused on how linguistic relations of the English language mediated and structured aspirations, outlining how English was associated in non-native English-speaking regions and countries with class mobility, identity formation and transcending traditional societal norms, and thus was a critical component in aspirational considerations. There were also challenges with what constituted a legitimate English speaker, and the ambivalences connected to English learning. Importantly, how English was represented by schools influenced how this linguistic relation was mediated within students’ aspirations.

The conceptual, methodological and empirical findings and questions raised in this literature review provide insights into research related to the focus of the thesis. But they also point out how existing work could be usefully complemented by an analysis of students’ aspirations, which accounts for the socially and culturally situated way in which students make sense of their futures, including the place of English in their home and schooling experiences. That is, there is a need to work across these different bodies of literature about students’ immediate social circumstances, the broader social milieu in which they are located, and how English language learning is implicated in the sorts of futures students imagine are possible for them. Thus, my study aims to add to the body of sociological research into the constitution of youths’ aspirations, especially in an empirical site such as Hong Kong that has received insufficient attention from a critical sociological approach, much less the application of the particular conceptual instruments brought to bear. As I am doing this by drawing upon Bourdieu’s (1977b) theories of practice, Taylor’s (2004) conception of social imaginaries, and Appadurai’s (2004) notion of the capacity to aspire, the next chapter focuses on the operationalization of these theoretical tools, and implications for data collection and analysis.
4. Research Methodology

4.1. Overview

In order to explore the question of Hong Kong students’ aspirational dispositions, this chapter argues for a methodological approach informed by the theoretical resources presented in Chapter Two – specifically Pierre Bourdieu’s relational approach to practice and epistemic reflexivity, as well as Charles Taylor’s notion of social imaginary, and Arjun Appadurai’s work on the cultural basis of the futurity of new norms. I outline how this methodological approach helps in the development and analysis of the data collected – specifically in making sense of students’ capacity to aspire within a contested social milieu, heavily influenced by a broader neoliberal/‘modern’ social imaginary. In taking account of the research process as a social practice, I also discuss the personal challenges associated with my own role in the data collection and analysis process. Finally, I provide an account of the qualitative methods used in this study, particularly focus group interviews, observations and document analysis.

4.2. Relational Approach

Bourdieu’s relational approach began to be distilled at a time when the oppositional objective/subjective debates which characterised French social science were dominated by the structuralism of Levi-Strauss and the existentialism of Sartre; for Bourdieu, both of these positions encouraged an artificial, false dichotomy, not sufficiently grounded in practice. Bourdieu wanted to reconcile the gains of the two traditions, based on his observations that structures were not static, but actually dynamic and constituting (Grenfell & James, 1998). His careful empirical work over time eventually led him to realise that actual practices only made sense in relation to other practices; they did not possess some sort of inherent/intrinsic ontology, and neither were they simply the product of the broader social structures which contributed to their make-up. Hence, his approach highlighted that social phenomena were
composed of a dialectic of the subjective (habitus) and objective (field), and moved away from the ‘substantialist’ thinking found in positivism and methodological individualism.

Bourdieu (1984) asserted that different practices must be viewed in context, in relation to one another, in the ‘field’ in which they arise. These differences – distinctions – reflect the social and historical context within which they transpire. As Bourdieu explained:

What is commonly called distinction, that is, a certain quality of bearing and manners, often considered innate…is nothing other than difference, a gap, a distinctive feature, in short, a relational property existing only in and through its relation with other properties (p. 6).

Social meaning is therefore patterned through systems of similarities and differences in social space, identified by relative distances between those involved. Bourdieu saw relational thinking as underpinning his notion of field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96). Consequently, research should be focused on the study of the field as a site of contested – relationally distinctive – practices. These relational distinctions encode power differences. In this way, this research seeks to understand, through students’ narratives, the assumptions, familiarities and taken-for-granted beliefs, which reflect the practical interest of social life. As such, students’ mediations, interpretations and meanings were derived from the relations to their everyday familial and schooling experiences, and contextualised by a milieu which was shaped by relations to the field of power (economy, politics) in a spatiotemporal sense.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) described a three-step process to analyse fields. They postulated the first as the need to analyse positions in social space based on people’s relation to the field of power, this being the need to examine the wider national, global and political contexts within which social actors (in this case, students) were located. The second task was to identify the relationships between the students and other players and entities within this space. Lastly, analysis must be undertaken on the habitus of the students and the dispositions they had acquired and internalised, and using the habitus as a tool of investigation as an organised way of questioning the social world (Wacquant, 2011, 2014). As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) put it:

First, one must analyse the position of the field vis-à-vis the field of power... Second, one must map out the objective structure of the relations between the positions occupied by the agents or institutions who compete for the legitimate form of specific
authority of which this field is the site. And, third, one must analyse the habitus of agents, the different systems of dispositions they have acquired in internalising a determinate type of social and economic condition, and which find in a definite trajectory with the field under consideration a more or less favourable opportunity to become actualized (pp. 104-105).

Relational thinking reflects the dynamics of habitus and field, although the boundaries between different fields should be ‘kept soft’ (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 158). Or as Bourdieu warns, ‘the logic of practice is logical up to the point where to be logical would cease to be practical’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 23).

The analysis was undertaken by firstly considering the broader field of power in relation to Hong Kong through its historical and contemporary stance, as a postcolonial, self-proclaimed ‘East meets West’ global city, and ambivalence about its position stimulated by an increasingly dominant Chinese sovereignty. Hong Kong’s position as a free-market entrepot, driven by a historically neoliberal ideology was also considered in respect of its influence upon the aspirations of students. This requires analysis on the systematic ways in which certain fields influence and ‘homogenise’ the autonomy of other fields. As such, the areas of globalisation and mediatisation come to influence the patterns, functioning and hierarchisation of fields (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008) such as family, education, linguistics etc. Secondly, analysis sought to appreciate the influences within the students’ lives that impacted upon their imaginings about the future – their aspirational imaginations – starting from examinations of the familial to the school, and the impact of the institutional logic associated with Hong Kong schooling practices. Thirdly, I analysed how these relational forces helped produce the individual habitus of students, looking into how particular experiences are structured and were structuring the students’ dispositions towards education, the wider society and ultimately their unfolding futures. In the investigation of habitus, Wacquant (2011) points out habitus as a concept to understand how a set of dispositions is *acquired*, dependent on social location and historical experiences. Practical mastery embodied by the habitus operates beneath the level of consciousness and discourse, meaning individuals may not possess a ‘conscious’ understanding. Furthermore, ‘the socially constituted conative and cognitive structures that make-up habitus are malleable and transmissible’, (p. 86) layered through pedagogy, meaning the study of habitus should centre on understanding the internalisation practices which produce the layering.
Investigations to make sense of habitus occurred through seeking to understand how individuals related to the world and the practices encountered in the quotidian, in an attempt to understand the present and historical experiences that have formed such perceptions; what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) called the complex interplay between past and present. Therefore, this investigation started with the products of the inscription processes that were easily articulated by the students: familial pressures and stories passed from parents, their perceptions of the broader Hong Kong society, attitudes transmitted from schooling, and beliefs about what was achievable and inaccessible, both for the present and into the future. In addition, I tried to come to an understanding of how particular student habitus interacted with unfamiliar fields, resulting in disjunctures, generating not only change and transformation, but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty (Reay, 2005).

Furthermore, students’ access to particular capital, which was associated with habitus and development of practical sense, also determined the chance and orientations towards success (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242). This was evident in how specific economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital influenced students’ aspirational capacities. This was manifest through narratives about economic uncertainty, the privileging of certain forms of capital, institutional capital from the choice of schooling, and how students were misrecognising the symbolic power and cultural arbitrariness within various forms of capital such as the legitimacy of English, and its consecration.

4.3. Epistemic Reflexivity

Bourdieu was also critical about how ‘objective’ observers in the process of observation and seeking to interpret practices, import biases or what Bourdieu (1990a) called ‘principles of his [sic] relation to the object’ to the subject in question, thereby creating a distorted understanding of the situation (p. 27). Bourdieu (1990a) remarked that distortions were inherent to the structure of the research relationship, and required researchers to engage in the scientific investigation of their own presuppositions to gain knowledge of how they made sense of the world (1999, p. 608). Bourdieu’s epistemic reflexivity was an approach for reducing unreflected epistemic bias, thus enriching the data collection process. Berger (1990) described reflexivity as requiring the researcher to engage in self-awareness and separation of
their role as a member of society and the analyst undertaking the enquiry. Bourdieu’s epistemic reflexivity entails a more nuanced approach by insisting on the importance of engaging in a ‘sociology of sociology’ to uncover the prejudices, presuppositions and doxic assumptions the researcher imports how she/he perceives the subjects’ understandings of themselves, and the extent to which a researcher’s analysis of knowledge is a reflection of their partial and positioned viewpoint:

The point of view of the detached sociological observer – looking for explanations – produced a distorted understanding of the situation in question, a view which reified and overemphasised ideals, norms, values, etc…these become represented as the ‘rules’ which govern or determine social action (Jenkins, 2006, p. 26).

Hence, when the researcher assumes a ‘detached’ sociological or analytical stance to observe a given social situation, he/she may unconsciously look for rules of understanding to explain the social behaviour. This influences the kind of questions asked of the subject, steering him/her to produce responses - ‘what it is believed ought to happen’ (Jenkins, 2006, p. 28). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argued that these rule-governed models were a product derived from the objectification process and this ‘theoretical posture’ produced interpretations of the social world that mistook scholastic reasoning for practical reasoning (Jenkins, 2006, p. 27). By understanding the methods and techniques employed by the researcher, epistemic reflexivity could then be viewed as serving to explain the fluidity of social life, reducing confusion between the model of reality and the reality of the model.

Bourdieu outlined three types of these prejudices that may act as distortions. The first bias is the social origins and ‘coordinates’ (class, gender, ethnicity etc.) of the researcher, which he contended could be managed through mutual and self-criticism. Secondly, he identified how the field of academe and the field of power imposed upon the action and beliefs of the researcher. Finally and most distinctively, he pointed to the intellectual bias of the researcher, who makes assumptions that the world ‘is a set of significations to be interpreted rather than concrete problems to be solved practically’(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 39). In these ways, reflexivity helps in shifting the researcher’s perception of what counts as valid knowledge during the research process and the validity of methods and methodology, thereby helping to avoid the false sense of objectivity that may arise from using the instruments of analysis and which can distort understandings of practice as evident in data.
Practically speaking, instances of making sense of action, looking for ‘rules’ to understand practices, generally through verbal communications with the actors, were likely to ‘produce normative, value-oriented statements about what ought to happen, rather than a valid description of ‘what goes on’ (Jenkins, 2006, p. 28). As such, Bourdieu argued that researchers needed to be aware, firstly of the ‘discourse of familiarity’, that which goes without saying; the presuppositions of everyday life that are left unsaid. Secondly, the ‘outside-orientated discourse’, whereby the actor presumed the researcher’s unfamiliarity with the social world in question because of the uninformed nature of questions asked. And thirdly, ‘semi-theoretical dispositions’, which were ‘the product of learned questioning’ leading researchers to dwell on the extreme possibilities, leading to formulation of rules in accounts (p. 31).

Consequently, this necessitated the researcher making a shift from understanding practices as characterised by rules, to a conception of practice as the product of more active strategies on the part of those under investigation. Just as researchers were not automata responding to various stimuli beyond their comprehensions, so too for those subject to research processes. Bourdieu (1999a) called this a rejection of ‘epistemological innocence’, calling for the researcher to state her/his positionality and disclosing the intention, values and assumptions that underlie that position as a precursor to any form of analysis. This process required the researcher to firstly objectify the experiences of the participants, and secondly acknowledge that distortion has necessarily been created in this effort to make sense of practice:

Social science must not only, as objectivism would have it, break with native experience and the native representation of that experience, but also, by a second break, call into question the presuppositions inherent in the position of the ‘objective’ observer who, seeking to interpret practices, tends to bring into the object the principles of his relation to the object, as is shown for example by the privileged status he gives to communicative and epistemic functions, which inclines him to reduce exchanges to pure symbolic exchanges (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 27).

Hence, the researcher can avoid exercising symbolic violence, or at least acknowledge attempts to do so, by acknowledging the research process as an interpretation of reality, of practice.

Epistemic reflexivity implies that data collected involves a process of co-creation on the part of both the participant and researcher, with the emerging data constantly negotiated, evolving
and dynamic. In this way, I recognise the participants as competent social actors, capable of their own interpretation, and through this understanding, I come to acknowledge that the meaning actors give to actions are necessarily a part of, and must be taken into account in, any effort to understand practice. Bourdieu (1977b) made this discovery as part of his break from the ‘structuralist paradigm’ during his study of matrimonial practices in the Bernaise community in which he grew up, and through his comparison between earlier work he undertook in Kabyle society. Such understandings were in contrast to the viewpoint that the participant was talking to a passive, ‘distant’ researcher who simply received information:

In short, I wanted less to observe the observer as an individual, which is in itself not particularly interesting, than to observe the effects produced on the observation, on the description of the thing observed, by the situation of the observer- to uncover all the presuppositions inherent in the theoretical posture as an external, remote, distant or, quite simply, non-practical, non-committed, non-involved vision. And it struck me that there was an entire, basically false social philosophy which stemmed from the fact that the ethnologist has ‘nothing to do’ with the people he studies, with their practices and their representations, except to study them (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 60).

Hence, the interview research process, as an attempt to illuminate the participants’ representation of certain situations, is by its very nature, an intrusive and somewhat arbitrary social exchange. The researcher is the instigator of the ‘game’, establishes the rules, and assigns the objectives and questions of interview – reinforcing an asymmetry through the researcher’s social hierarchy evident in the linguistic and symbolic exchange. Bourdieu highlighted the need for ‘non-violent communication’, an attempt to reduce the distance from the participants through total availability to the person being questioned, striving to make sense of the participant’s language, views, feelings and thoughts, and ensuring the level of verbal and non-verbal language used was appropriate to encourage participant responses (Bourdieu, 1999c, pp. 608-610). This was achieved by imparting to the participants the feeling of legitimacy to be themselves, through the tone adopted, the questions asked, ‘without pretending to cancel the social distance separating [the interviewer and participant]’, but questioning based on constant effort to understand the social space participants occupy (pp. 612-613). The role of the researcher was to assist in helping participants to verbalise what was difficult to admit and accept. In effect, the interviewer was establishing the conditions of discourse, carrying the experiences from the private to the public sphere (pp. 614-615).
Bourdieu wanted to avoid the false choice between ‘the unreal intimacy of a subjectivist position - an essentially descriptive model of the social world as it was believed to be experienced – or the equally misleading superiority of objectivism’ (Jenkins, 2006, p. 31). Instead, he insisted that research should be seen as an ‘epistemological experiment’ (Wacquant, 1989, p. 33) and a kind of exploration and reflexivity should be involved in every stage of research from establishing the object of research, within data collection, in analysis to presenting the findings, or what Bourdieu (1990a) refers to as ‘fieldwork in philosophy’. On the latter, Bourdieu wanted to pick up on the necessary and ongoing imbrications of the empirical and theoretical. In doing so, the researcher was better aware of what was actually the ‘reality’ of the world, and what was merely an artefact of the research process (Jenkins, 2006). Indeed, Jenkins (2006) argued that Bourdieu’s greatest contribution to the social sciences is a methodological one, through his recognition of the practicality of epistemological matters in all phases of research.

### 4.4. Imagination-Based Approach

Taylor’s (2004) concept of social imaginary also informed the methodology because it foregrounded the broad frame of reference in which modern individuals imagined and conceived of their own independent constitution, how individuals related to each other, and the individual’s relationship to the wider society. The notion of social imaginary reflects a sense of moral order that constitutes modernity, allowing individuals an understanding of how to act in different situations, with whom, and in relation to a shared or common understanding. Practices are formulated within the sphere of a collective, mass-mediated imaginary, that transcends national space (Appadurai, 1996). This means students’ genres are embedded with ‘ordinariness’ or taken-for-granted within social experiences and practices that inform the quotidian of students’ lives.

Within the social imaginary, futures were conceived and framed by the students in the context of a collective social imagination that was constituted through the repertory of social practices articulated by students, existing in first-person subjectivities (Gaonkar, 2002) embedded in symbols, addresses, ritual, stances, images, stories, legends, visuals and
metaphors that are interconnected, mutually dependent and constituting. Gaonkar (2002) argued that:

Within the folds of a social imaginary, we see ourselves as agents who traverse a social space and inhabit a temporal horizon, entertain certain beliefs and norms, engage in and make sense of our practices in terms of purpose, timing, and appropriateness, and exist among other agents (p. 10).

This practice-based imaginary contains a sense of how the future will be (the factual), and what futures are self-evident or invalid (the normative), and how students reinterpreted or found new meaning (Femke, 2006). From this perspective, this required scrutinising and distilling the practices and narratives complicit in students’ constructions of the world around them and themselves within it, in dimensions of both space and time, including the state of flux that constitutes these imaginaries (Gaonkar, 2007). For instance, teaching practices, ‘purist’ forms of English, qualifications and apologies, dispositions of embarrassment, and other mythologies that surround English and EMI schooling in Hong Kong and how the linguistic capital operates within symbolic systems constituted an embedded social imaginary within the broader ‘modern social imaginary’ (Taylor, 2004).

Furthermore, people live under multiple social imaginaries – national, ethnicity, popular mainstream, the public, humanity, democratic, neoliberal etc. (Gaonkar, 2002), implying the need to comprehend how their complex and sometimes contradictory manifestations inform upon the students’ constructions of aspirations. For example, three social imaginaries identified by Taylor (2004) in the constitution of ‘Western’ modernity – the public sphere, the market, and the self-constituting citizen state – ‘predisposes a self-reflexive structure of circulation built around some social action’ (Lee & LiPuma, 2002, p. 193). Thus, social imaginaries should be appreciated as evolving, multiple, interconnected and overlapping, with implications for re-negotiation, change and the opening up of one imaginary to another from new encounters, within the presiding legitimacy (Gatens & Lloyd, 1999). For instance, Hong Kong students’ imaginary of living in a global city are challenged by economic realities and ascriptions to the multiple dominant discourses from forces such as globalisation and neoliberalism, internationalism etc. This negotiation of competing imaginaries is revealed through existence of homogenous or heterogeneous versions of modernity within students’ narratives, and the students’ capacities to contest existing imaginaries and re-imagine alternative discourses. It extends students’ spatial orientations in relation to their common
understanding surrounding Hong Kong’s distinctive identity and legitimated perceptions of mainland China, whereby media representations and popular discourse powerfully constitute and are constituted.

The concept of social imaginary complements, but also extends Bourdieu’s relational thinking, by incorporating the wider social context of contemporary populations within fluid societies. These contexts stretch beyond confined national borders, and help construct the formation of possibly global future aspirations. Social imaginary is conceptually useful in encapsulating the mutual and recursive constitution of habitus and field which forms the ‘background’ that informs social practices. The concept extends Bourdieu’s thinking tools by challenging the self-conserving nature of habitus, highlighting habitus’ slow-to-change nature. This extension also permits the conceptualisation of aspirational trajectories that are more mutable and problematic to frame (or risk critique as static), through ‘doxic’ position, and ‘habituated’ dispositions. Furthermore, it integrates well with Appadurai’s (2004) future as a cultural capacity approach, because the approach recognises this background is plural and open to change and contestation.

4.5. Future as a Cultural Capacity

Appadurai (2004) places the futurity of the new norms as a cultural capacity at the centre of his conception of the capacity to aspire, providing the paradigm for reframing culture, and the possibility for change outside of reproductive social and cultural contexts. His concept arises through criticism of how the dominant discourse over future orientation of culture has been contradictory because culture, customarily framed by ‘habit, custom, heritage, tradition’, contains an implied opposition to future development, framed in terms of ‘future-plans, hopes, goals, targets’ (p. 60). Furthermore, Appadurai argues that the science of future development has been dominated by the field of economics, through the language of ‘wants, needs, expectations, calculations’ (p. 60).

Appadurai reframes this debate through what he terms three key developments for the recovery of the future as cultural capacity, which can be used to interrogate the data to uncover and frame students’ aspirational capacities. The first concept of relationality is already familiar through earlier discussions of Bourdieu’s relational approach; that is, the
systematic and generative nature of collective relationships within cultural accounts, and the interconnectedness of norms, values, beliefs towards conceptions of the future. As Appadurai (2004) remarks, ‘Aspirations to the good life are part of some sort of system of ideas…which locates them in a larger map of local ideas and beliefs’ (pp. 67-68). Therefore, students’ conceptions of the future are based on a cultural capacity, grounded by relations to the familial, schooling, language, and the broader cultural context. We can examine how these relations provide the cultural apparatuses that enabled or activated aspirational possibilities, including students’ understandings of the connections within aspirational horizons.

Secondly, Appadurai (2004) discusses the possibility of change to sedimented structures and changing the ‘terms of recognition’ (Taylor, 1994), through the instrument of ‘dissensus’ within existing dominant frameworks of consensus. He contends that cultural dissensus is conventional, with the implication that shared culture does not mean complete consensus, but rather a shared platform for participatory voices. This connects well to Taylor’s conceptions of ‘social imaginary’ because it opens up the opportunity for contestation within systems of common understandings and shared legitimation based on social and cultural genres.

The last development which Appadurai (2004) flags is that the boundaries of cultural systems are ‘leaky’ within the era of globalisation, visible in processes of migration, trade, internet, warfare. Consequently, ‘traffic and osmosis’ (p. 61) are the norm, implying that cultural systems are diverse, heterogeneous and plural, and continuously reconfiguring. This point interconnects and reinforces strongly the earlier points concerning relationality and dissensus, and further challenges static accounts of culture by emphasising change as inherent and inevitable. To operationalize this concept, it warrants the analysis of aspirations within the perspective of a broader cultural context, and awareness of how movements in cultural systems influence aspirational capacity. This extends to understanding the nuanced effects of globalisation, neoliberalism, modernity, national identity etc. and its impact on relations to futurity in terms of anxieties, confidences, degrees of engagements and so forth.

Appadurai (2013) further adds that in order to gain a sense of the capacity to aspire as a cultural capacity, the examination of ideas of the good life is critical. This extends beyond Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, and allows refraining from logics of reproduction of the status quo, moving towards the relational idea that ‘cultural systems also shape specific images of the good life as a map of the journey from here to there and from now to then, as a part of the ethics of everyday life’ (p. 292).
4.6. Acknowledging the Person of the Researcher

As part of this process of epistemic reflexivity, it is important to discuss and acknowledge how my role as an international researcher influenced, distorted or limited the data, through the language I employed, my positionality in relation to the students, the ways in which I projected my interests and intentions onto the interviewees, and my presuppositions regarding school life, and ways of thinking more generally. In addition, I maintained an awareness of the initial biases at the commencement of my research study, and how this investigation gradually altered my perspectives. In this way, I hope to acknowledge how the stance I adopted as a researcher has helped to co-create the data, and the limitations this process brings forth.

4.6.1. Holding Back

My position as an Australian postgraduate research student, with an Australian English accent, instead of a local Hong Kong English accent, could have influenced students’ perceptions of the interview and reduced disclosure because students may have assumed the interviewer’s unfamiliarity with local cultural practices, norms, conventions, linguistic devices used within the school and student community. Moreover, students could have provided accounts more in line with how they perceive they should act as an interviewee or student, thereby giving accounts of practice which may lack a sense of the immediacy of practice, or the logic of practice. So their accounts would have been more akin to ‘accounts of practice’, than providing access to the variability, contingency, contradictoriness and embeddedness of practice. Also, students may not have willingly disclosed information because there could have been difficulty or additional effort elaborating in-depth on certain points, especially if students were not confident in their own English proficiency, compared to that of the interviewer. Evidence of this surfaced when at times students in the process of explanation would struggle grammatically to express the response in their thoughts, and consequently give up. At other times, students would offer qualifications and apologies for their poor English proficiency. Encouragements for students to persist in elaboration via clarifying questions were helpful because it demonstrated my interest, and therefore
conveyed the importance for the students to continue verbalising. Peers also gave encouragements through frequently helping each other to fill in words or statements when the speaker was pausing to find the right English words for me to understand, without resorting to code-mixing in the Cantonese Chinese vernacular.

In the same light, the students could have limited their level of disclosure because I did not speak or understand the local Chinese dialect, as Hong Kong students seemed more comfortable freely expressing themselves in code-mixing rather than purely in the English language. There were a few instances when the students could only find words in Cantonese Chinese and struggled to locate the suitable translations in English. An instance of this phenomenon transpired when one of the students used a Cantonese Chinese word, hoping that I would understand, and then deciding it was too difficult to explain in English, gave up and changed the topic.

From a language perspective, the exchange of questions and responses between the interviewer and students could also have been inhibited or misunderstood due to differences in the linguistic devices the students were used to, or the levels of conversational formality of each student. The impression from comparing the focus groups showed that the tone of the students influenced the method, breadth and depth of information that was disclosed. For example, a focus group of students from one school, ‘Town Secondary School’, who framed the interview as an opportunity to voice their opinions and dissatisfactions to an ‘outsider’, tended to elaborate voluntarily and required less prompting and fewer probing questions. On the other hand, the focus group of students from ‘East Secondary School’, where some of the students initially adopted an attitude of indifference, answered concisely to the question, but did not care to elaborate or volunteer additional information, until prompted by further questions. This example is indicative of the requirement of the researcher to be present in the moment and aware of the difference in dynamics, or what Bourdieu refers to as the ‘sociological feel or eye’ (Bourdieu P., 1999, p. 608), in order to minimise limitations in communication.

In spite of the concern over whether or not students possessed the linguistic faculties to understand and respond to what may have been a confusing litany of questions, and not always worded as succinctly as desired, I was somewhat surprised at the degree of English listening comprehension, and in most instances the articulation and openness provided by the student participants. When I complimented the participants’ English comprehension, students
readily admitted on several different occasions that their listening and reading skills were superior to their speaking, attributing this to the cultural and pedagogic nature of Hong Kong classrooms; teachers do most of the talking, and students lack the environment to practice their speaking. Erica from Southwest Secondary said:

We just listen to our teachers as they speak English. We [acts out nodding head] and say ‘yeah, yeah. It’s okay.’ (Erica, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

Students from East Bay Secondary provided another insight:

Fonnie: Hong Kong students are good at reading English, but not speaking English because we don’t have many chances to speak English with native speakers.

Sammi: And also some teachers don’t speak English when teaching.

(Group laughs) (Students, East Bay Secondary School)

I therefore came to a realisation during the short session together that these students had an abundance to share, and there were many lost opportunities because schooling did not encourage these students to express themselves.

4.6.2. Intrusions

The power established in my role as an international researcher, and as an external and arbitrary intruder into the routines of these students’ lives, led to a mild degree of uncertainty on behalf of the students about how to ‘properly’ conduct or respond. This uncertainty manifested itself explicitly in the mistaken identity by the students later through e-mail correspondence in referring to me as ‘professor’. It established what I felt must have been a certain apprehension in students’ responses initially. As I was assumed to be removed and unfamiliar to the students’ world, it ensured participants elaborated and delved further into their statements and assumptions to ensure I understood their world. However, this point is also made in the knowledge that such ‘elaborated’ accounts are also, and always, accounts of practice for a researcher, reflective of perhaps a cautionary disposition on the part of students who may feel they have to give accounts of practice which they perceive the researcher to be seeking. This is an example of my attempts at challenging various processes of ‘participant
objectivation’ – of being explicitly aware of how participants’ accounts are not somehow self-evident, but always open to being, and needing to be, interpreted (Jenkins, 2006). Again, this presents a challenge to making sense of the ‘logic’ of practice. In correcting their mistake regarding the title of ‘professor’, the students then referred to their teachers who had given this title, and were revealing about how the teachers perhaps regarded this research – possibly with the same uncertainty as the students.

Additionally, there was an instance when a student participant framed a question as in an examination and asked if there was an answer I, as the researcher, was seeking. I responded to the situation by inviting the student not to think about the answer I wanted, but respond based on her thoughts, conclusions and sentiments. In this instance, it was possible student participants consciously distorted their responses because they were anxious to impress, giving favourable or ‘politically correct’ responses as representatives of their schools, censoring responses, or what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear; the challenges of a preconstructed space (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As the exact process of recruitment of the research participants was unknown and determined by the schools and gatekeepers who had granted site access, there was uncertainty as to how the research was framed to these student participants, and to teachers involved in coordinating them. Nonetheless, many students were willing to voluntarily share negative aspects about schooling life, perhaps partly because they believed the research was a vehicle to carry their voices, hopefully enabled through the sense of trust I tried to establish within the focus group setting. Relatedly, the interviewed students acted as co-analysts during the focus group discussions, revealed by insights and commentaries expressed, demonstrating some social awareness of the conditions of their own social positions and that of others.4 In this respect, Bourdieu (1990a) offered that ‘the sense of the position occupied in social space, which always involves a sense of the place of others and, more precisely, a practical mastery of the two independent and homologous spaces and of their correspondence’ (p. 114). Hence, students, through social experience and social positioning, can gain limited insights into their conditions.

4 Students’ partial ability to act as co-analyst in identifying sociological constructions raises interesting methodological questions, which are embodied in critiques by Ranciere (Pelletier, 2009) and Boltanski (2011) on Bourdieu’s theory of misrecognition. Whilst this is not reconciled in this thesis, it is interesting to ask where the process of misrecognition and reconnaissance ends and begins, and potentially how ambivalent relations are implicated in this process.
As the interviewer, there was an attempt as the interviews progressed to convey a sense to the students in the interview that such focus groups from international researchers were not out-of-the-ordinary, and to share my familiarity with their routines and struggles from reading about and interviewing other students. Phrases such as ‘I’ve heard from other students this is the case…’ and talking about common difficulties in the local setting helped to carry across this point. This process of trying to reduce the distance between the researcher and the participant, helped to actively constitute the subsequent data, and again showed how unfolding narratives were deeply influenced, as they always are, by the very research process itself (Bourdieu, 1999c).

There were also two separate instances when students emailed afterwards for advice and recommendations to improve their English proficiency. The two requests demonstrated the perception by these students during the interview process that their English proficiency was inadequate, perhaps a reflection of their sense of ability to fully express themselves during the interview process. In another instance, a student asked for assistance afterwards in helping her find job experiences and internship opportunities during the summer holidays. During the focus group interview, the student had expressed her pessimism regarding entry to study her chosen vocation, and subsequently her actions were an attempt to seek alternative aspirational avenues. This was produced from what Bourdieu (1999c) remarked as ‘the investigator occup[y]ing] a higher place in the social hierarchy of different types of capital, cultural capital in particular’ (p. 609).

4.6.3. Distant Perspectives

I believe the condition of being part of an ethnically Chinese-Taiwanese diaspora, living in and educated in Australia from an early age, and my recent years of being ‘displaced’ to a distant and semi-familial territory to reside, work and to undertake research, have significantly influenced my approach to the research. In the four years living in Hong Kong, I was able to observe and awkwardly ‘learn’ the habits, customs, the taken-for-granted values, idiosyncrasies, and contradictions that were constitutive of the doxic rhythms of the local Hong Kong. Muddling through the initial feelings of discomfort and uncertainty, I was able to understand and adopt part of the social norms of how expatriates were supposed, and allowed to conduct working and educational practices, and down to the general pace of the
city, embodied in the ‘jogging pace’ of my walking speed. There was the sense on one hand of familiarity that runs through ethnic Chinese communities, and on the one hand an unfamiliarity and awkwardness that was grounded locally, which led me to an attempt to learn the language, a dialect in which I could not communicate, and that awakened a sense of cultural appreciation of not only Hong Kong, but deeper understanding of other cultural contexts. But the continual feeling of not completely belonging to the place persisted, a condition of displacement or exile described by Barbour (2007) in reference to Edward Said’s work, as:

…a way of dwelling in space with a constant awareness that one is not at home. The exile is oriented to a distant place and feels that he [sic] does not belong where he lives. Exile is also an orientation to time, a plotting of one’s life story around a pivotal event of departure and a present condition of absence from one’s native land (p. 293).

From a research perspective, I found myself constantly shifting back and forth mentally, comparing between the Australian conditions I was familiar with from my schooling days, and the remote circumstances under investigation, in both a spatial and temporal context. I especially reminisced about the relatively carefree periods of schooling, contrasting it to the pressure and anxieties these students disclosed through their narratives, body language, hesitations, and general sense of ambivalence about their future aspirations. It therefore made me feel conflicting sentiments when reflecting on Australian educational policy reforms and discourse that increasingly focused on ‘looking East’ (Sellar & Lingard, 2013) to countries like Hong Kong, with high performativity scores, but ignoring the symptoms of psychological challenges and other fallouts wrought from a highly competitive, numbers-oriented educational system.

The distanced perspective, which disposed me to cross-reference to the cultural understanding gained through my background, was significant in guiding my questioning and research interests, reflected in the follow-up questions I asked, and the time spent on each topic. Undoubtedly, it also did not help mask my surprise when students responded unexpectedly to what I had anticipated. I was occasionally left with a high regard for a few of the students, impressed through their conversational fluency, openness to sharing with an outsider, and insights behind their responses. It is curious to ponder how my displaced and privileged researcher condition, with its inherent connotations of spatial mobility and educational aptitude, representing aspirational qualities the student participants were
constructed to aspire to, may have influenced students’ to re-imagine the aspirational possibilities available to them after the interviews. As Bourdieu (1999c) says:

…the researcher helps create the conditions for an extra-ordinary discourse, which might never have been spoken, but which was already there, merely awaiting the conditions for its actualization (p. 614).

In other words, my implied embodiment of cultural capital as a research student, and by the very nature of the interview as an instrument that focuses and reviews their relations to the broader field, may have provided opportunities for students in regards to fully appreciating aspirational possibilities. Indeed, one of the students, ‘Jessica’, emailed after graduation to inform me how she ended up pursuing her stated aspirations, but in Australia, observing how she felt lucky and more relaxed compared to her peers who had stayed in Hong Kong.

4.6.4. Moderation

A striking reflection during my period undertaking this research was awareness of the changes of my initial perspectives and biases, towards a more moderate, humanistic and less parochial perspective for assessing the social world and its interactions. The research made me more sympathetic to students’ expressed anxieties, and, in adopting the viewpoints of my participants, compelled me to adopt a more empathetic stance, especially about broader relations within Hong Kong, such as the fast, asynchronous pace of business, constant financial burdens and worries, severely restricted living space, the plight of working class senior residents, and in one instance witnessing the suicide of a senior resident who jumped off the third-floor of a shopping centre atrium. I reflected on the incident and how the social milieu and Hong Kong’s absence of a social welfare system might have instigated this.

What I coined as my initial perspectives and biases were, I believe, formed through the trainings and experiences that were more or less internalised through my background in the world of business and finance. This perspective was implicitly based on the values of neoliberalism (such as competitiveness, individual ‘freedom’, choice and self-responsibility), which I previously held with self-evident certitude and without much criticality. There was a gradual recognition to my misrecognition of doxic conceptions of ‘freedom’, connected to the realisation that the student participants were the victims of a similar misrecognition, with
adverse consequences. The pluralisation of my perspective began during my readings of the theoretical materials for this dissertation, especially Bourdieu’s works that implicitly and explicitly critiqued the neoliberalism discourse (Swartz, 2003). However, this transformation in perspective became most profound while I was engaged in the data collection process and afterwards, in analysis. The recognition was gained that the students’ pessimism and anxiety about their futures were not singularly a failure of their own abilities or motivations, or their parents’ choices, which neoliberal discourse clearly delineated, but also attributable to a symbolic violence exerted upon them by this discourse that attributes blame for the failure. It was through attempting to understand the students’ anxieties, aspirations and presuppositions that a mirror of my own presuppositions came to the fore.

4.7. Method Overview

The research was undertaken from 2012 to 2013 using a purposive sample group of thirty students in total across three government EMI schools in three different areas across Hong Kong. A purposive sample of senior school students from Forms Five and Six (ages 15-16) was recruited for the project. Student focus groups of five to six participants, and two focus groups per school, were used as the primary data collection tool to gather detailed information into students’ aspirations and imagined futures, and their relationship towards the English language. Analysis of online content, policy documents and documents posted on the schools’ websites was a supplementary tool to measure the schools’ public discourse and the subjectivities the school constructed for the students, in order to compare them to the actual practices articulated by the students.

4.7.1. Research Setting

The research setting constituted three government secondary schools, from three distinct regions across Hong Kong. The different settings provide insights into a more varied conception of students’ aspirations. In keeping with the constitutive nature of habitus, students’ narratives reflected their positioning within these local settings. This was useful as
students often described their schools in relation to their perceptions of the local environment of which they were a part.

All the schools selected were categorised as EMI and hence the schools were officially required to use English to teach their students for the majority of subjects. The decision to select EMI schools provided the opportunity to more explicitly explore English and English language’s connection to the nature of the broader Hong Kong social milieu, including more neoliberal practices, and enabled the investigation of English as a valued capital and as a form of distinction. Pragmatically, it was also convenient to undertake focus group interviews from an English language perspective – the language to which both I and the participants in the study had mutual access. Furthermore, most EMI schools were generally academically and reputationally stronger than CMI schools, and situated in more or less middle class\(^5\) populations, which allowed for more focused insights into the aspirational possibilities of such students, as compared to lower socioeconomic classes that faced the constraints of insufficient economic resources. This study was also about trying to understand how English plays out in a contested site such as Hong Kong, and learning more about the nuances which characterise EMI schooling sites, which may appear from the outside to be readily characterised by specific forms of distinction, and developed English language capacity. The reality is somewhat different, and the research provides important insights into lived practices, rather than ‘external’ perceptions.

An overview of the government schools and the surrounding environment is described below:

**Table 4-1 Description Of The Schools And The Local Districts**

| Town Secondary School | Town Secondary is a government co-educational grammar school with over 40 years of history, and traditionally has an academically strong reputation. It is located in the most populous district in Hong Kong, and an established district of the New Territories, with a mix of public and private housing, |

\(^5\) The definition of what constitutes ‘middle class’ in Hong Kong is debated, given the absence of government consensus. I refer to Ball (2003) on his elaboration into how ‘middle class’ is designated. However I also acknowledge how changing conditions of the economy, especially local housing affordability, have the potential to adversely redefine notions of middle-classness (Li, 2013).
commercial shopping malls, cultural attractions and amenities, accessible public transport, and government offices and health facilities. The location had a high concentration of schools and educational institutions, including one of Hong Kong’s leading universities.

| Southwest Secondary School | Southwest Secondary is a government co-educational school with over 30 years history, and situated close to two government-subsidised Catholic secondary schools, and a primary school. It is located on the quieter fringes of one of the most densely populated regions in Kowloon, traditionally with high industrial concentration, and new commercial buildings. The district is characterised by below average income, and historically high proportions of poverty, and an ageing population. |
| East Bay Secondary School | East Bay Secondary is a government co-educational school, founded over 30 years ago. It is located in a large residential area in an outer rural district of the New Territories, housing about 500,000 people. The district is relatively far from working urban areas but has a mix of medical and recreational facilities, natural beach and fishing amenities, shopping mall complexes and educational facilities, including an internationally renowned private school. |

None of these schools were classified as an elite public school, although ‘Town Secondary School’ was ranked as a Band One school - the highest of three bands, reflecting the school’s high academic achievement. The elite government schools, which are always Band One schools, generally have longer histories of operation and as institutions that have taught with English as the MOI to foster an elite ruling class, given their closer proximity to the colonial ruling class. As admission policies for government schools weighed strongly in favour of geographic catchment zone, the majority of students resided in the local area. The students interviewed from Town Secondary School seemed more capable and/or willing to elaborate in length on the questions posed, and expressed themselves more effectively through English. I note also that my initial ambitions to gain access to elite schooling in Hong Kong were thwarted in a few cases by the refusal of the principal and vice-principals of these institutions to permit research, citing schooling policy. One school verbally agreed, but then withdrew consent later. Many others did not reply to emails after initial telephone contact.
Access to undertake research in the respective schools did not require specific consent from the Education Bureau, but instead had to be negotiated directly with the school principals, after a written request detailing the specifics of the research project.

4.7.2. Participants

29 students in Secondary Five or Six (previously referred to as Form Five and Six, and equivalent to Australian Grade 11 and 12) were selected from across three EMI government secondary schools to conduct focus groups. The selection of three sites provided for variability within the sample. One student from Southwest Secondary School voluntarily elected to conduct an individual 30 minute interview. Students were aged between 15 and 16 years inclusive. This was an appropriate age because the students were exiting out of the secondary school system within the next year or two, and choices about their future studies and career paths were imminent. Participants also had close to 11 to 12 years of schooling life, and in the transition process had a better sense of where they were heading in the future compared with students from lower grades. The level of English competency of higher grade students selected was expected to be sufficient to allow interview questions to be understood and responded to in English, which was found to be the case.

This sample was purposive because it was an attempt to understand the in-depth perceptions and strategies of a selective student population which already had some English proficiency, and that resided and attended school in three demographically different areas of Hong Kong. The number of schools and students was chosen to enable more in-depth insights into the lived experiences and the practices of these students, as well as some variety across different contexts. The relatively small number of participants per focus group also enabled a deeper exploration of the students’ aspirations by enabling time for students to elaborate further on themes, compared to surveys or questionnaires.

As the selection of participants was arranged internally by the school, coordinated through the teachers or vice-principals, the sample could have been biased towards certain groups of students selected within each school. This was evident, for example, in a focus group from ‘Town Secondary School’, which consisted of students from the school’s student council and senior prefects. Whilst the majority of interviewed students were not overly confident in their use of English, as evident in how they engaged in various forms of self-censoring, the school
may have selected students that were more articulate with English, giving an impression of heightened English proficiency in the school as a whole. School pride may have been a factor, and indeed, the research process itself may have been construed by the leaders in this school as a vehicle for the ‘favourable’ promotion of their school.

From a historical contextual perspective, the student participants lived through a period marked by several major events. This included the height of the Asian financial crisis, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic, the dominance of terrorism in the media post 9/11, China’s assertion as a dominant economic and political power, and the recent global financial crisis, with its implications for the temporary contraction of the local labour market.

4.8. Instruments and Procedures

4.8.1. Outline

Focus groups, observations and document compilation were the primary methods used to collect data. The focus group interviews were appropriate to provide in-depth exploration of issues and uncover the doxic experiences of these students, which would otherwise be less evident or detailed using survey or questionnaire formats. The method allowed students to exchange dialogue about individual and collective perspectives, and the reduced time imposition compared to individual interviews improved gatekeepers’ acceptance of the investigation. From an ethical perspective, this approach also minimised intrusion on students’ highly pressured lives. Observations of students’ non-verbal body language and social environments were also incorporated to contextualise the analysis. Discursive social-theoretic analysis of school policy documents and the schools’ websites, informed by Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus, capital, Appadurai’s capacity to aspire, and Taylor’s social imaginaries, helped to reveal the subjectivities that the schools and their policies helped constitute, and enabled richer understandings of the schooling practices expressed by the students. The application of the analytical concepts to the data helped to provide the themes and framework to explore and elaborate students’ lived experience, as this pertained to these field-relevant aspirational imaginaries.
4.8.2. Ethical Considerations

Written consent for students’ participation in the focus group was collected from individual students and their parents (see Appendices for information sheets and consent forms). Kleiber (2004) stressed the need to establish ground-rules at the beginning of the focus group that addressed confidentiality and ethical considerations, and shared the goals and uses of the collected information, the responsibilities of the interviewer and the expectations of the participants. Therefore, students were informed about these points through the information sheet provided, and gave written consent in relation to this. And again, prior to the commencement of focus group sessions, they further reinforced this written consent through their verbal consent. Additionally, students also verbally confirmed understanding of their freedoms to disclose or withhold information, and that they could contact me with any concerns and amendments after the research. This message was reiterated during interview sessions with the participants when there were signs of hesitancy and uncertainty regarding the choice of whether to disclose or not, for example when students hesitated to speak out on certain issues that painted the school in a negative light, such as shedding light on teachers who instructed in Chinese Cantonese despite explicit policy against this practice during the time.

Students were told there were no right or wrong answers, and students should be free to express opinions and ideas, even if these differed from those shared by other students. Participants were encouraged to interact with each other and ask questions of the interviewer if questions were unclear. These steps were critically important to establishing an accepting and non-threatening environment, and reducing fears that could exist in sharing their views with others in the group, such as those which could be construed as leading to judgement or ridicule (Hennink, 2007). Further permission was obtained within the interview to follow-up with additional questions through phone or e-mail.

Interviews were also conducted during the non-peak times of a student’s school calendar, corresponding to the beginning of first semester or end of last semester, to ensure this did not add to the stress and pressures of normal schooling life, and especially the preparation for high-stakes examinations. Students were therefore more relaxed during these sessions than would have otherwise been the case.
4.8.3. Focus Groups

Focus group discussions were employed to gather qualitative information from the students. The method gave confidence in terms of access to participants from the gatekeepers’ perspective – in terms of both student safety, as well as the usefulness of the experience for students, generating interactive group conversations, and gathering broad and in-depth data.

Hennink (2007) defined focus group discussion as a qualitative research method that involved discussing a ‘specific set of issues (and topics provided by the researcher) with a pre-determined group of people’ (p. 4). The purpose was to obtain an understanding of the issues from the participants’ perspectives through identifying a range of different views in relation to the research topic. Compared to conventional one-on-one interviews, group interviews allowed the collection of broader information from a single session, exploring complex themes and issues in unanticipated ways (Morgan, 1993). Given that knowledge is socially constructed, focus groups were beneficial for their potential to reveal socially constructed meaning and underlying attitudes (Kleiber, 2004), and how people make private opinions public and how that process shapes the formation of the participants’ stated opinions (Casey & Krueger, 2009). Clear benefits to the school and participants were that this minimised the time burden in contrast to arranging individual interviews with all the students, making the proposition of research at the school site more acceptable to the gatekeepers. Indeed, when the principals were approached initially with the investigation requiring both individual interviews and focus groups, principals opted in favour of focus groups due the above reason.

Compared to traditional forms of interviewing, the focus group approach also seeks to reduce the influence of the interviewer on the research subjects by tilting the balance of power towards the group (Madriz, 1994), and enabling more spontaneous responses and free expression of new issues otherwise not anticipated through pre-determined questioning (Hennink & Diamond, 1999). Focus groups encouraged greater spontaneity through mimicking regular social interactions, partly shifting dominance away from the interviewer by focusing on generating a discussion, thereby allowing participants to have greater control over the conversation (Hennink, 2007). As focus groups were a generative group interaction (Morgan, 1988), the method offered the advantage of observing how students’ interactions are influenced through the process of talking with their peers; but not necessarily to reach a
consensus. Morgan (1988) referred to how focus groups allowed participants to become aware of their own opinions and perspectives, and encouraged the desire to articulate an opinion potentially different from another participant’s viewpoint. Moreover, group discussion facilitates the emergence of shared understandings, which is consistent in understanding broader social imaginaries. Morgan (1993) observed that ‘people can recognize hidden parts of themselves in others. They can also reconstruct their own life narrative from other’s stories’ (p. 146). Indeed, I was frequently amazed by the interactivity amongst the student participants, the inclination of peers to complete each other’s sentences, agree or disagree with each other’s ideas and passionately defend an unpopular stance within the group against other students who disagreed. I was also both surprised and grateful for how generous the students were in volunteering information beyond the scope of the proposed questions, discussing pertinent topics I did not foresee.

As focus group participation was voluntary, such an approach depended on the motivation of students in articulating their viewpoints, and the degree of comfort and confidence they felt in expressing opinions publicly, in the English language. In a few instances, participants hesitated to express negative views about school experiences due to fears of not saying ‘the correct thing’, but continued with disclosure after reassurances of confidentiality. There were other instances when a majority of participants were active in the discussion, and the minority then took more passive roles by agreeing or supporting the expressed viewpoints, both verbally and non-verbally. In these instances, I endeavoured to consciously direct questions to quieter participants in order to encourage their voices to be heard. Both these examples indicate how the research influenced the researched.

Research into students’ aspirations in educational sociology using the focus group method are well supported, for example in the qualitative study by Slack (2003) into the aspirations of high school students towards schooling policy aimed at raising widening participation towards post-compulsory education in the UK, and also an investigation by Kao and Tienda (1998) into the educational aspirations of minority youths in the USA as a method for verifying correlative findings from previous quantitative data.
4.8.4. Focus Group Process

Two focus groups were conducted per school in order to assess students’ practices and aspirations in the same school, and to get a sense of how these practices and aspirations were locally grounded and shared. A total of six focus groups were carried out, with five groups of five to six students, and one group of four students. This follows Green and Hart’s (1999) advocacy for the selection of four to six participants per focus group, given the homogeneity of the group provided sufficient similarity to warrant active discussion, while ensuring all participants could contribute meaningfully - a risk if groups were too large (Brown, 1999). Interviews ranged from 60 minutes to 120 minutes in duration for each session based on the maximum amount of time each school could allocate.

Schools were free to select the time and environment for the interview, provided the location was quiet and with minimal interruptions, although some sessions were scheduled during recess hours, when outside noise levels could not be controlled. In these cases, a few of the students became distracted by outside activity, and background noise captured from the audio recording made some responses inaudible for transcription. In all except one session, teachers did not preside over the focus group interviews; in the one exception, a teacher’s assistant stayed in the classroom but did not contribute to the discussion or conversation. The presence of a staff member could have influenced the decision of students on disclosure, as there was evidence of students glancing at the teacher’s assistant during the discussion of certain topics, such as school quality and teaching.

Videotaping was used to help capture some of the non-verbal cues, such as signals of agreement or disagreement from peers when a participant was discussing particular topics. The non-verbal cues were meaningful in understanding how students reacted to certain questions during the framing of their responses (Kleiber, 2004), and helped make the transcription process more meaningful. As participants were interjecting and affirming with each other during the discussion process, videotaping made transcription easier and more accurate. The recording also helped refine the effectiveness of questioning techniques for later focus group interviews, by picking up the non-verbal cues of confused participants from poorly worded questions.

I note the use of videotaping could have inhibited students in freely expressing their opinions. This may have been true especially if comments that were to be expressed were adverse or
negative about the schooling experience, hence resulting in students self-censoring their responses. However, this occurrence was reduced by reinforcing the condition of confidentiality of the recorded material, which emphasised that the audio data would be used in the subsequent analysis, and recording did not seem to materially impact on the students’ disclosures.

4.8.5. Focus Group Questioning

The focus group employed semi-structured questions designed to explore students’ understandings of their imagined futures, such as study and career aspirations, expectations about what constituted a good future life, and attitudes towards the broader Hong Kong environment, schooling and parental expectations. The questions attempted to map out the students’ relations to other agents, institutions, and dominant logic within the broader field/s, and which were internalised within the habitus, and consequently affected aspirational considerations. As the student sample was purposive, analysis was based on the students’ perceptions but also validated by observations, documents, literature and other data.

A conscious effort was made within the introductory ten minutes commencing the focus group to concentrate on establishing rapport with the students. This was achieved by asking each student to provide a self-introduction, usually accompanied by their future study or career aspirations, and sometimes what they enjoyed about schooling. This initial exercise was non-threatening, created familiarity within an otherwise unfamiliar setting, and ensured every participant had an opportunity to speak, establishing a precedent to speak out (Kleiber, 2004). This information then provided the possibility to broaden or deepen the conversation with other questions leading from this, and to link and reference later narratives back to students’ expressed aspirations. Questions revolved around themes related to the students’ aspirations, which included familial influences, aspects of schooling life, perceptions of local and national identities, spatiotemporal aspects of future imagined lives, and their relationships towards the languages of vernacular Chinese Cantonese, Chinese Putonghua/Mandarin, and English.

In order to mimic and produce a natural flow within the conversations and thus reduce the sense of disruption from non-sequitur and arbitrary questions, I tried to ensure most questions transitioned from the responses and themes provided earlier by the students. For example,
student qualifications and apologies about their own English ability within a group of
students from Southwest Secondary School enabled the discussion about the nature of
English by asking students to reflect on the reason why they believed their English
proficiency was inadequate. Another instance was the continuous allusion by students from
East Bay Secondary School to the competitive pressures brought to bear by mainland Chinese
students, which later allowed questioning focused on students’ sentiments and perceptions
towards mainland China. In this way, inquiry was directed at topics in which students had a
preconceived opinion and interest, and discussions within these topics generally generated
powerful discussion and debate, without too much further prompting.

Hence, the flow of discussion for every focus group was different depending on the themes
the students provided in their responses, as illustrated in Table 4-1. The table provides
insights into the logics of practice which characterised students’ aspirations.

Table 4-2 Thematic Topics/Logics Discussed/Evident During Each Focus Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Town Secondary School</td>
<td>Town Secondary School</td>
<td>Southwest Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Schooling</td>
<td>General Schooling</td>
<td>Future Aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Aspirations</td>
<td>Future Aspirations</td>
<td>Definition of Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial Mobility</td>
<td>Dislikes about School</td>
<td>English proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong as Ideal place</td>
<td>Spatial Mobility</td>
<td>Tertiary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Choice Influences</td>
<td>EMI/ CMI Schooling</td>
<td>Conceptions of Good Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of English</td>
<td>Importance &amp; Nature of English</td>
<td>Spatial Mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Studies</td>
<td>CMI Student Aspirations</td>
<td>EMI/CMI Schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMI/ CMI Schooling</td>
<td>Familial Influences</td>
<td>Importance of English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial Influences</td>
<td>Definition of Success</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of English</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMI Students</td>
<td>EMI/ CMI Schooling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whilst my discussion of analysis has been organised in accordance with a thematic structure derived from students’ narratives, it is important to acknowledge that paradoxes, contradictions and conflicts were continuously intermixed amongst the naturalised narratives, as the discussions progressed. This is in the spirit outlined by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), that the research presentation should be ‘the very opposite of an exhibition…it is a discourse in which you expose yourself, you take risk’ (p. 219), compared to the polished and finished accounts of research relished by ‘Homo Academicus’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mainland China</th>
<th>EMI/CMI School Teaching</th>
<th>Universities Abroad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>South-west Secondary School</td>
<td>Group 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Future Aspirations</td>
<td>Future Aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conceptions of a Good Life</td>
<td>Probability of Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of English</td>
<td>English Proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EMI/ CMI Schooling</td>
<td>Exams/ Tutorial Classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liberal Studies (Subject)</td>
<td>Concepts of Good Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language Preference</td>
<td>Spatial Mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutorial Classes</td>
<td>Universities Abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English Proficiency</td>
<td>Chinese Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examinations</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English Accents</td>
<td>Importance of English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spatial Mobility</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Familial Influences</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
4.8.6. Transcription Process, Observations and Interview Analysis

Following the focus group interviews, transcription was undertaken, converting the videotaping of spoken words into written form. For confidentiality purposes, and to ensure anonymity, students and schooling institutions were provided with pseudonyms during the transcription process. As I was dealing with a relatively small number of interviews, I undertook my own transcription. An advantage was the feeling of increased intimacy with the data, and the inclusion of field notes to contextualise the conversations. The poor acoustic quality of the schooling environment, however, made transcription challenging, due to attempts to separate the background noise against the students’ voices. Furthermore, within the transcription process, I endeavoured to preserve fidelity of students’ words, minimising any corrections to grammatical mistakes, so as to impart a sense of the students’ English proficiency. Additionally, I noted down obvious and overt emotional expressions, when appropriate, to contextualise the mood in which students were expressing. As Bourdieu (1990b) observed, the body is a fundamental aspect of habitus, and therefore schemes of expression (identified through observing students during interviews) were the beginnings of objectification and mechanisms of reinforcement, such that:

The body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it enacts the past, bringing it back to life. What is ‘learned by the body’ is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is. (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 73)

Therefore, observations such as pauses, hesitation, laughter, frowns, sighs and background interjections from the students helped to provide a sense of the matrices of attitudes and perceptions taken by students to the discussed topics, and how these matrices were actively mediating responses during these conversations. An example was when Taylor spoke of her aspirations to be a journalist, and was challenged by Swift:

Taylor: I think the job also is well-paid.
         (Group laughs)
Swift:   (Gesturing to Taylor) I don’t think so.
         (Group laughs)
Swift: Being a reporter is very hard job. Just compare the job with the payment. The job and payment is not good.

(Group laughs)

In this instance, the transcription of the laughter from other students was meaningful in showing how other students were invalidating Taylor’s beliefs about the economic rewards of the journalist profession. It also appropriately conveyed the tone of Swift’s light-hearted rebuke to Taylor’s remarks, by demonstrating the humour of the exchange. Moreover, often students struggled with finding the right words to use in English, and substituted non-verbal body language to relay their meaning. Where appropriate, transcription of this non-verbal communication was undertaken, made possible by video recording that permitted this to be captured, as in the case of Queenie, who expressed difficulty in finding the right word to describe Hong Kong’s lifestyle:

Swift: I love urban area and I love living in a city, but not...(pauses)
Queenie: But have to do everything in our...(signalling small space with hands)
Swift: (Tries to interpret Queenie’s non-verbal language) Flat?
Queenie: You need to do everything in a short time, maybe. Quick...
Taylor: (Answers triumphantly) Rushed.

(Students, Southwest Secondary School)

The annotations of non-verbal communication once again helped to make sense of the interactivity that was taking place during the focus groups, and provided an appreciation for the degree to which students supported or contested the imaginaries of other students. Much time was spent on replaying recordings, because the audio was too soft against background noise and interferences, such as loud air-conditioning units, transmissions through the school’s public announcement speakers, student noise outside during recess, and students who were too softly spoken. In hindsight, the placement of an audio recording device in closer proximity to the students would have improved audibility, as the video recording device had to be placed at a sufficient distance away from the group to capture all faces of the participants, therefore reducing voice clarity. Audio that could not be confirmed after repeated replays was marked as inaudible.
Recordings were also replayed repeatedly because students’ English grammatical constructions were unfamiliar or incorrect, and I wanted to accurately capture as much as possible, and as practicably as possible, how these students were speaking, rather than interpreting what I thought I heard. In this way, I tried to recreate the relative ease or struggle with which the focus group interviews proceeded, imparting an impression of the students’ communicative English. I found this constructive especially during my data analysis, as my initial interpretations sometimes turned out to be different from the underlying messages the students were trying to convey. Therefore, recordings were replayed at various intervals post the initial transcription in order to confirm accuracy, and contextual notes were important and were not overlooked or excluded. Even now in reading the transcripts, I am amazed at how vividly these interactions are instantly alive in my memories, and the mixed feelings the students’ interactions left on me, even though these interviews were conducted over two years ago (2012/2013).

4.8.7. Document Analysis

The third method in this investigation, after interviews and observations, was document analysis of school policy documents mandated by the Hong Kong Education Bureau, and the contents of publicly available webpages of the three schools from which the participants were drawn. Information on the schools’ websites represented a public channel of communication for the school, not only to students and parents, but also to the community and the world.

Document analysis is defined as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating both printed and electronic documents (Bowen, 2009). This analytical process ‘entails finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of) and synthesis of data contained in the documents.’ (p. 28) Excerpts, quotations, or entire passages are then organised into major themes, categories and case examples related to the central questions of the research through content and thematic analysis (Labuschagne, 2003). Document analyses were undertaken to illuminate, contextualise, confirm and critique the perspectives developed from the student focus groups, and vice versa, as policy and institutional documents were likely to simplify and make rhetoric of significant complexities that arose from focus group dialogues. The process helped to make sense of student responses, the degree to which student subjectivities contained complex awareness that exceeded the doxa that dominated the policy. The process
also helped make sense of the subtle contradictions within policy texts to better understand the institutional logics of the schools and how the discourses created by these texts were influencing and entering into these students’ subjectivities, habitus and practices.

The selected documents analysed were the principal’s message, mission statements, annual school plans and reports, and school development plans located freely on the public websites. The policy documents such as annual school plans, reports and development plans were created by each individual school for internal quality assessment purposes, part of the governance structure enforced by the Hong Kong Education Bureau, and usually contained a plan with aims and development objectives (Ngan, Lee, & Brown, 2010). On the other hand, school websites contained information on recent school achievements, and comprised more accessible and readable information and representation of the school to the wider public. As such, the compilation of these documents provided a glimpse into the outcomes, practices, habitus and capital valued by the schools and their leadership teams, and the institutional logic – all of which helped constitute the broader field/s within which students lived and learned. Analysis of these documents was valid for my investigation of students’ future imaginaries because the texts contained statements about the qualities of the students they sought to produce, which corresponded (at least discursively), at times, to the aspirational trajectories of students, and their motivations.

Document analysis was also appropriate because of its availability in the public domain, cost-effectiveness as a data collection method, and the lack of obtrusiveness and reactivity, i.e. the documents were unaffected by the research process, in comparison with interviewees (Bowen, 2009). However, there was a need to examine situations of ‘biased selectivity’ (Yin, 1994), where documents analysed were incomplete, and produced under corporate policies, procedures or the agenda of the organisation’s principals. An example of this was analysis of international schools’ webpages in 24 countries across the Asia-Pacific region which concluded that webpage discourses were often contradictory and reproduced similar ‘hyperrealist’ representations (Tamatea, Hardy, & Ninnes, 2008). Therefore, consideration of the original purpose of the document and the target audience determined whether the documents were comprehensive, selective and/or balanced (Bowen, 2009). Awareness of rhetoric, contradictory or converging discourses within the data were helpful in trying to decipher the schools’ motivations in producing these documents, and how schools were drawing upon ‘hegemonic discourse in broader cultural politics and how [the schools], in turn, reproduced and reinforced the platforms and emphases of these discourses’ (McDonald, Pini,
& Mayes, 2012). This is in keeping with what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) called ‘magisterial discourse’, discourse that was unidirectional, commanding and instructing, and that constrained possibilities for interpretation (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Consequently, it was more meaningful to attempt to understand the discourses within which the school documents were located (Taylor, 2004), and examine the issues and theories underlying the specific social policy analysed or developed (Gil 1989: 69). In drawing on Bourdieu, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) stated that:

> Context of the field of text production has particular logics which are often different from those of the field of policy reception, school and classroom practices, which have different logics and thus ensures policy as ‘palimpsest’, literally a new text written over a partly erased older text (p. 53).

What Rizvi and Lingard (2010, pp. 54-56) refer to as the ‘common approach framework questions’ was hence a useful framework to document analysis, addressing, as it does, the contextual, policy and textual, and implementation and outcome issues. This analysis helped to recognise how the schools were positioned with respect to the students they claimed to produce, the kinds of subjectivities they claimed as outcomes, and whether this was congruent to the schooling practices and logics articulated by the students and through observations.

### 4.8.8. Personal Experiences Within Analysis

In line with epistemic reflexivity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), I have also drawn from my experiences as an expatriate living and working in Hong Kong whilst undertaking the research, in a form of autoethnography. This includes personal observations of the rhythms of daily Hong Kong life, firsthand experiences of restricted living conditions, the high cost of living that stimulates a feeling of desperation to ‘make ends meet’, and informal conversations with working professionals, educators, students and other local people. Included were also subjective impressions transmitted by the schooling atmosphere, and observations of the ethos of surrounding schooling districts. These observations were recorded as field notes, and embedded within my analysis. This helped to support and
supplement the students’ perceptions gained through focus group interviews, and helped improve the validity of the students’ claims.

Living within the local Hong Kong milieu was critical to my attempts to try to understand how the logics of the broader field were possibly being mediated and interpreted by these students. The unfolding and ongoing events within the territory during the period of the study (particularly student and other citizens’ demonstrations against mainland China’s limitations to the 2017 election process for a new Executive Officer for Hong Kong) had an impact on the orientation of my research, and were subsequently included in the analysis to help contextualise and ‘bring to life’ the social and cultural conditions lived by my participants.

4.9. Conclusion

The chapter started by positing Bourdieu’s relational thinking as methodologically transcending the approaches of individual agency and structural determinism. The relational approach emphasised the embeddedness of social meaning within patterns of differences and similarities that constitute the social milieu, and its implications for the research to be centred on the field, viewed as a contested space. The process for analysing the field proffered by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) was outlined, commencing from analysis of the broader field of power, the positions occupied by agents and institutions, to investigations of the habitus and how dispositions were acquired and internalised. Given the research process itself as a social practice, Bourdieu’s (1999) epistemic reflexivity called for the rejection of ‘epistemological innocence’, and for the researcher to be aware of the biases and presuppositions imported into the research process. In this light, I outlined how I, as the researcher, was involved with the interviewees in the co-creation of data, through disclosing how the research process influenced the student participants, as well the shifts in my mental perspectives.

I then elaborated upon the methodological approach as also involving applying Taylor’s conception of the social imaginary to the data. The focus upon the ‘ordinariness’ of the students’ experiences is a particularly valuable methodological insight to draw out in light of Taylor’s understanding of the ‘social imaginary’. Taylor’s focus on modernity (the ‘modern social imaginary’) also highlights his concerns about the dominant rationalistic, neoliberal
way in which society is currently conceptualised and largely understood, and how these foci play out in these students’ lives. The ‘modern social imaginary’ to which he refers is one which is very much shared by all of these students, and in different ways, their parents, and teachers. It is this ‘shared-ness’ which enables common practices to transpire and the widespread sense of legitimacy which surrounds this imaginary. Flagging the forces of this ‘imaginary’ is key to challenging more reductive and problematic aspects of its work.

It is the conception of alternative possibilities – alternative futures – and the potential development of ‘norms for futurity’ (Appadurai, 2004, p. 61) rather than a conception of the social and cultural as ‘sedimented’, unchanging, which makes Appadurai’s conception of the capacity to aspire so powerful. Identifying such capacities within students’ practices is key to shifting dominant, problematic subjectivities (e.g. senses of insecurity, uncertainty, ambivalence). However, trying to identify such practices also gives important insights into the extent to which such alternatives are indeed possible or probable.

Consequently, it is important to try to identify students’ aspirations (and, by association, the extent to which they exhibit capacities to aspire) in the context of a dominant, modern social imaginary within which neoliberal practices and principles exert such influence, and the contestation which characterises the field/s of practice within which these aspirations and capacities play out. Methodologically, the research seeks to apply notions of the capacity to aspire, under conditions of the current ‘modern’/rational/neoliberal social imaginary, and the varied and contested practices which arise, to better understand how these students make sense of their futures. The focus group interviews and observations that seek to ‘access’ the ‘voices’ and practices of these students, in the context of the school milieu in which they are located (which will be evident through the various policy artefacts (policies, websites etc.), will provide access into the dominant influences upon these students, dissensus in response to their influences and the permeability of the social spaces (fields) in which these realisations and realities play out.

In the next two chapters, I present analyses based on collected data, guided by the methodology outlined in this chapter, in order to reveal how students’ experiences are constituted and mediated within the broader Hong Kong milieu, and how the nexus between family, linguistic relations, and EMI schooling settings influenced how they made sense of their aspirations.
5. Globalisation, Family and the Constitution of the Middle Class Habitus in Hong Kong

5.1. Overview

This chapter analyses how global neoliberal ideas are powerfully intertwined within students’, social and cultural experiences, and how these ideas diffuse through various channels/fields to structure students’ aspirational considerations. Through this analysis, I shall point out the junctures of refraction within students’ narratives that indicate what I argue are dispositions of ‘aspirational ambivalence’. To do this, I chart the aspirational spatiotemporalities by firstly examining these middle class students’ mediation, relations and embodiments of and towards the broader fields of power, beginning with the imaginary of Hong Kong as a global city, its ambivalent geopolitical and historical condition, the naturalisation of competition, and connections between the valorisation of economic capital and the good life. This is an attempt to understand how Hong Kong’s milieu fits into the social-structural positions of these students, given the structural fields examined are situated within the geographical space of Hong Kong, which is imagined as a ‘global city’. Next, I delve into middle class familial relations, exploring how familial influences and appropriation of the English language structured students’ aspirational social imaginaries. I end with a discussion of English as a symbolic capital, and tie this back to how this misrecognition sustains a neoliberal doxa of competition, individual self-governance, and the illusion of meritocracy.

5.2. Global-local Relations

A starting point of the analysis appropriately begins by examining the imaginary of Hong Kong’s status as a global city, and how it features in how student organise their aspirations. This was done by exploring how the students framed Hong Kong’s milieu in their narratives from a spatiotemporal perspective, and the doxic values that constitute this broader field.
Through this, the analysis focuses on how the geographical space and the values of the broader field impacts on the socio-structural position of the students (i.e. the broader field of power), and informed upon students’ aspirational orientations. The discussion of these broader values will be relevant in understanding how it influences the autonomy of other fields.

The imaginary of Hong Kong as a global city was reinforced by the students’ description of its ambiguity in culture, and its entanglement with other cultures. References to the diversity in opportunities, lifestyles and international exchanges portrayed a colourful imaginary that was immersed in the dynamisms of globalisation:

Taylor: Hong Kong has no specific culture, but mixed up with many other countries’ cultures. So being in Hong Kong, we have opportunities to learn many other languages, many other… (Pauses to think)

Erica: Cultures.

Taylor: Living styles. So I think we have a little bit of everything.

Swift: When we deal with Hong Kong students, we can be very local and if we communicate with other exchange students, we can be so-called international. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)

In Taylor’s case, Hong Kong’s hybridity and fluid culture were constitutive of a habitus characterised by complexities about her own specific cultural identity, the permanent quality of her accessing part of the global through the local, and a feeling that it was integrated and converged with other cultures. As Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue, the social imaginary of globalisation powerfully moulds identities, aspirations and social expectations. The descriptions were illustrative of the territoriality of the broader field of power, characterised by increased porosity, and having to coexist with common and deterritorialised spaces (Marginson, 2010), with Tam et al. (1996, p. 116) suggesting that Hong Kong’s ‘fluid cultural milieu’ fostered complex and ambivalent identities. Nonetheless, this sense of deterritorialised ambivalence did not dampen the shared desirable narratives painted of Hong

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6 At this stage, I am simply referring to the notion of ambivalence to describe how the students’ identities are drawn to multiple poles, attributed to the imaginary of Hong Kong as a global city. Later, I will extend this definition of ambivalence to encapsulate how the implicit neoliberal logics constituting the imaginary of Hong Kong as a global city within the globalising economy lead to feelings of uncertainty, confusion and self-questioning.
Kong as a place where global opportunities resided, characterised by configurations of diverse cultural and economic capital and practices, and described by Jessica in terms of a more convergence of Sino/Western ways:

Jessica: I think Hong Kong is a good place, with many diversified cultures. Many, many…we have Chinese traditional activities, and some Western festivals, so I think it is a good place. And we can…use…operate some business in Hong Kong as well.

Adam: And Hong Kong is one of the cities [with] high living standards.

Cecilia: And we have many freedoms, and we can do business without government intervention, because it is a free-market and you can own your own business. It is very convenient for us to buy anything, fruit and clothes and something…anything you want you can find in Hong Kong. It’s a very good place. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)

These students illustrated a strongly shared imaginary of Hong Kong as a desirable city through building upon each other’s narratives to form an idyllic portrait of contemporary Hong Kong, undergirded and constituted by laissez-faire attitudes towards business, economic liberalisation, freedom of choice, and conveying a sense of consumerism and materialism, as reflected in Cecilia’s comments. The description exposed a logic of the social field that was undoubtably framed through a neoliberal doxa, which was unsurprising, as Chen and Pun (2007) have argued that the pervasiveness of the neoliberal dominant ‘common sense’ into Hong Kong society has been both historically and politically situated since the colonial era. Yeung (2000) detailed how late colonial Hong Kong was already driven by a neoliberal ideology that saw the rapid deindustrialisation of Hong Kong, and its conversion into an international financial space, leading to increased dependency upon and vulnerability to global forces. Neoliberal policies were perpetuated and intensified after Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty, especially post the Asian financial crisis as Hong Kong struggled to reinstate its position as an international financial hub (Chen & Pun, 2007). In a way, neoliberalism’s doxic hold can be seen as a gradual acceleration brought about through the vulnerabilities of Hong Kong’s position and post-crisis insecurities, parallel to the contention of Peck (2010) that neoliberal reinvention and adaptation occurs as crisis-driven and crisis-animated processes.
Consequently, students here expressed a largely uncritical, ordinary acceptance and acknowledgement of neoliberal values as correlative with Hong Kong’s high standard of living, sense of opportunity and its desirability as a place to reside, evidence of what Harvey (2007) described as neoliberalism’s hegemonic discourse that has ‘become incorporated into the common sense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world’ (p23). As such, the values from the neoliberal imaginary were deeply ingrained within these students’ habitus via the practices of history, and readily enabled students to imagine, and even romanticise Hong Kong as a fluid and multicultural milieu. The students’ position as middle-class students, with the acquired cultural capitals, made them more eager to ascribe to the idea of a globalised knowledge economy for upward mobility tied to neoliberal doxa, than working class students. The process of acquiring and valuing knowledge stemming from the familial field shaped the aspirational paradigms of these students. This was complemented by a shared belief that Hong Kong possessed the ideal conditions to foster cosmopolitan capabilities through acquisition of broad sets of cultural capital, and the misrecognition of economic liberalism as civil liberty, which arguably was a demonstration of the dominance of the neoliberal doxa in students’ lives. The students powerfully gravitated towards this vivid local social imaginary, despite the fact that the specific middle class backgrounds of these students suggested that they perhaps did not appear to possess the cultural, economic or readily recognisable forms of symbolic capital to actualise their aspirations in relation to these romanticised depictions, especially for students in the non-elite schooling sector. The belief of Hong Kong’s presumed economic safety and stability rested upon the students’ assumptions of Hong Kong as a global city, free-market, meritocratic and a place of opportunity. These optimistic attachments towards the Hong Kong milieu generated ‘sustaining inclinations to return to the scene of fantasy’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 2), with the expectation that proximity would inevitably bring about the good life and upward mobility.

This was no more evident than in Doris’ response to her imagination of a good life, where her future was beholden to the neoliberal frame, speaking of the freedoms of consumerism, and how Hong Kong’s institutional, objectified and other capital would enable her to develop a good life:

I think I would like to work in Hong Kong because Hong Kong is a lovely city, and we could have many things we want. And I think the government and political environment is quite good and stable. For me, I think a good life is simple and stable. It is not necessary for us to be very rich, very luxurious life, but stable life is
considered [okay] because, you know, if you are a citizen and you don’t know what will be like tomorrow. It’s very anxious for you to live in the city. Although I have admitted that I like foreign [countries] like England, but I think Hong Kong is more give-able…how do you say, it’s…more resources and more facilities for us to develop a good life. (Pauses to think) Yes. (Doris, Student, Town Secondary School)

However, this neoliberal space also configured and transmitted an anxiety, generated from the accumulation of insecurity within the habitus of youths like Doris. The anxiety led to a contradictory tendency/ambivalence that extended towards spatial aspirations, producing a readiness and strategic decision to accept a ‘simple and stable’, but seemingly more predictable future in Hong Kong. This rejection of a ‘very luxurious life’ was also an attempt to reconcile what was aspirationally unimaginable and unachievable by the students; the acknowledgement of lacking the capital that permitted this surreal realisation.

The imaginary of Hong Kong as a global city infused by a neoliberal ideology nourished genres of opportunities. However, this imaginary concurrently induced a symptomatic destabilisation and uncertainty that constrained students’ spatial aspirations. In other words, Doris’ attachment to these fantasies of opportunities for a good life seemed to diminish her through anxieties in relation to her habituated sense of realistic possibility about the future that drove her aspirations towards the security associated with the proximate space. The destabilisation made her settle for Hong Kong as aspirationally satisfactory, compared with mildly attractive notions of transcending into foreign and distant spaces like England. Even when asked if she would relocate overseas for study if she failed to enter her preferred subject, Doris struggled in re-imaging herself spatially displaced, and said she was willing to compromise on her aspirational choices to find an alternative to stay in Hong Kong:

No, Hong Kong is the best place I think. So if I can’t get into the faculty of [a health profession] maybe I will consider pharmacy, or other medical related fields. (Doris, Student, Town Secondary School)

Correspondingly, other students, like Pamela, criticised Hong Kong’s grave environmental conditions, including a yearning to escape from the hypercompetitive mindsets, and pressures from parents apropos schooling that were making her anxious. She reflected on relocating to England, where she imagined green pastures, better air quality and a less anxious lifestyle, yet displayed spatial ambivalence as she reasserted her affections for Hong Kong ‘culture’ as her reason to stay local:
The only reason for me to leave Hong Kong is because air-pollution is very severe. So I think it will jeopardise my health and my parents’ health. But roughly speaking, I want to stay in Hong Kong because I just love Hong Kong. It’s the culture. (Pamela, Student, East Bay Secondary School)

Like Doris, she wrestled with re-imagining herself relocating to an unknown setting like England, contesting between this social imaginary of a relaxed rhythmic pace, against the known space of a frenetic and hurried Hong Kong. Pamela’s verbalised affinity for the Hong Kong ‘culture’ was an example of a habitus at ease and safe in the taken-for-granted environment of the local milieu, but simultaneously threatened and unprepared by its vicissitudes. Arguably, the spatial compression of Hong Kong’s landscape, coupled with the fast-moving temporal rhythms of its globalising space, disposed students’ habitus towards limited spatial mobility and security, rendering spatial breadth in places like England ‘unfamiliar’ and ‘threatening’. Cheung (2004) identified this as ‘the disintegration of experience’ (p. 251), whereby Hong Kong’s mutability led to an enduring sense of destabilisation, ‘resulting in substantial disorientation and disillusionment, and forcing people to urgently search for a stable identity to cling onto’ (Chung, 2007, p. 6). Indeed, it is not difficult to appreciate these students’ embodiment of insecurity given they grew up during a period when Hong Kong was badly impacted by two financial crises, and the traumas suffered through the pandemic outbreaks. Therefore, students seemed conflicted between the contrasting narratives embodied within the Hong Kong landscape. On the one hand, as the milieu which has shaped their habitus, and tied to their identities of belonging, the students are supposed to feel security. Yet, evidence of Hong Kong’s mutability, unpredictability and the economic, mental and physical burdens placed on the individual and the family, demand the need to be prepared for the unexpected.

The construction of Hong Kong as a space of opportunity was furthered as the students’ habitus responded with a sense of possibility to the narratives popularised by the imaginary of the global city as an access point to mainland China’s growing opportunities, through its emergence as an economic and political power:

I think I will stay in Hong Kong because China’s economy is growing more and more fiercely, and some say it will replace America one day. So I think Hong Kong is a gateway to China and I have more working opportunities, or any other opportunities to stay in Hong Kong. (Fonnie, Student, East Bay Secondary School)
The genre of opportunity central within Fonnie’s response induced the expectation of optimistic futures potentially realised by her local spatial and social-structural alignment, and brought from Hong Kong’s geopolitical advantage, swayed by the popular discourse that a competitive China may eventually overtake the current American hegemony. However, for her, the actualisation of opportunity in an ever-changing Hong Kong was provisional upon the preparation of a ready and competitive habitus that was able to navigate the Hong Kong milieu, imagined as a dominant and implicitly neoliberal construction. This dominant belief in the inevitability of Hong Kong’s viability as a prosperous global city dependent on neoliberal values was no more evident than in the recent 2014 protests over universal suffrage⁷, whereby mass-media and public discourse frequently posed the question of whether Hong Kong’s future as a financial centre was ‘threatened’, with the unspoken assumption that calls for social justice and welfare would erode Hong Kong’s competitive position as a financial hub. This speaks to the insecurity of the city’s position under neoliberalism, but also engages with the contention by Sassen (2005) that global cities do not engage with questions of inequality, and that global cities such as Hong Kong were spaces for new claims, by global capital itself, leading to questions of ‘whose city is it?’ (p. 39). For these students though, who were involved in the focus groups over a year prior to the eruption of protests, the neoliberal values seemed never too distant in their aspirational narratives. As Zipin et al. (2012) observed:

(Neoliberalism) makes it difficult for the less powerful to imagine and articulate designs for a future that are not defined in dominant terms. Indeed, to not aspire in capitalist terms is to risk appearing as though one has no aspiration at all (p187).

Unsurprisingly, when students were challenged about how the ideals of Hong Kong’s imbrication of the global and local encouraged them to aspire globally, students overwhelmingly chose to stay local. This was despite many students musing about the possibility of foreign study and work, in a liminal sense, but they eventually focused on home:

Mary: So I want to travel in the coming 10 years, but after that I’ll stay in Hong Kong.

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⁷ Whilst the Hong Kong protest was sparked by calls for universal suffrage and greater political autonomy, the heart of the grievances lay in social justice stemming from the wealth gap, housing affordability, lack of social services, and perception that government policies were aligned to the oligarchic business interests.
Lloyd: I have been thinking about going to an overseas university to experience the foreign culture and to broaden my horizon but after that I think I’ll come back to Hong Kong to work or to continue my studies. Because after all, I’ve spent so many years here. It’s very tough to go out alone and in a foreign country to be able to make a living. Also, I think experience from abroad can help me find a great career in Hong Kong.

Antonia: I would like to travel to other countries to maybe live for two or three years and to try other cultures, but I know it’s hard to live there for a long time and to find a job there. So after two or three years, I’ll come back to Hong Kong.

Darin: I like Hong Kong. I just want to try something different…so I choose to go to other places, to try something new. (Students, Town Secondary School)

Lloyd readily admitted to an anxiety about relocating elsewhere, doubting his success in a foreign country, echoed by Antonia – a habitus that lacked assuredness about embodying the necessary capital to succeed in unfamiliar territories. Like Doris and Pamela before, both again were (re)drawn to the imaginary of Hong Kong as a place of opportunity. Even Darin, who was moving to Canada to complete his final year of secondary schooling, expected that he would return to Hong Kong eventually. Travelling abroad was considered by some of these students as a ritual to broaden cultures, while others framed it as a competitive advantage for future aspirational advancement through acquiring cultural capital that was valued at home:

Apple: I think I prefer to stay in Hong Kong, but after if I can study in university, and after I graduate from university, I think I will just travel to Australia, and broaden my horizon. And can communicate with the native speakers, and improve my English.

Fonnie: But actually there are many fresh graduates in Hong Kong that go overseas to seek a higher proficiency or diploma, and then they will [come] back to Hong Kong and find a job because it is said if you can gain a higher diploma of education overseas, you have a better job in Hong Kong. (Students, East Bay Secondary School)
Awareness of this desire for transnational spatial mobility as a means to garner distinction and pursue advantage (Sellar & Gale, 2011), symptomatic of a ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller & Urry, 2006) within the globalising space, lingered in the background of students’ aspirational descriptions. This was also consistent with Bauman’s (2000) contention of how the conditions of liquid modernity compelled individuals to seek out multiple fleeting experiences. Nonetheless, this notion was ambivalent, transitory, and constructed as a liminal experience, compared to the powerful inclination to re-connect to the sphere of Hong Kong, that was familiar and ‘alive’ in their shared aspirational imaginations. In other words, students’ articulations of mobility were about the struggles to exercise mobility as an outcome of this social imaginary, however, the students seemed captivated by Hong Kong’s local opportunities and lifestyle. Kelly’s statement recapped this logic, and showcased glimpses of the aspirational ambivalence that would materialise throughout and characterise these middle class students’ habitus:

Yes, I like to stay in Hong Kong, but I would also like to experience other culture for a period of time. But lastly, I would like to stay in Hong Kong. (Kelly, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

In essence, the globalised Hong Kong milieu enabled and facilitated embodied social imaginaries characterised by a consumerist freedom, cosmopolitanism and sphere of opportunity that were interwoven within a neoliberal construction. This produced within students proclivities to proximal attachments, with the optimistic expectation of becoming beneficiaries of Hong Kong’s ‘opportunities’. However, Hong Kong’s milieu also generated anxious and insecure relations within these students, from its destabilising, precipitous and unpredictable rhythms. The mediation of these characteristics within students was expressed by some as a desire to relocate overseas, perhaps an expression against the contradictions of Hong Kong as a cosmopolitan city, albeit with confined physical space. For others, this transnational mobility was liminal and transitory, allowing for the accumulation of capital required to be competitive back home. Students imagined themselves locally situated, but simultaneously and consistently troubled by a longing for spatial movement. Nonetheless, the dispositions of middle-class positioning of these students run into ambivalence in relation to the contesting imaginaries that struck chords of both possibility and impossibility in reading the changing life-worlds that they inhabit. I must also insert a caveat and question whether my position as an international researcher, embodying the sense of mobility, could have influenced the students’ responses.
This aspirational spatiotemporality and the disposition of insecurity, leading to ambivalence, are explored further in the next section, through arguing how Hong Kong as an ambivalent space, constituted by specificities of history, politics and economy, gives rise to conflicting social imaginaries. These contesting imaginaries harbour ambivalence by concurrently discouraging students’ habitus towards the construction of transborder aspirations, against the increasingly popularised genres of the opportunities available in mainland China.

5.3. Ambivalent Spaces

Whilst Hong Kong’s integration of globalisation and neoliberalism has a profound impact upon students’ aspirational spatiotemporal ambivalent attachments, this can be further contextualised against Hong Kong’s position as an ambivalent space, induced by its geopolitical condition and steeped in various historical stratums. The constitution of this milieu can be understood from its colonial and postcolonial history, the city’s global ambitions and local foundations, its economic competitiveness and social insecurities, and the aggregation of these relational conditions in attitudes towards mainland China. A brief portrayal of this context will be useful in understanding how the economic, political and sociological landscape undergirded the aspirational ambivalences of these students, specifically producing ambivalent spatial orientations towards transborder aspirations.

Lingard (2014) points out that global spaces are sites where ‘residual, dominant, emergent, and contested geographies of power, including those of the colonial past and postcolonial present…manifests in vernacular ways in the local, national, and regional’ (p. 171). As such, Hong Kong as a complex global space is also an ambivalent one, mapped predominantly through its history and location. Historically, Hong Kong people have deeply internalised scepticism of Chinese rule, heightened by historical memories of the spill-over from the 1967 Cultural Revolution, and the exercise of ruthless power during the events of the Tiananmen Square protests, regarding China as a backward and inferior ‘Other’, especially as the colony experienced rapid socioeconomic transformations during its colonial days (Fung 2001). Consequently, whilst this notion of the ‘Other’ in descriptions of the mainland has remained in public discourse, ambivalence about Hong Kong identity has developed due to growing transborder mobilities and economic dependence (Chung, 2007). Responses to this
ambivalence have manifested in language policies promoting biliterate education, between preservation of the local Chinese Cantonese vernacular and English as an international and privileged language, and policies of trilingualism together with Chinese Mandarin/Putonghua to service the increasing consumerist Chinese market. Arguably, the Hong Kong population has adopted an instrumentalist approach, by identifying with Chinese culture and focusing on a marketised Chinese economy as a land of opportunity, while not giving up Hong Kong identity as distinctive, and maintaining its critical stance on the mainland’s political regime (Chan, 2014).

Furthermore, ambivalence is shaped by the hybridity of a local social identity and imaginary that existed in part from its colonial rule under the British Commonwealth, and postcolonial rule, as ‘an anachronistic case of decolonisation without independence, one characterised by China’s re-nationalisation of Hong Kong and by Hong Kong people’s re-adaption to the new sovereign’ (Fung, 2004, p399), under Chinese sovereignty. Institutionally, Hong Kong has retained most aspects of its government as an inheritance of colonial rule, from the judiciary and legal frameworks, civil service to educational systems, and blending this against the contradictions symbolised by mainland Chinese control. Nonetheless, as part of its development as a major regional and international financial services hub, tourist destination, and trading port, Hong Kong was also beset by positional insecurities, anxiously competing against other regional global cities, like Shanghai, Macau, and Singapore, which feeds policy paradigms orbited around the notion to stay competitive. Imagination of Hong Kong as a global city, marked by the city-state’s openness to globalisation, democratic and neoliberal values, was a contradiction against the nationalistic values demanded by Chinese sovereignty. Indeed, Hong Kong’s decolonisation without independence, but marked by the transfer to Chinese sovereignty, was contradictory against global trends of liberal democratic ‘utopia’ and globalisation (Herman & McChesney, 1997). The postcolonial political system allowed citizens to vote for representatives, but not permitting its citizens to vote for a government, with half of the legislature controlled by a small-circle electorate. Loh (2007) argued that this contributed to the creation of ‘disarticulation and disconnection’ between the holders of power and civil actors. Unsurprisingly then, Sing (2009) found through survey study how political representation was a key contribution to the negative assessment of the quality of life by Hong Kong people, in addition to environmental and social welfare challenges. As Wang (2000) stated, Hong Kong ‘as a world trade centre, a symbol of the free-market in the age of transnational corporations… is too much at odds with the idea of the “nation-state”’ (let alone
a “socialist” nation-state) to be incorporated without grudge within the boundaries of the Chinese national culture and identity’ (p89). Hong Kong people more readily imagined the sovereignty of their own social constitution, instead of the legitimacy of the PRC government. This imagined sovereignty allowed the ‘common space’ (Taylor, 2004), the right cultural context for the public sphere associated with a distinctive identity to develop. Such frictions are evident in instances where protestors and activists carried the colonial Hong Kong flag, and one highly publicised event involving the trespassing into the headquarters of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army in Hong Kong (Mok, Siu, & Ngo, 2014) suggesting a politics of nostalgia (Chung, 2007). Additionally, widespread debates and protests over constitutional reform raged, against the backdrop of the Chinese government’s declaration that Hong Kong did not respect its constitutional authority (Ming Pao, 2013).

Other politically-charged and media-publicised incidents in the preceding years over mainland Chinese tourists buying up baby formula, maternity ward shortages due to mainland mothers delivering in Hong Kong, and the influx of wealthy mainland Chinese in driving up housing prices have ingrained themselves in the psyche of local Hong Kong people. There was a sensitivity about being colonised and reactions of resistance, in what Fung (2001) referred to as a ‘collective resistance to domination imposed through labels such as “Chinese-ness” or “Chinese identity”’ (p. 594), outlining the condition of incompatible social imaginaries. This assertion of local identity within the postcolonial can be seen as an expression of the residuals of the colonial vocabulary (Rizvi, 2009). This social imaginary constituted by contested and hybrid collective identity, shaped by the narratives and meta-narratives, indirectly informed the habitus of these students in this research. And it is this collective and hybrid identity that helps constitute these students’ aspirational relations.

Therefore, despite the increasing global discourse turning attention to the rising political, economic and educational prowess of mainland China, deep incompatibilities were evident within students’ habitus, including in relation to the idea of transborder aspirational opportunities. Hong Kong students rendered a narrative that frequently downplayed or invalidated this navigational possibility, and focused on the adversities of mainland China and its incompatible culture. Transborder aspirational exclusions included living, studying and working there, observing - from the neoliberal constructed imaginaries of individual self-determination and cosmopolitanism - the apparent lack of freedom, lower morals, and the social and cultural differences of the mainland Chinese people. Lloyd framed his
spatiotemporal reluctance through criticism of the shortcomings of mainland China’s social development:

The environment is not really good. Generally, the quality of the people, in my opinion – over there, it’s not really well-developed. I don’t think I really want to go to China. (Lloyd, Student, Town Secondary School)

Lloyd consumed the mythology of mainland China as having rules and logics that were alien to the dominant norms, etiquette and behaviour of Hong Kong, of which the mainland Chinese were perhaps unaware. There was an almost dichotomous construction within the social imaginary of China as ‘backward’, in contrast to Hong Kong as a modernising and increasingly international city (Fung, 2001), where cultural and social capital for sophistication and success were privileged, with connotations of cosmopolitanism conveyed conspicuously from students’ earlier romanticisation. Fung (2001) contested how this social imaginary was in part a historically mediatised construction, where the mass-media stigmatised mainlanders as ‘uncivilised’ and ‘uneducated’ outsiders and intruders, and crystallised distinctive images of Hong Kong’s ‘way of life’ (p. 401). Lloyd’s response therefore reflected a clash of habitus against the imagined mainland Chinese milieu - a habitus inculcated through historical narratives and the dominant local social imaginary, which were serving to distance the students from the notion of aspiring to be in China. This was affirmed when students were asked to provide a comparative consideration of Hong Kong and China:

Akin: I think they have lower morals compared to Hong Kong. I don’t know why. Maybe it’s because the government has controlled them so long, they just want to make money out for themselves and they don’t really care…they care less about what’s going on than us.

Raymond: The address on the progress of GPD…GDP growth, and they put little resource in educating the people about their manners and moral value. And when they come to Hong Kong and will use their…

Akin: They are used to their cultural style so they will still use their normal values against us. So like, they are not used to lining up, but we want to line up to be fair for everybody, but they don’t really care about the cultural value. (Students, East Bay Secondary School)
Similar to Lloyd’s comments, these students’ narratives demonstrated the salience of this social construction of the ‘other’, an element of the social imaginary, where mainland China was personified as incompatible with the notions of the ‘good life’ held by these middle class students. This is reflected in Akin’s denunciation that mainland people coming to Hong Kong did not care about Hong Kong’s ‘cultural values’, which these senior secondary school students in EMI schools had heavily accumulated, invested, and which were expressed in and integral to their quotidian practices. Affiliated with the perception of mainland Chinese’s overt emphasis on economic capital, the students’ criticism extended towards the different way in which forms of capital were privileged, through the overt practices that exposed this difference in privileging different forms of capital. In other words, the configurations of capital most valued under these circumstances by Hong Kong students were those distinct from the perceived capital valued in mainland Chinese culture and society. Within this normative interpretation, the students, like Lloyd sought by criticism to segregate themselves from the imaginaries of mainland Chinese, with respect to the constitution of identity and aspirational spatiality:

That’s why we always call ourselves Hong Kong people rather than Chinese. But for me it could be acceptable for me to live in China, but until they don’t continue doing immoral things. Because in the news, they always do things for money and I don’t think it’s what human beings should do. So for now, I don’t think I would go to China. (Andrew, Student, Town Secondary School)

Andrew’s classificatory schemata was fed from social imaginaries constituted by the mass-media, which characterised mainland Chinese practices as inhumane, reflecting aspirational dispositions to stay within ‘civilisation’. The cultural separation was no more apparent and objectified than via the style and appearance of the Hong Kong-Mainland Chinese border crossings, which resembled national borders. Arguably, this physical manifestation imposed upon the students’ mental structures, creeping into their aspirational maps on what was desirable to keep in, and undesirable to keep out. Indeed, Cheung (2014a) contended how national identity was complicated by the emergence of ‘nativism’ embedded within the social understanding of Hong Kong people, that normatively prescribed the notion that ‘native’ Hong Kong people should take precedence over immigrant residents from China. The antagonism and ambivalence over Chinese identity was clear, as the students prioritised local Hong Kong identity over the national:
Interviewer: Do you identify yourself as a Hong Kong person, or do you identify yourself as a Chinese person?

Swift: Hong Kong China (Laughs)

Erica: (Hesitantly) Theoretically I’m a Chinese people but…

Queenie: (Assertively) We treat ourselves as Hong Kong. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)

This reaction gave glimpses of how familial, schooling and broader relations of these students had not fostered a habitus favourable to transborder imaginaries, nor developed the maps to capitalise on aspirational opportunities within a rapidly developing mainland. When I asked students if schools activated orientations towards seeking opportunities within mainland China, there was an acknowledgement that these institutions neither encouraged nor discouraged this notion. Even as students expressed ‘no choice’ but to seek opportunities in the PRC, due to the increasing competitiveness in Hong Kong, this transborder aspirational alternative was voiced reluctantly:

Adam: It is not our choice, we must go to China to work. There’s many…competition, Hong Kong is. So we must go to China to work to find more opportunity.

Cecilia: With no choice, I may go to study in China, but some university with higher standard and I think something...we can’t enjoy in China, for example the freedom of speech. But I think for money, for our self-development that it is necessary for us to do business or work with China or Chinese partners. Because the development of China is good nowadays, it is very…I think we have…it is one way for me to future develop.

Interviewer: Some of you seem to have mixed feelings about going to China. Have the recent events that have happened over the last year for example affected your perception? Or where is that perception coming from?

Kelly: I think that is not only of one incident, but you can see there is a conflict between us and China, although we are Chinese, I don’t think I can get into the culture in mainland China if I’m going to stay there and live there.

Jessica: The living styles between Hong Kong and Chinese is very different.
Adam: We have different systems and values. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)

The aspirational ambivalence was unequivocal in these students’ narratives, as they weighed up the aspirational imperatives out of necessity, set against mainland China’s imagined gauche, hostile, ‘backward’ settings and social practices. The presence of highly sensationalised and mediatised conflicts during this time, stimulated by the behaviour of mainland Chinese tourists, and growing public outcry over the previously mentioned distributions of social resources between Hong Kong locals and mainlanders, also fuelled a growing apprehension that influenced students’ narratives:

Doris: I don’t like China because I hate their behaviours and culture. I think it is such a shame to be one of the Chinese as they are doing that bad behaviour.

Calvin: I don’t think so. (Disagreeing)

Andrew: That’s why we always call ourselves Hong Kong people rather than Chinese. But for me it could be acceptable for me to live in China, but until they don’t continue doing immoral things. Because in the news, they always do things for money and I don’t think it’s what human beings should do. So for now, I don’t think I would go to China.

Francis: I like China, but I don’t like, I hate the Chinese government. (Group nodding) And I think those immoral behaviours of Chinese people is built by the Chinese government and in the (Inaudible). And they just want to have more money and they do not care about others in the community, and they just want to have money, have money and they…

Andrew: Actually, the Chinese practicing the real capitalism instead of socialism.

Calvin: I don’t agree with them actually (referring to disagreement against his fellow students’ comments) because I think every city or every country always has this dark side, and there are always immoral things in all countries, not just in China. Because I think Hong Kong people always have in their minds that foreign countries are always better, but I think China is improving. The situation will be better. I believe.
Doris: (Dismissively of Calvin) When the situation is better, we will consider it. (Group laughs)

Calvin: (Defensively) I don’t think it’s far behind those foreign countries. Even European countries or USA, there are always some immoral things, but we don’t know. (Students, Town Secondary School)

Once again, differences in the privileging of forms of capital were reinforced, evident in an imaginary of mainland China’s open prioritisation of economic capital at the expense of community and culture. The students had acquired the sensibilities that reacted abhorrently to the idea of mainland Chinese people, who they perceived lacked the cultural and social capital embodied in refinements, etiquette and societal norms. But simultaneously, the students’ disposition also marked out their pretensions to be included within a kinship of Hong Kong people. The incompatible social imaginary differentiating Hong Kong against mainland China is backed up through the work by Matthews (2001), that argued how Hong Kong’s youth identified with ‘Western’ values of freedom of speech, democracy and equality. In such a way, students’ spatial exclusions were partially borne from an anxiety that these forms of cultural and social capital accumulated would not be appreciated within mainland China, and the feeling of a betrayal to a Hong Kong belonging by seeking such transborder opportunities. The students’ reluctance to deploy themselves to the mainland also hinted at the disposition of unreadiness within their own habitus to be competitive within transborder aspirational endeavours, a doubt of probabilistic success in an unknown setting.

Nonetheless, Calvin was one of the few students who attempted to contest transborder exclusion within aspirational possibilities as informed by a misrepresented social imaginary, although his efforts were futile against the deeply ingrained and historically-constituted normative order and schemata entrenched within the habitus of the other students. The efforts of a few other students like Calvin to inject contesting notions were similarly suppressed by the wider majority that reacted in vehement disagreement, through debate, laughter or irony against the mainland as an acceptable aspirational space. The responses from other students regarding mainland China within their aspirational futures witnessed similar doxic retorts:

Akin: If I don’t have to, I won’t.

Raymond: No. (Directly with a smile)

Sarah: Maybe. (Hesitantly)
Raymond: (More seriously) It’s dangerous. China is dangerous.
Sarah: Maybe I want, I would like to study Putonghua [Chinese Mandarin] in there. Because I have a cousin who study in the university in Beijing to study Putonghua, because I think Putonghua is very important to our future.
Interviewer: And for those of you that don’t want to live there, is that because you feel like the culture is too different?
Akin: Yes.
Interviewer: Even if there are good opportunities there?
Akin: That’s why when I say if I have to, there’s a good opportunity there. But if I can go to other countries for the same opportunities, I’d rather go somewhere else. (Students, East Bay Secondary School)

Generally amongst these students, the imaginations of aspirational relocation overseas to places like the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea or Taiwan were more vividly positive compared with imaginations of transborder aspirations for life in China, which was even considered ‘dangerous’. However, Sarah’s remark, exposing how via her familial social capital she would consider the possibility of acquiring Chinese Mandarin proficiency to become more competitive, was revealing of comments from students like Calvin, Fonnie and Cecilia that highlighted how mainland China’s growing significance in meta-discourse was problematic to discount, especially under the inscribed neoliberal order. The persistent apprehension over competitiveness was still at the forefront within students’ habitus, intensifying this ‘caught in the middle’ ambivalent oscillation towards the mainland as an aspirational destination. As a point of clarification, I am not claiming that ‘good’ middle-class students should all be aspiring to futures in mainland China, but making the point that these students’ possibilities of aspirational pathways were narrowed from a doxic understanding of the mainland. This contributed to deepening the anxieties the students’ felt about their imagined futures.

As such, Hong Kong’s geopolitical, and postcolonial condition generated ambivalent relations that were internalised saliently within students’ habitus. Students drew on a dominant, historically-constituted, mediatised social imaginary that predisposed the framing of Hong Kong identity as hybrid and differentiated against the ‘backward’ national Chinese identity, through a division in the privileging of cultural capital. Consequently, the imaginary
guided an exclusion of transborder opportunities within aspirational imaginations, but at the same time generated a contradictory ambivalence due to mainland China’s growing political and economic clout, as a place of growth and opportunity.

5.4. Competitive Anxiety

Another inflection of ambivalence is borne out of the neoliberal social imaginary’s intertwinement with the demands of Hong Kong as a global city that structured the normative notions of students’ self-constructions, embedding competitiveness as one of the dominant values. In this section, I analyse the effects of competitive values interwoven into students’ imaginary at various junctures of constituted aspirational trajectories, from schooling, to future employment and notions of identity.

In colonial accounts of Hong Kong in the period prior to handover, Sweeting (1991) referred to Hong Kong as a ‘wok’ instead of a melting pot to describe the competitive and high-pressured nature of Hong Kong’s educational system that involved ‘various separate ingredients (that) are rapidly and briefly stir-fried in a very heated and high-pressured atmosphere’ (p. 65). As a condition of the temporal entanglement with neoliberalism, this constituting social imaginary valorised competitiveness in students’ aspirational narratives, especially in relation to achieving tertiary educational aspirations, which were characterised by a landscape of intense competitive struggle. The descriptions of this landscape were often framed by students through anxious lenses. For example, Akin’s deflated confidence arose from an overdue recognition that he conceivably did not possess the necessary capital for entry into his preferred course, due to the high entry standards and competitive nature of schooling. Akin was experiencing the temporally-induced sensation of a shrinking sphere of objective possibilities in relation to his doxic and habituated aspirations. Acting like free-market corporations, the education system, structured by broader neoliberal relations modulated the students to internalise a ‘motivational force that opposes individuals against one another, and runs through each, dividing each within’ (Deleuze, 1992, p. 5). This internal division was expressed through the divulging of pessimism and uncertainty, witnessed by Akin’s repetitions of ‘I don’t think…I don’t think’, served to simultaneously self-reinforce
and emphasise a clash between his aspirational dreams and his own sense of limits. These repetitions embodied his habitus as it encountered the ultra-competitive schooling field:

   Interviewer: And how likely do you think you will get into the topic, subject that you want to get into in university?

   Akin: You have implied, but I don’t think my skills are enough to be there. So for the subject I want, I don’t think there’s much of a possibility because it’s such a highly competitive learning environment. So [I] must be able to be better than the really, really hard working students.

   Interviewer: So what would you do if you can’t get into finance?

   Akin: I will try to get into other, less competitive subjects. (Student, East Bay Secondary School)

Akin and many other students embodied the belief that aspirational success required the sustained endurance to compete and be competitive against other students working ‘really hard’. For him, the zero-sum struggle necessitated a competitive accumulation of cultural capital volume based on investments of time and labour. Faced with the possibility that he may potentially fail in his imagined aspirational trajectory because other students were imbued with more of this ‘competitive’ capital, Akin exhibited a readiness to strategically seek an alternative but ‘easier’ aspirational goal. By enrolling in another tertiary course that was less competitive, and consequently less valued by other students, he was also throwing himself into an aspirational gamble. Akin’s despair was indicative of the limited navigational alternatives within his aspirational horizon, although questions about university education were concerned with ‘what’, not questions of ‘if’, underscoring a deeper layer of inculcation that stressed university credentials as mandatory to competitiveness for middle class students like Akin. Like many of the students interviewed, Akin, through feeling less competitive, less endowed with the necessary capital than other students, constructed failure as an individual problem, within the doxic assertions of self-responsibility and self-government (Rose, 1999), a symptom of an ascription to the dominance of the neoliberal discourse privileging individualism at the expense of collective obligations. For example, student Qwan justified that the struggles and pressure she was facing in her senior years were the results of her failure to ‘pay attention’ in junior schooling years. As Davies and Bansel (2007) puts it:
The so-called “passive” citizen of the welfare state becomes the autonomous “active” citizen with rights, duties, obligations and expectations - the citizen as active entrepreneur of the self; the citizen as morally superior. This is not simply a reactivation of liberal values of self-reliance, autonomy and independence as the necessary conditions of self-respect, self-esteem, self-worth and self-advancement but rather an emphasis on enterprise and the capitalisation of existence itself through calculated acts and investments combined with the shrugging off of collective responsibility for the vulnerable and marginalised. (p. 252)

In a similar way, Doris declared a precondition was to compete aggressively as an ‘activated’ agent in order to enter her chosen vocation. As the Hong Kong academic scoring she made reference to was based on relative results against other students in the same grade across Hong Kong, she conveyed feelings of hopelessness, because her habitus did not embody the cultural capital to enable her to believe she could competitively achieve the highest academic standard in public examinations, especially when pitted against students from elite schools:

Doris: I’d like to get into the faculty of (a health profession). But it is so hopeless to me now because the standard is so high. They need at least one five-five star and two five star. (Expression of dismay)

Andrew: Which is the highest. (Students, Town Secondary School)

In this sense, the consistent pessimism and doubt arising from the imaginaries of competitive high-stakes examinations was in constant confrontation with students’ subjective sense of possibilities, bleeding through the vulnerabilities of aspirational constructions. Indeed, after the interviews, Doris confirmed through e-mail correspondence she had abandoned her aspirations of working in the health profession, even before going through her public examinations. Her habitus was ambivalent about the probabilities of success regarding aspirations that were perhaps upper-middle class, an acknowledgement of how these aspirations were unfamiliar to the maps of her cultural grouping, and the habitus in this context acted as a frontier between the thinkable and the unthinkable (Bourdieu, 1990a). This seemed like a ‘turning point’ (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997), as Doris’ habitus integrated the low probabilities of success from objective conditions and subjective limitation, and, through re-evaluation and revision, consciously re-imagined alternative aspirational trajectories. In this case, the previous aspirations were internalised as ‘not for her’. Nonetheless, despite the
setback, an active determination, expressed by Doris in her later correspondences implied a habitus ingrained with a background understanding as to what was not for her, in this case working class ‘retail’ professions, and the alternative and identifiably middle class trajectories that were suitable for her. In both Akin and Doris’ examples, the students’ habitus were disposed to the surrendering of aspirational dreams under the pressures of a competitive imaginary. Tragically though, what was evident was the doxa of self-responsibility that naturalised a belief and misrecognition of examination as a meritocratic level-playing field for aspirational fulfilment. This was problematic, according to the PISA Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong that stated the socioeconomic correlations to aspirational outcomes:

An ideal education system should be a level playing field for all students to unleash their full potentials regardless of their backgrounds. However, the PISA findings show a very strong impact of familial socioeconomic status (SES) on Hong Kong students’ educational and career expectations. Specifically, in PISA 2009 and 2012, 75% and 81% of students from upper class (highest 10% of SES) expected to pursue university education respectively, while the corresponding percentages from grass-roots level (lowest 10% of SES) were only 28% and 35%. (Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013b)

The misrecognition of meritocracy within schooling was repeatedly visible through how competitive, high-stakes public examination was framed as the filter for what was deemed appropriate in terms of aspirational trajectories. In such a way, the Hong Kong public examination system exercised symbolic power by embodying competitiveness through its mechanism, and was veiled in a dominant imaginary of meritocracy based on an assumption that all students participated in a level playing field, ignoring the aspirational inequalities from the endowment of what we might see after Appadurai (2004) as better navigational capital based on social location. This was evident when I challenged students to think about how choices of schooling influenced future vocational success, to which Raymond and George effectively dismissed the effect of location, choice of schooling, in aspirational actualisation:

Raymond: (Dismissively) I think the major factor for you to get a well-paid job is your result in the public exam, not where you come from.
George: (Agreeing with Raymond) The academic result is the most important point. (Students, East Bay Secondary School)

The naturalisation of the competitive and meritocratic doxa within the students’ habitus was unmistakeably clear here, and offered a glimpse into the system of domination besetting these middle class students (but particularly poorer children in the Hong Kong context). The ascription to these logics, overlayed within the interpretative matrixes of the habitus predisposed students to a strategy of ‘study hard’ to achieve aspirational success, but a self-blame when this success was elusive, under the assumption of a level-playing field. This structuring power of the competitive logic extended temporally into students’ imaginations about future employment. In one example, Fonnie acknowledged that even if she was successful in entering her chosen vocation, she despaired at her chances of becoming a manager, imagining herself stuck in mediocrity:

Fonnie: So I think it will all depend on our public exam coming soon. But even if I make it to university, and study financial like I wish, I think it’s easy to get into the financial sector but it’s difficult to do something great. Or be in the high position. (inaudible)...is difficult.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that, what’s a high position?

Fonnie: Maybe management, yes.

Interviewer: So you think it’s quite hard to get into that end?

Fonnie: Yes, quite hard. But I mean it may be easy for me to get involved in the financial sector, but maybe…I’m just down there, with people ordering me to do something.

Interviewer: Why do you think that’s difficult?

Fonnie: Because I think the financial sector is an industry that requires experience, and if you stay long enough you can get experience. It requires some sort of interpersonal skills, that if you know someone, then it may be easier to get a promotion or something… (Student, East Bay Secondary School)

Under the guise of competition, these students’ habitus seemed permanently subordinated to the sense of perpetually seeking to acquire more capital to remain ever competitive, that extended into future conceptions. And this occurred alongside recognition that social capital
was also potentially important (‘if you know someone’). The sense of struggle and ambivalence in navigating her future reflected how her current habitus, instilled through her middle class family background and schooling, allowed her some degree of confidence to enter her chosen profession, but did not instil her with the confidence to excel beyond what she saw as mediocre. Gender and her middle class background could also have contributed to her imagined limitations for success into a position of management. Even Apple’s aspirations to be a teacher were imagined in a pessimistic mood, as the student grappled with the notion that there was ‘something’ lacking in order to effectively fulfil aspirational futures. In imagining the requirements and challenges to get into a teaching career, Apple was overwhelmed by a sense of despair and gave up explaining midway:

I think my first step to becoming a teacher of economics is to enter into the university, because as my economics teacher says, he has studied the subject of economics, when he’s in university. And it is also a long way for me to be a teacher because I have to fill the teacher intern, and I must have some…something like…(gives up explaining)

It’s not easy for me to be a teacher. (Apple, Student, East Bay Secondary School)

The excerpt is interesting in highlighting how Apple’s notion to become a teacher was based on a student-teacher dialogue and conversation. Apple’s aspirational possibility was bestowed upon her by her teacher’s narratives of his own trajectory, despite fighting against feelings of self-doubt unresolved by her reliance on the single and vague navigational resource she was drawing upon. Her expression of mild dismay reflected an uncertainty and ambivalence in embracing the future world that was held loosely, and the embodied self-doubt extending to her own capacities; the inability in her present situation to summon the appropriate capital to overcome the unknown obstacles of this competitive field as existing in her future imaginations. Arguably, the difficulty of students in grasping vivid images of possible futures suggested how dispositions born out of the competitive logic seemed to constrain temporal conceptions of the future – students worried and attendant to immediate concerns incapacitated more distant dreams. The induction of constant and present anxieties within a precipitous temporal rhythm was also not a resourceful foundation for hopeful imaginations of the future. Indeed, Bhabha (2005) in reflection on the work of Said (2004), argued how the temporal register of slowness regulates the flow of narratives, and facilitates the formation of connections between the parts and the bigger picture, and ‘what to connect with, how, and how not?’ (Said, 2004, p. 78). This connects to the spatial knowledge and engagement within Appadurai’s (2004) capacity to aspire. Hence, Apple’s situation presents
the possibility that increasing the frequency of social interactions for students about their futures could enhance students’ capacity to aspire, and help to alleviate this uncertainty and ambivalence concerning their futures.

The valuing of competitive practices also led students to construct mixed attitudes towards mainland students. Students from East Bay Secondary School reacted with concern about the influx of competitive mainland Chinese students that crowded out the opportunities available in Hong Kong, through competing away university places:

Raymond: Today, Hong Kong is highly competitive because the mainland students are also strong you know, and they can even get into the Hong Kong prestigious universities compete with us for the place in university. So I think the opportunity in Hong Kong is relatively less than that in overseas.

George: There’s too much people in such a small place, so there’s less opportunity. (Students, East Bay Secondary School)

Here, students held a consensus that mainland Chinese students embodied more competitive habitus, a threat to the students’ aspirational possibilities. Despite these concerns, students absorbed within this competitive doxic state consequently admired mainland students as ‘strong’ and ‘very hard working’ in an ambivalent coalescence of both awe and disapprobation, as witnessed in the previous section, against an understanding that local students were less competitive. In this sense, the students were legitimising the struggle of which they were the aspirational fallouts:

Akin: Yes, because they really work very hard to get a spot and because we wouldn’t want competition anyways. So, it does worry me.

Raymond: Yes, it’s a worry.

Interviewer: So do you feel like Hong Kong students are not as competitive anymore?

Akin: They are less competitive than mainland.

Interviewer: To get into university requires quite strong English skills. Do you think the students in mainland China…their English skills are getting better?

Akin/ Sarah: Yes, they are getting better.

Interviewer: Better than Hong Kong students?
Sarah: Yes, strong. They are very hard working.

The mainland Chinese students were engaging in ‘meritocratic’, competitive practices that were dominantly legitimated practices within Hong Kong, which students found unimaginable to invalidate, despite feelings of territorial intrusions and being ‘moral superiors’, which was prevalent within social imaginaries regarding mainland China as previously discussed. Similarly, Pamela showed a conviction and apprehension of the competitiveness of mainland Chinese students, and an imagination of ‘falling behind’ by local Hong Kong students:

Pamela: But I think it’s quite difficult for the locals to get a high position in different sectors in Hong Kong because the competitiveness is…because of the influx of mainland students with high qualities. Because local employers think that the qualities and education are all better of the mainland students than Hong Kong students. So they prefer to employ mainland students. Yes. They might have better language skills.

Interviewer: And is that mainly because of Putonghua [Chinese Mandarin]?

Pamela: I don’t think so. Because mainland students have more…I can say that their education is much better than Hong Kong, because the standard of mainland students are better than Hong Kong. It is commonly acknowledged.

Interviewer: Well, is that based on exam results? Or is that based on the media? What has made you think that?

Pamela: Well, in recent years, the proportion of mainland students account for nearly 30 or 40 percent of the Hong Kong universities. (Student, East Bay Secondary School)

Pamela contested that mainland Chinese students embodied the competitive dispositions and wielded the valued cultural capital for success, which was lacking within Hong Kong students. Whether this was true or not, her assuredness of this imaginary precipitated a reservoir from which her apprehension and accounts of legitimisation could be substantiated; the normative position she occupied in her imagination occupied her. From this position of anxiety, the future was perceived with a pessimistic ambivalence because she perceived she
was invested in a game in which she would ultimately be out-competed. Interestingly, the school’s teaching assistant, who attended as an observer for one of the focus groups, remarked afterwards that whilst the competitive and high-pressure conditions of Hong Kong schooling were ‘obvious’, she nonetheless argued against the belief that Hong Kong students were ‘competitive failures’, showing the differing perspectives of teachers and students. At this point, I wish to emphasise that I do not see the problem as ‘hard work’, but instead how students’ blamed themselves for educational failures within a highly competitive environment where success is heavily influenced by a students’ social structural position. Students focused on attending to short-term competitive burdens were partially ‘incapacitated’ to explore aspirational horizons, and definitely much less confident to undertake this exploration if they identified themselves as failures.

Overall, the naturalisation of competitive struggle within Hong Kong’s neoliberal milieu supported the notion of a meritocratic order that compelled students to misconstrue aspirational success in terms of individual effort and responsibility, glossing over structural challenges. The paradox of competitiveness was that, whilst valorised and naturalised within the habitus for future aspirational success, this same ‘competitive’ habitus encountered a milieu that thwarted expectations of competitive success, and simulated dispositions of anxiety in these middle class students. Ascription to this logic assigned these middle class students to a constant state of inadequacy, provoking a sense of uncertainty about achieving their middle-class careers, and the unrelenting fear of becoming uncompetitive and being out-competed – a fear that populated the students’ future imaginaries. This situation also manifested through the misrecognition of competitive struggle as meritocratic, activating a burden of blame and self-responsibility from this possibility of failure. These arising dispositions of a mild pessimistic ambivalence towards the probabilities of imagined aspirational futures, exhibited within students a readiness to ‘give up’. As relations to the future were impermanent and mutable, the future was therefore held by the students as a space of fear, as much as it was a space of possibility and opportunity, and this condition was implicated in the constrained temporal orientations of students’ aspirational thinking. Whilst it could be argued that the constant middle class ‘fear of failure’ is a fairly common aspect of contemporary middle-class habitus, the consequences of failure are heightened in Hong Kong, with the high Gini coefficient of inequality serving as an indicator of the gap between the rich, middle-class and poor. A reminder of the fragility of the ‘good life’ is further explored in the next section.
5.5. Economic Imperative

Another site in which neoliberal values diffuse into the framing of futures is in the valuing of economic capital and materialism, and which enter into students’ conceptions of the good life. In this section, I examine how this economic imperative was rooted in Hong Kong’s milieu, and its repercussions for the aspirational insecurities of the middle class students interviewed in this research, with further implications in narrowing the routes of future educational and career choice.

Adding to the competitive concerns of students, the doxic pursuit of future economic capital also dominated students’ aspirational imaginations and decisions. This was most evident in anxious disclosures by Fonnie, and other students, that described the harsh financial realities of Hong Kong, like falling housing affordability, increasing prices of consumer goods, and future financial pressures to support older parents. An example of poor housing affordability was underscored by the Hong Kong Housing Authority statistic estimating almost 50% of the population live in public housing or subsidised housing schemes (Hong Kong Housing Authority, 2014). The recent record of 130,000 applicants wrestling for 2,160 subsidised homes under the Home Ownership Scheme (Fung, 2015) illustrated how competitive and desirable housing was in aspirational dreams. With average housing prices higher than London, New York or Tokyo (Cheung, 2014a), the phrase ‘sandwich class’ depicted Hong Kong’s lower middle class, who were trapped between the large population in public housing, and the smaller group with private housing (Li, 2013). As such, a fear of financial scarcity underscored the class origins of these students, and led to the construction of students’ habitus predisposed for trajectories towards accumulations of material capital, which subsequently structured the aspirational mediations of these students. In responding to the important criteria in her career decision-making, Fonnie prioritised and valorised ‘pay’ to support her future:

Fonnie: How much money I will receive.

Interviewer: Is that an important concern for you? Like the salary you will receive in the future.

Fonnie: Actually, that’s the major concern because we – our parents tell us you have to buy a house. Because the prices are rising so rapidly, so you
have to find a well-paid job that you can afford to buy a house, and afford for their living after you retire.

Zack: Interest is less important.

The unequivocal pursuit of the monetary for these middle class students, inculcated by their families, and blended with the salient Confucian cultural doxa of filial piety in supporting parents in retirement, was an aspirational concern, which in itself manifested as a division of social class against the absence of this consideration within economically well-off families. The logic in the field prioritised survival above all else, and indeed construed survival as the meaning and very raison d’être which framed these students’ lives. Hong Kong, as a city, acted as a neoliberal-constructed depository for ‘a system of demands inscribed in objective space asking to be fulfilled, a universe strewn with expectations and thereby generating needs and dispositions’ (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 85). The economic burdens of living in Hong Kong were present in the quotidian images of senior citizens engaged in labourer work, sometimes undertaking strenuous physical labour of pushing heavy carts, collecting recycled materials, serving at McDonalds or the local supermarket chain, which would be unthinkable within modern Western democratic societies. But this was a commonplace occurrence in Hong Kong, where the inadequacy of government social welfare and high cost of living made retirement for the working class highly unattainable, and marked out the imperatives of economic security for the middle class futures. As such, the visible images of financial burden were entrenched and imported ‘second nature’ within the social imaginary that sustained and reinforced the orientation of the habitus, elevating economic capital above all other forms of capital, and relegating aspirational pursuit based on interest almost fanciful. The intimacy between an imagined ‘good life’ and economic security was evident:

Erica: Well, I don’t think I need to be a famous person in the world. I just need to… (Pauses to think)
Taylor: (Interjects) Able to make a living.
Erica: (Interrupts to complete earlier sentence) I think if I enjoy my life, then that would be successful.
Taylor: (Continues from earlier comment) Able to make a living and also the rest of the time, I can enjoy my holiday with my family, my friends, my loved ones.
Swift: Similar. (Nodding)
Erica: And the most important is I shouldn’t have a debt…with others.  
(Students, Southwest Secondary School)

To Erica, the emphasis on economic self-sufficiency and alleviation of this pressure was prioritised in her aspirations, tied to the idea of enjoying her life. Erica’s pre-emptive statement of the improbability which was already denied to her - that of becoming ‘a famous person’ – was a reflection of the habituated limitations set upon her. Instead, she expressed modest subjective aspirations that seemed more compatible, achievable and reproducible within the possibilities of her habitus, structured by the lower middle class industrial milieu that permeated the landscape of Southwest - an environment her colleague Swift described as ‘not a [good] district, and people are not having much money, and families are not rich.’

Similarly, Queenie expressed the importance of having ‘the ability to do what I want to do’ and yet understood how her social class, evident in her local living environment, denied her aspirationally of many possibilities. She makes reference to limitations of economic and cultural capital present in Southwest district, conscious of the ‘harshness’ of Hong Kong urban lifestyle in reference to spatiotemporal limitations; ‘doing everything in our [small space]…in a short time’, a description of the confined spaces of both home and schooling. This description was also characteristic of the sense of space-time compression as a phenomenon of globalisation, due to the precipitous transformations in modes of communication and digitization, cheaper and faster travel (Harvey, 1989), stimulating the sense of spatiotemporal uncertainty. Economic capital provided the counterbalance and augmented certainty of the future, skewing the axis of navigational trajectories towards it.

The responses illustrated students’ underlying awareness of the socioeconomic constraints that limited their aspirations, producing in them dispositions that can be felt as anxious. The immediacy of attention directed to the pursuit of the economic as a means to alleviate anxieties about survival meant students were less inclined towards the luxury of exploring how present practices could expand aspirational capacity. These middle class students’ anxiety towards Hong Kong was therefore arising from the imagined burdens they will face in the future staying in Hong Kong. This anxiety has its basis in the economic: high cost of living (housing prices are the highest in the world), filial duty to support parents, low adult social welfare for an industrialised economy, highly competitive work environment, low labour protection, abundant materialism, and high level of mutability. Subsequently, the accumulation and investments in other forms of capital, namely cultural, was focused on
employment that could improve future re-conversion into economic capital. This was evident in expressions of trajectories towards middle class professions based on interest, and how economic returns from career investments structured their responses:

**Apple:** For my future, I want to have a fruitful life. And I will be successful. I want to be a teacher because I like teaching people, although I’m a student now. And I’m really keen to be a teacher. If I have enough experience, I can be a tutorial teacher, and I can earn more income.

**Sammi:** Also, I want to do something I want to do. I want to be a civil engineer. First, I am interested in that, and then I can earn quite high a salary that I can have a better living standard for my daughter, my son and also my parents. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)

Consequently, economic reward was a mandatory criterion for career selection, and in Sammi’s case, it was a prerequisite for (re)producing the good life. In a way, this valuing was the expression of the competitive logic whereby economic capital was treated as an objective measure of success, and epitomized the high-stakes of the competitive aspirational game. Students admitted that aspirations of lower paid work such as at the convenience store, or engaging in charitable and social work were disqualified for them. These disqualified vocations were left to students who had meagre ambitions, or lacked the academic aptitude to ‘properly succeed’, revealing a predisposition towards a future imaginary within their own social class, the ritual of class inclusion and reproduction. This cast employment as ‘the resolution of the issues of, simultaneously, socially acceptable personal identity, secure social position, individual and collective survival, social order and systemic reproduction’ (Bauman, 2004, p. 11). This regulating logic linking aspirational futures with careers of material acquisition was more explicit in the conversations from another group of students from East Secondary, but also put more into question. Raymond repeatedly mentioned the necessities of entering finance to ‘make [himself] a fortune’, driven by the unequivocal belief that ‘money is very important in today’s society’. In response, another student, Akin, cited the circulating narratives of the financial fortunes of those working within the financial industry and how it was ‘mak[ing] us want to head in that direction.’ This romanticised social imaginary of the financial industry perpetuated the myth of economic acquisition as aligned with the good life, and was objectified in the vast, epic and glimmering skylines of Hong Kong’s financial districts as aspirational magnets to poles of material capital. As such, students such as
Raymond invested into fulfilling this dream, further encouraged by familial pressures towards aspirations for careers that maximised economic returns:

Raymond: My parents force me to do something that makes money. Also my sister.

Interviewer: How important is the matter of how much you earn in the future affecting your decision?

Akin: I think I want to earn enough to only satisfy my needs, not a lot and excess of money.

Linda: The money that I earn is enough to make a living, then that’s okay.

Interviewer: So are you going into a career because it’s good money, or you think you may? (Group nods)

George: Yes, so often.

Interviewer: Is that because you think it’s important yourself, or is that from your parents? (Long pause, as students hesitate to respond) Both? (Group nods) (Students, East Bay Secondary School)

For these students from middle class backgrounds, the habituated experiences of familial influences frequently and prominently moulded aspirational expectations. In the case of Raymond, the overtness and efficacy of family members in pushing him to pursue aspirations of economic security were explicit. Although Raymond’s use of ‘forced me’ implied he felt a little critical towards the pressure exerted on him by his family, his acceptance of this influence revealed his belief that economic capital was important for the ‘good life’. His obedience was possibly augmented by the Confucian filial doxa. The aspirational self-narratives of the students were homologous to their parents, highlighting the inelasticity and deep layering of familial indoctrination on the habitus of these middle class students.

Nonetheless, the valuing of economic capital, whilst prioritised, was bounded by students’ class-derived senses of limits, and a normative sense of the volume that was permissible without betraying class and local identity, demonstrating the nuances in how economic capital should be privileged. Earlier, students’ narratives emphasised an almost doxic criticism of mainland Chinese people’s insatiable, ‘immoral’ and pragmatic appetite for economic gain. Although this seemed an apparent contradiction against their self-verbalised emphasis over imagined futures tied to economic security and materialism, ambivalence existed about extending beyond a middle class imaginary and lifestyle. There was almost a
zone of illegitimacy past having ‘enough to make a living’, as students were enclosed within the social imaginary reflectively embodied within their habitus that normatively prescribed the forms and quantities of economic capital deemed appropriate and achievable, characterised by middle class needs and wants:

Akin: I think it’s important to buy the things I want. If I’m not hurting anybody in the way, I don’t think it’s much of a problem.

Raymond: Have a flat, have a car, and a good family, like have some children. That’s what I’m looking for.

Akin: A spacious, quite a good living standard house, a car to get around. Of course, a family, and maybe a good entertainment system.

George: I think if I can sleep eight hours a day, it’s enough. (Jokingly)

Sarah: I think, have a house and have a family.

Linda: Me too. Flat, family, car, yeah.

(Students, East Bay Secondary School)

There was no doubt these aspirations were material, shared, limited and narrow, although unsurprising in Hong Kong’s materialistic and consumer-driven society. Arguably, these students displayed a desire to aspire to a familiar middle class future, an adequacy rather than excellence in their future lives. Even George’s comments about sufficient sleep, whilst remarked in jest, reinforced this notion. The orientation of students’ practices was towards a social identification through classed consumption configurations. Indeed, Bauman (2001) argued this consumption mentality has been made possible because of the broken collective bonds wrought by the forces of globalisation, consumerism and modernity, resulting in individualised subjects with multiple units of self-identification. The security and at-home feeling of the middle class lifestyles was both conflicting with, and imbricated with, the discourses and imaginaries of competition and social mobility, beckoned by the ideologies of globalisation and neoliberalism. Akin’s comments were symptomatic of ambivalence, as he expressed the importance of material acquisitions as a future desire, but felt a need to justify his response with ‘if I’m not hurting anybody in the way, I don’t think it’s much of a problem’, revealing an inner disjunction between wanton materialism and the logics of his own cultural grouping. Students’ focus on material wealth was related to an understanding of the future lifestyles it would bring, but there was no overriding desire to accumulate wealth, confirming studies of middle class aspirational attitudes towards economic capital, that
students acted as ‘class repositories…merely [to] solidify and pass on family capital’ (Huppatz, 2010, p. 126).

As illustrated, the pursuit of economic capital was reinforced by the oppressive economic burden of living in a densely-crowded, expensive and competitive global city. For these students from middle class backgrounds, access to economic capital was an impending thought, as was anxiety in meeting the economic realities of ensuring sufficient future economic resources for survival and a good life, reinforced saliently by familial narratives and traditional cultural values of filial piety. Invariably, this drove future tertiary educational and career aspirations in the pursuit of future economic capital, albeit ambivalently, that were characteristic of middle class aspirations. This in turn narrowed the students’ aspirational routes, and subjugated other interests and values, such as matching interest towards future profession. This economic pursuit was bounded and divided by a class logic that invalidated extending beyond what was appropriate within class and location.

The dominance of class and family mediation in students’ aspirations has already appeared prominently within students’ verbalisations. The next section will discuss how such narratives compose the core of these youths’ habitus.

5.6. Familial Logic of Class Preservation

The influence of family in driving aspirations towards careers with stable or higher remunerations as an indicator of success demonstrated an aspect of how powerfully the familial habitus was reproduced within students’ habitus. In this section, I outline the salience of family within aspirational navigational capacity and construction, and how the middle class familial logic orientates students’ habitus towards pre-determined social positions and configurations of vocations.

Familial relations were the vanguard through which the doxa of the broader field was internalised into the students’ habitus. These relational practices through familial relations moulded the habitus of these students by instilling recognition of the rules, stakes and the willingness to participate in this aspirational contest. The drive towards economic success that was showered with narratives of familial indoctrination tended to instil within the habitus
the stakes of the game, which was concerned with the preservation or advancement of the current familial class, i.e. ‘middle-classness’. This is what Ehrenreich (1990) described as middle class defences erected as modes of resistance to the ‘fears of falling’, but through this process, complicating the process of reproduction. Within the Hong Kong middle class context, future probability of economic capital conversion seemed to be construed as the security to which relational class standings of the students could be at least maintained. Education and career were viewed by these middle class families as providing the necessary capital and position for these future conversions.

The family, through social capital, featured as the source of prominent ‘maps’ of aspirational imagination for some of these middle class students. In these cases, students utilised these familial narratives to enable and exercise navigational possibilities, by imagining themselves situated within professions associated with family members, as with Linda’s case, which spurred her explorations of entering the health profession:

It is because my auntie is a nurse, then she always shares about the things and mood in the hospital and I think it’s quite funny to work in a hospital. Then I searched online to check whether I can work in those hospitals, and I am quite interested in becoming a radiotherapist. (Linda, Student, East Bay Secondary School)

Linda was clearly captivated by stories shared by her aunt, who acted as a catalyst that propelled her towards a related profession in healthcare. Another example was of Taylor, who was influenced by the familiarity provided by social capital, with one of her cousins attaining prominent status within a major local Chinese language newspaper. Although Taylor aspired to this trajectory, her articulated reasons were challenged by other students. The clarity with which these students were apparently cognisant of economic yield within vocations was illustrated in the students’ ridicule of Taylor’s belief that journalism is highly-paid:

Taylor: Maybe my cousin. Both my cousins study journalism and one of them is already an editor of Ming Pao…do you know?

Interviewer: Okay. The newspaper.

Taylor: I think the job also is well-paid (Group laughs except Taylor)
Swift: (Gestures to Taylor) I don’t think so (Group laughs). Being a reporter is very hard job. Just compare the job with the payment; the job and payment is not good. (Group laughs) (Students, Southwest Secondary School)

In this case, the domestic transmission of social capital enabled Taylor to aspire to a profession that other students in the group excluded as a non-choice due to normative notions of ‘hard work’ and low pay annexed from the social imaginary. Furthermore, these familial sources, in contingent circumstances, were also turning points for students wishing to enter certain professions, as with Alexa’s case where family tragedy activated her aspirations towards certain orientations:

It’s just with the [tragedy of a family member], the doctors do not consider the feelings of the family members. I hope I can change this. And, does not only to find out how to…fight against…stop the spread of disease, but take care of family members which is very important. (Alexa, Student, Town Secondary School)

Alexa’s statements demonstrate how unexpected familial-based events could catalyse profound transformations to the deeper aspirational schemata of this student’s habitus, and thereby affect practice; although the requisite was that Alexa would have already possessed the cultural capital to readily imagine her aspirational turn. In essence, familial relations were central nodes in the aspirational roadmap of these students, and deeply productive of these students’ habitus. In highlighting the primacy and durability of familial inscriptions on habitus to future educational endeavours and beyond, Bourdieu (1992) remarked:

The habitus acquired in the family is at the basis of the structuring of school experiences; the habitus transformed by the action of the school, itself diversified, is in turn at the basis of all subsequent experiences ... and so on, from structuring to restructuring (p. 134).

Through dominantly regulating the doxa of students, middle class familial relations tended to ensure the habitus was deeply predisposed to practices for competitive success within the field of schooling and, beyond that, at least preserved the sense of ‘middle-classness’. Here, I reference the rich bodies of sociological studies into middle class ‘reproduction strategies’ of parents and students within divergent backgrounds (Ball, 2003; Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2006), and reinforce these findings in my work in the Hong Kong
context. I also draw on Ball’s (2003) consideration of middle class as the reflection of a particular identity, lifestyle, trajectory, set of perspectives and relationships in the social world, characterised by specific emotional complexities. In relation to aspirations, Ball identified middle class preoccupation to planning ahead, concern for the future and ensuring states of ‘learning readiness’. This was evident from students that considered university attendance mandatory and taken-for-granted, even when aspired vocations did not require formal university degrees. University was seen as the doxic prerequisite to a ‘good career’ and ‘good life’, a safety net to enhance competitiveness and improving future employability with future employers. This ‘taken-for-granted’ ingrained within the habitus was clear when students were asked who wanted to enter university:

All Students: (Turns to look at each other)
Leigh: All of us.
Interviewer: Is it because your parents have said you have to study, or do you want to study?
Leigh: Because having a university degree is important and it’s very important to have a university degree in Hong Kong. And it’s much easier to find a good career if you have a university degree. (Students, Town Secondary School)

The non-verbal concordance between the students to this question, and the fact that Leigh is able to speak on behalf of her colleagues, demonstrated a shared understanding that tertiary attendance would constitute their class identity. The legitimacy that university degrees endowed upon these middle class students’ aspirational identities was also framed by the competitive logic:

I think in Hong Kong it is essential for students to study in university, because the requirement of the company is the significant of...they will ask you to graduate, to finish your studying in university. (Cecilia, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

In this sense, familial relations ensured that these middle class students’ self-identity within the habitus was rooted in education. Additionally, earlier discussions in Section 5.5 on familial influences on concerns for economic futures were revealed in how the students orientated themselves towards vocations based on remuneration. Working class vocations like shop attendant, and social work, with lower economic yield, were aspirationally excluded.
as ‘not for us’. Hence, the students’ middle class identities were formed as a distinction from working class aspirations (Savage, 2000). The overbearing nature of familial pressure to reproduce middle-classness through competitive academic results and university was summarised by Pamela in her conception of a good future life:

Pamela: I think a good future is to get rid of all the pressure from my family.
Interviewer: And what kind of pressure would that be?
Pamela: They just keep exert too much pressure on my academic results. They said, if you don’t, you can’t enrol in university, you have the results like me. Just can’t earn a good salary. (Student, East Bay Secondary School)

This ‘concerted cultivation’ (Lareau, 2003) that Pamela was experiencing near the transition point to tertiary studies reflected the familial fear of loss of class, foregrounded by the economic imperative as a product of the uncertainty generated by the Hong Kong milieu, and its potency generated dispositions of ambivalent resistance within these students. Parents were deploying a ‘pragmatic use of immediate capital’ (Archer et al., 2013, p. 72), for instance, sending their children to tutorial classes, or reinforcement through repetitive narratives of the consequences of downward mobility, as strategies to guard against downward social mobility. These parental practices are what Ball (2003) refers to as ‘exclusion from within’ (p. 76), through active monitoring and policing of their children’s development. This anxiety has supported the proliferation of Hong Kong’s tutorial school industry, which was estimated in 2009 at US$3.9 billion per annum (Ng, 2009). To the reader, these parenting practices are probably reminiscent of the Tiger Mom stereotype established by Chua (2011) in her memoirs. However, the journalist Roiphe (2014) precisely encapsulated the fear of parents under contemporary circumstances:

And yet, in a world in which people are immensely anxious about their children's futures, these thorny questions of success do occupy our imaginations. We run our kids ragged with lessons, enriching them within an inch of their life, for fear they will slip through the middle class standard of living in a harsh, new future that we envision but can’t quite understand. This is a cultural moment in which an unprecedented amount of energy is being poured into creating "successful" children and yet we seem often to be floundering and misguided in how precisely to do that (p. 14).
Vincent and Ball (2007) referred to escalating demands on the decisions of middle class parents via the assault of incongruent discourses and imperatives originating from the market and broader field of power. These narratives arbitrate versions of what is good and necessary parenting, and inducing guilt through the doxa of meritocracy and self-responsibility. In this way, it was not difficult to understand students’ and most certainly the parents’ states of trepidation within the global and neoliberal space of Hong Kong, as the milieu was simultaneously an opportunity and threat to the familial middle class logic ingrained within the students’ habitus. Undoubtedly, this fluidity, hyper-competitiveness, and destabilisation fuelled a tighter adherence to the orthodoxy to preserve the field of familial relations that seemed relatively dependable and controllable. Students’ seemed overtly, even excessively, aware of the generational preservation strategies and ‘safe roads’ that parents were trying to reproduce within them, and as such, articulated a contestation that tried to resist this doxic trajectory:

- **Calvin:** The pressure is created by the whole society. The culture in Hong Kong is to study hard, and to get as good a result in your public examination as you can.
- **Francis:** And you will go to a good university, find a good job and have a happy life.
- **Calvin:** Yes. I think the rules are same for all Hong Kong people.
- **Doris:** They think if they graduate from university, they will have a good life and good standard of living. This is called blissfulness. I was thinking this question- but we are blissful now I think. We are blissful too. But it is not necessary for us to walk the same road with everyone in Hong Kong.
- **Calvin:** I think this, we call ‘road’ created by our parents maybe, our teachers, because they experienced at the time when they were poor, and they can give a better life. So now it’s become more reachable. People in Hong Kong are more rich and the situation changed. But they are still pushing us to walk the same road as them. So they think we can have a better road ahead, a better future, so that we do not need to experience the poor situation as they did. (Students, Town Secondary School)
The descriptions reinforced how parenting and schooling practices played into a broader homogenous social imaginary of a form of ‘middle-classness’, dominantly compelling students to temporally-grounded and orthodox routes for middle class preservation, proffered as the formula for achieving the good life. Most likely, the real and common phenomenon of downward mobility from Hong Kong’s early export-oriented industrialization during the 1950s and 1960s were imprinted within the historical memories of parents, including the recent turbulences from two financial crises (Lui, 2003). In this way, the students revealed their differential and ambivalent relations to the broader field, and the notion of exploring alternative pathways within their current liminal state, trying to show how the value of ‘traditional’ trajectories of parents were invalid within the contemporary contexts. This same ambivalence was carried by Mary as she attempted to resist parental and schooling narratives of orthodoxy. Like the other students interviewed, she was taken by the mobilities paradigm of wanting to travel in order to broaden her aspirational trajectory and ‘explore the world’:

Mary: Yes, not only from the school, but also from their parents. They believe they must get very fine marks and very good academic results so they can be a successful person. To me, I don’t believe that.

Interviewer: So what do you want to do after you graduate from secondary school?

Mary: I don’t really think about that. Well, I’d like to do some jobs that are more free, and might be travelling around the world. Maybe being some kind of generalist – I don’t know. Something with travel just to explore the world instead of sitting in an office. (Student, Town Secondary School)

As such, Mary’s occupational aspirations were situated in a liminal state, but with an assured notion of not limiting herself from the multiplicities of opportunities and alternatives. For Mary, ambivalence towards the future seemed productive, as she challenged the need for very fine academic results, and imagined a career that did not confine her to Hong Kong. Arguably, Mary embodied an inheritance that emboldened her capacity to aspire, an inheritance of cultural and symbolic capital that made not imagining beyond her present temporality unproblematic for her. And yet Mary admitted to an internal struggle that was a signature of dominant familial relations amongst these middle class students, which regulated and synchronised aspirational temporality and spatiality:
I’d like to travel around, but at the same time I’m quite confused about that because I’ll also miss my friends and family. I know that I just want to travel in the future, but I want to spare some time to spend with my family first. (Mary, Student, Town Secondary School)

The attachment to family and home was a powerful consideration, confirming Alloway and Dalley-Trim’s (2009) description of its potency to discourage the move away or make separation unthinkable. Aspirations grounded in family were most likely interspersed amongst students’ notions of wanting to stay local, fuelled by Hong Kong’s romanticised imaginary. Therefore, despite the vocal contestation to these rules, the endowment of the middle class habitus at the primary level, the stakes from the investments in the accumulation of the capital for middle class aspirations, largely predisposed students to continue engaging in orthodox practices. Furthermore, the harshness of Hong Kong’s economic environment would likely steer most students, without the same degree of confidence shown by Mary, towards narrow aspirational pathways.

Therefore, according to students’ narratives concerning familial relations, social and cultural capital was a central node and reference point within students’ aspirational formation. As such, students were influenced by the reproduction strategies of Hong Kong middle class parents, and inculcated with the taken-for-granted that mandated university attendance, and strived for middle class professions. Middle class familial relations were wrought with anxieties and pressure, as parents invested in concerted cultivation instigated by relations to the broader milieu that rippled with uncertainty, heightening the possibilities of downward mobility. The primary influence of family within students’ habitus ensured the internalisation of reproductive strategies was met without serious dissensus.

One of the reproductive strategies by middle class parents was in the investment of English as a capital. Subsequently, the dominance of this familial logic can be identifiably traced to how familial relations appropriated English as a form of capital in attempting to safeguard and enhance ‘middle-classness’.
5.7. **Family Socialisation and the Legitimacy of English**

In this section, I will expose how the field of familial relations imparted to students’ habitus the sense of English’s representation as an economic, social, and cultural capital, necessary in the competitive struggle to sustain relational class positions and achieve upward mobility. I will chart the process of appropriation and reinforcement of this linguistic relation through family socialisation, and how parents passed on this ‘ordinary’ and naturalised imaginary in the form of personal experiences, stories and myths, privileging English as an aspirational marker of distinction.

Quite a few students admitted their parents lacked strong English language skills, and despite their *nonconnaissance*, transmitted the belief in a precondition to acquire English in order to ‘live a better life than them’, revealing a familial logic that appropriated English in order to fulfil the doxic drive to maintain social class and for social mobility. Of this, Sherry stated her motivation for English learning was inherited from her father’s experience of occupational advancement which was limited by English:

> My father is always asking me to learn a lot of English because in situations he cannot speak fluent English, he cannot get to the management level. Because he cannot get to management level because he cannot speak good English. He’s always asking me to learn better English so I can get a better job, and so I can get a higher salary. (Sherry, Student, Town Secondary School)

In this case, the ongoing dialogue with her father’s historical experience inscribed within her aspirational map the association of the English capital as constituting the divisions between levels of professions. This need was reinforced by explicit references to the repercussions of not attaining this mastery, and its relations to future economic security, with the risk of jeopardising social class and the good life. Parents were summoning temporal imaginaries from the past to preserve the orthodoxy of the present, and through this practice, sustaining the structure of the field. This assumption that the acquisition of English would automatically result in a successful life for his daughter constituted a potential misrecognition of the place of English acquisition that will be elaborated in Section 5.9. Family socialisation practices regarding the appropriation of English were further exemplified as Jessica spoke about her parents’ belief in accessible international opportunities via the learning of English:
They think if I learn English well, that has the whole connection with the whole world. I can communicate with so many people and I can do business in the overseas. They have this idea. And they don’t know English, so they have to work after high school. (Jessica, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

The imaginary of English capability in expanding aspirational capacity was offered by the parents, and its transmutability as a cultural and social capital in providing connections to the global space; English could be deployed to expand aspirational capacity amidst increasing competitiveness brought by globalisation, instead of retreating from it. Here, as well, is the place of English as the global language of business. To this point, the experience of Jessica’s parents working straight after high school was reinforcement to her of the inappropriateness of her parents’ past circumstances against students’ habitus of middle-classness and her constructed future imaginary. Even in Kelly’s case where no overt familial pressure was exerted to acquire English from parents who did not have English proficiency, Kelly had a normative sense and expectation that acquisition of English would satisfy parental expectations of her schooling, an indication of its symbolic power:

My parents never asked me to learn English but they, I think…they are happy if I can study English well. (Kelly, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

Furthermore, the fundamental necessity for English was expressed by Kelly elsewhere in her conversations, believing such linguistic capital made her ‘more competitive’. This logic of prioritisation of English was moulded temporally across childhood, to naturalise the importance of English and prevent future resistance at different junctures in the students’ lives. Erica’s account was indicative of her gradual realisation about the importance of English through time, and how she came to this realisation:

Actually when I was small, my parents usually asked me…the governments would usually send them letters and inside it’s English. So they will take the letter and go ‘Do you know this?’ Ah, I don’t know, but after secondary school, I know and I will tell you. And from that time, I have the concept that I need to study English. (Erica, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

This early childhood rite of passage of slowly deciphering written English letters wove and aligned the student’s habitus to the doxic expectations of her parents to become proficient in English, and the positive validation she no doubt received upon the realisation of her practical
proven. Erica was also structured by discourses of Hong Kong’s global city status that conferred increased value and legitimacy to English, in comparison to the period during which her parents grew up, when ‘Hong Kong was not as international as it is now’. In this sense, within the globalised milieu of Hong Kong, the extent to which this capital was embodied influenced the life-chances, and potential life-chances – including aspirations – of those affected. Specifically, the historical practice of English language appropriation as a capital by the elite, upper class for distinction was being appropriated by the middle class in its efforts for class preservation. It also reinforced the middle class familial belief of how the fluid and competitive global space of Hong Kong as a threat to class could be neutralized and countered through an appropriation of English.

Similarly, students were also influenced by parents with proficiency in English, who circulated accounts on the benefits of acquiring the capital that resulted in advancements in social position and career success. An example was Andrew, who, although he did not believe his father’s English was perfect, was conditioned by witnessing his father speaking to foreigners, demonstrating the opportunities English delivered:

Well, I wouldn’t say he speaks [good] English but he works with foreigners. And sometimes I hear his conversation and his phone calls. And sometimes I think I need to learn good English so I can get comfortable to talk to others. Because my father went to management level because he can speak, I guess fluent English and I think that’s very important. (Andrew, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

Andrew’s firsthand experience of his father’s English conversations, career advancement and consequential familial lifestyle informed his aspirational conceptions of English’s conversions into social (‘foreigners’) and economic capital. This was despite his acknowledgement of his father’s limited knowledge of this cultural capital, which seemed to have benefited the father disproportionately in relation to the volume of his linguistic acquisition. Andrew’s confidence in his own English proficiency relative to his father’s, in addition to his overt declaration on English’s importance, showcases how durably this disposition had become ingrained within Andrew’s habitus. Durability in the valuing of English was also transmitted through familial investments in the capital expended over time. Lloyd and Antonia mentioned explicitly how parents encouraged them and provided resources in the acquisition of English, including, in Lloyd’s instance, his mother’s time and labour:
Lloyd: My mum cares about my English a lot because she used to be a translator in Customs. And this is how she puts it. She says if you live in Hong Kong, you can use Cantonese Chinese every day, but you don’t get to use English that much, so she always puts a lot of time and effort into English, into speaking English with me and in my English learning so I think she puts English as my priority.

Antonia: Yes, my father really cares about my English results. I also joined a lot of English classes with foreign teachers at three or four years old. Because I think speaking English is really important when you get to do some jobs in the government, the public sector, you still have to be good in English. (Students, Town Secondary School)

Lloyd’s mother was an example of a parent with a working knowledge of English, and the recognition that the reality of the Hong Kong setting was not conducive to English acquisition. Consequently, Lloyd’s mother readily undertook practices that ensured the permanent transmission and privileging of this cultural capital within the habitus of her son. This successful reproduction was carried across in the student’s relative confidence, ease and competent utilisation of the English language during the interview. On the other hand, Antonia’s family instilled the legitimacy of English at a very young age through sending her to English classes, specifically cultivating a habitus disposed to recognising the language as a powerful capital, through instructions by native English-speaking teachers, and via her father’s concentration on her English results. Antonia’s future imaginary of how English can be deployed for public sector opportunities allowed a reference point for her to value English in the temporal present, and vice versa. In other words, future imaginary and present habitus were mutually constituted and reinforced. In another explicit example, Leigh’s familial inculcations through early childhood tutorial classes in English resulted in the dominant valuing of English in her habitus, leading her to aspire to becoming an English news presenter after participating in a school public speaking competition. It was illustrative of how this family-constituted habitus, interacting with contingent conditions within the schooling field, induced particular aspirational possibilities. The example resonated with the research by Clegg and Stevenson (2011) showing how extracurricular activity constituted conditions for students’ aspirational orientation.
Similar to Antonio, Fonnie related stories of her relatives attempting to nurture the English capital in their children from infancy in order to equip them with the linguistic familiarity and schemata that would facilitate the ease for further English acquisition that they imagined would enable the children to compete for entry in future schooling and beyond:

Fonnie: And I have a cousin who just gave birth to a baby and her baby is about 1 year old and he’s already remembering some flashcards about English vocabulary and I think that’s hard.

Interviewer: Why is that happening though?

Fonnie: Because he wants her children to be more competitive. He can’t afford to send him to an international school. He wants to cultivate his English from a very young age. (Student, East Bay Secondary School)

Familial practices aimed at increasing the probability of successfully cultivating English proficiency at an early age also related back to the dread surrounding the erosion of middle-classness because of the schooling selection process. The popular demand and availability of English kindergartens in Hong Kong, commencing from the age of two, endeavour to instil English writing and literacy into young children, with the hopes of imbuing the ‘right’ cultural configurations that elevate competitive success into applications for ‘prestigious’ institutions of primary schooling, which in turn increase chances of entry into ‘prestigious’ forms of secondary schooling. The fact that ‘prestigious’ schools and universities are usually EMI in nature fuelled this appetite. Interviewees cited that students with poor proficiency in English were relegated to CMI schools, instead of entering minority EMI schools. The loss of entry into English-based schooling institutions was construed anxiously by parents as the loss of the future imaginaries of broad aspirational horizons tied to English capability that were evident in parental narratives. Therefore, parents were in effect strategising to access the dominant cultural value, embodied in the minority of EMI schooling institutions, where the correct volume of cultural capital in the form of English in primary school ensured this entry. Through this practice, English was further affirmed as a dominant cultural capital within the habitus of students, and the statistical probability of preservation of class was upheld.

Nonetheless, the degree to which the value of English was internalised at the familial level was not straight-forward within the students’ habitus, and the future imaginary possible through English language acquisition was not always stable. Arguably, the richness and subjectivity of familial narratives, experiences and practices contributed to the degree to
which these students ‘practised, repeated, explored, conjectured and refuted’ (Appadurai, 2004, p. 70) the aspirational imaginaries possible through English, and the potency of its entanglement to the primary habitus. Compared to parents with limited understanding of English, parents with knowledge of English were capable of expanding students’ navigational capacity via constructing imaginaries with more relatable and vivid examples of relational links between the capital and its horizons of aspirational possibilities (Appadurai, 2004). This was observed through parents that provided practical application of English in their lives as valuable social and cultural capital, and how it could be deployed to middle class preservation. Additionally, as discussed, the quantity of familial capital dedicated, and its temporal correlations (i.e. from childhood), made students more complicit with this future imaginary and its construction more viable.

Familial mediation in tempering the habitus to the logic of valuing English surfaced at various moments of students’ conversations. For example, Darin’s insistence that English was only artificially used in school was overridden by familial practices of sending the student to an EMI school, which affirmed English’s legitimacy:

Interviewer: Darin, earlier you said you don’t really need English other than for school, and you don’t need English to communicate in society. But does your family think English is important?

Darin: It’s important so they put me in this school. It is still one of the most important languages in this world. I think learning English is really important. (Student, Town Secondary School)

Darin’s contradiction of his earlier comments abhorring English displayed an internal contestation over the place and value of English, where he talked about his indisposition for English, visibly manifested in his evident hesitations, verbally and non-verbally in deploying English during the interview. Furthermore, Darin’s parents were relocating him overseas to an English-speaking country to complete his final year of secondary schooling, signalling familial attempts to nurture further English in him. Another example of familial involvement and contestation of this doxa was illustrated through Mary’s story of the conflict she felt regarding her parents’ contrary viewpoints on the valuing of English:

My family does think English is important because at a young age, for example, my mother didn’t really get into university and she would think English is important
because ‘I didn’t learn good English so you should learn good English’. And then for
my father, he would think ‘oh, that’s fine’ cos he was a university student and ‘that’s
fine because you should learn many languages instead of focus[ing] only on English’.
So there’s a kind of bitter conflict between my father and mother and that would
influence me to think English is not that highly important. (Mary, Student, Town
Secondary School)

Her mother, lacking English proficiency, attempted to reinforce the doxic valuing of English
from childhood, in contrast to her university-educated, English-proficient father who did not
ascribe to this logic, and instead insisted Mary prioritise Chinese due to her racial ethnicity:

It’s quite funny because my father says ‘You’re Chinese, so you should learn
Chinese’ and he thinks because you are a Chinese citizen, you should learn Chinese
first, and you should not put any other language as a priority. You should learn more
of other languages instead of focusing on only English…and although he’s good in
English and uses English in his work. And also he’s using Chinese to talk to me. Even
when I was young my dad would talk to me in Chinese Cantonese all the time,
without pushing me to learn English. (Mary, Student, Town Secondary School)

In this case, Mary’s father was trying to instil her with a Chinese identity, and encouraging
her to deparochialise the prioritisation of her learning. Paradoxically, Mary’s father benefited
from English through entry into tertiary education during Hong Kong’s colonial period, and
advanced into a career requiring competency in English. Her father’s embodiment of a
practical English therefore played a part in legitimising English to Mary, despite her father’s
insistence in downplaying the language’s importance and encouraging her towards embracing
her Sino heritage, by shifting the priority from learning English to Chinese and broader
focuses. Consequently, regardless of Mary’s stated ambiguities and expression of dissensus,
evidence pointed to the fact that Mary had internalised the importance and proficiency in
English. This was validated through her confidence and relatively strong expressive
capabilities in English during the interview, and her explicit acknowledgment that ‘I know
English is important because that helps me communicate with more people.’

These potent familial narratives, demonstrations and practices emphasising the importance of
English had the tendency to reproduce and naturalise a belief in the correspondence between
middle class aspirational realisation, and linguistic acquisition of English. Parents’ genres
located the centrality of English within future endeavours, often through the recounting of
their own historical narratives. Regardless of parental connaissance or non-connaissance, these middle class parents emphasised and invested in their children’s acquisition of this capital, understanding that Hong Kong’s milieu did not guarantee this acquisition. The strength to which students internalised this logic is evident in the next section, which analyses the students’ own disclosures concerning English and aspirational probability, and how these were identifiably influenced by familial relations.

5.8. English and Aspirational Probability

The articulation of the familial imaginaries left no doubt that parents viewed English acquisition as a doxic part of the upbringing of middle class students. External to the field of familial relations, affirmation of English’s competitive importance was further witnessed via how students framed English within educational and career success, and how practices in these generic fields privileged English. These expressions are revealing of the degree to which the previous familial logic had been durably inculcated into students’ habitus.

The competitive importance of English to students was affirmed saliently through how students imagined that English capital could further short-term aspirational success apropos of educational success. This was consistent with research concluding that student and parental attitudes towards acquisition of English was pragmatic (Tung, Lam, & Tsang, 1997). Students held beliefs that English proficiency was weighted more favourably than other subjects within secondary schooling public examinations, including Chinese. The importance of these high-stakes public examinations for university entrance meant that English was considered a strategically important capital to raise the probability of attaining aspirational dreams. Students talked about how English capability was assessed in public examinations, which involved components of oral communication, including grammar, fluency, expressiveness, such as structuring sentences, and communicating ideas and feelings correctly. Accordingly, this meant students who wanted to achieve high scores in English needed to have acquired particular forms of capital associated with English that were valued for assessment, including the capability of activating these and deploying them through combinations of linguistic demonstration and bodily hexis, not simply an acquisition of superficial working knowledge. Cecilia’s remark was illustrative of the processes that marked
this embodiment, from the written, oral and kinaesthetic practices, to a sense of belonging to English:

In exam, the papers are written in English, we can answer in English and I think it is for us to...because English is the future...because we know how to type...how to make a sentence correctly, how to communicate and transfer our meaning to others. (Cecilia, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

Cecilia imagined a future dominated by English, with the students of her cultural grouping, i.e. students like her, in essence preparing their habitus to capitalise on these arising future circumstances. Immediate future circumstances included the educational success at the university level where English was a privileged cultural capital, because it was the sole MOI amongst the major universities in Hong Kong. Evidence of a prepared habitus was in the general concordance by a few students that learning in English for most subjects had become easier than learning in vernacular Chinese. In contrast, earlier mention of Darin’s conflict in internalising English manifested in the student admitting to the difficulty he would face in university without proficient English. Darin’s statement also showcased his general lack of proficiency to express himself articulately in English:

After you graduate, for first...(Soft, inaudible mumbling) It’s hard for me, because in major universities they use English in their teaching in most subjects, and English is...probably...supporting things. (Darin, Student, Town Secondary School)

This showcases Darin’s internal contestation to resist the dominant familial logic attributing English to aspirational success. His internal defeat leads him to construct a future imaginary of struggle in the tertiary educational field.

From a vocational standpoint, English’s importance was confirmed by the students’ imaginaries that wove the language as a prerequisite to middle class professions. Taylor referenced English as a valued social and cultural capital within the interconnected financial milieu of Hong Kong, in order to reach out globally:

If you are good at English, there’s a very big advantage in your future career and also with going to university. Because maybe if you are working in the financial sector and you work with some foreigner, you need English to communicate with them. English is a prerequisite for many careers in Hong Kong. (Taylor, Student, Town Secondary School)
Along the same line, Kelly framed English as a privileged capital within a competitive milieu, believing it improved chances of future employment both practically and symbolically:

I think everyone, almost everyone in Hong Kong study English, they know English so you have to study this subject, you have to know English because if I’m an employer and two interviewees come to me and one knows English and one didn’t, and even if my job doesn’t require English but I would want one who knows English. Because English makes ourselves more competitive. (Kelly, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

In response to how English influenced aspirational futures, Mary’s rationalisations painted a picture that those without English were relegated to working class careers:

Mary: I think they wouldn’t care because they will find their own way. They might think, if I can find a job in 7-Eleven it will be very good. I can work my whole life there. So, that is their own choice. I think they will plan their way or try to plan their future without using a lot of English, but that will cause a little inconvenience to them. But I think they will find their own position in society.

Interviewer: Are you saying they will not get a ‘higher’ position generally?

Mary: Maybe less choice. Higher…I don’t think you can define that. I know there are a lot of people, they don’t speak a lot of good English, but they will help a lot of people, they would like doing volunteers. Or they will do social work, helping teenagers in society. I think their position is still high, but they are not as charmed as the well-known jobs. (Student, Town Secondary School)

Mary painted a picture of students without English bound into jobs out of necessity, maybe working entire lives in one job, or doing local community and social endeavours. What she framed as ‘choice’ could probably be argued as a reference to a certain habitus, one of narrower and pre-defined aspirational opportunities, constructed with expected difficulties and hardship ahead. Mary admitted there was less choice for students without English proficiency, especially in ‘well-known’ vocations, but tried to dispel the classification of vocations into dichotomous higher/lower positions in the social hierarchy. However, Mary’s use of the word ‘charmed’ seemed to presuppose a belief in a better life to describe the ‘well-
known’ vocations, revealing her habitus, and the reflection of Hong Kong societal discourses towards economic success, tied to English proficiency.

From these narratives, students related an English-proficient imaginary associated with fulfilment of middle class trajectories and beyond, implicitly and explicitly excluding or rejecting working class pathways. The dominance of English capability to legitimise the validity of aspirational pathways exposed how the language was implicated within a symbolic system. This symbolic power of English is addressed in the next section.

5.9. The Symbolic Power of English

Bourdieu (1977c) argued that symbolic systems acted as a means for comprehension and ordering of the social world, as instruments of communication and instruments of knowledge, and as a domination function via the ‘integration for dominant groups, distinctions and hierarchies for ranking groups, and legitimation of social ranking by encouraging the dominated to accept the existing hierarchies of social distinction’ (Swartz, 1997, p. 83). English provides access to instruments and institutions for aspirational futures, especially complicit within the middle class imaginary, endowing the language with qualities of a symbolic capital.

This symbolic violence, through misrecognition, can firstly be marked out by a discussion of the resultant dispositions of pride and shame imposed by English, complicated by the broader global and neoliberal dynamics discussed earlier. Later, in Section 5.9.2, I investigate how symbolic violence was also perpetuated by the framing of a dominant form of English that downplayed and invalidated other varieties. Given English’s prominence in aspirational success, I argue how this symbolic violence exacerbates aspirational ambivalence.

5.9.1. Pride and Shame

English’s symbolic influence lay in how the language attached itself to perceptions of an individual’s relative position within the schooling and wider social fields, and hence to the heart of middle class social class preservation. As Bourdieu (1977a) stated, no one acquires
language without acquiring a relation to language, and this relation is regulated by class membership. Previous discussions revealed how students associated access to aspirational possibilities through English as a capital, whilst those deficient in this capital were imagined as preordained to lower socioeconomic professions and lives. This state of doxa was perpetuated by, and coexisted with, Hong Kong’s assumed status as a neoliberal-driven international city; the notion was that, under the competitiveness of a deterritorialised space, the threat of a class regression without English was inevitable, the ‘good life’ elusive:

In Hong Kong, it’s an international city and English is the most important, basic criteria you must have…so that if you don’t know English then you won’t get a…you can only get a low paid job. (Joby, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

Joby’s comments articulated the underlying doxa of how English was equated to a sense of middle class belonging, divided by vocation and pay. The student’s comment was telling of how English as a symbolic power tended to legitimise existing economic and political relations, embedded within the moral order circumscribed by the broader field of power. Lin (1997) argued how this imaginary originated from a historically media and policy-driven public discourse with a presupposition that learning English was overtly connected to satisfying the demands of the labour market, and maintaining Hong Kong’s competitive edge.

Chan (2002) contended that English was part of a historical collective identity of Hong Kong and a sign of cosmopolitanism, serving as a differentiation from the rest of China. This collective identity was expressed by Andrew, who saw English as a capital associated with fulfilling this role of providing a global perspective. The student imagined English could be deployed to decipher, reach out, and differentiate himself from the dominant way of thinking shared by Hong Kong people:

Well, I’m someone who really spends a lot of time on the internet and having English is more easier for me to understand more of the news. Because it takes a really long time to get the news translated into Chinese, especially some technical news. I think learning English is more efficient for us to know how people think, say if you go to some forums in English, we can really learn how people from other worlds, how other countries think. And I think we can never really frame ourselves in Hong Kong. Because most of them share a common way of thinking. And learning English gives you the power to understand how other cultures think. And I think it’s really important because I think Hong Kong, they say it’s an international city and you
really have to think internationally. You can’t usually just think of yourself or just how Hong Kong people think. We have to concern ourselves about some foreigners or some workers from other countries. And it is really important. (Andrew, Student, Town Secondary School)

Andrew, most probably influenced by his father’s experience in international business, exposed his inclination to prepare for globalisation, via the notion that acquiring English would fulfil this imaginary of ‘thinking internationally’ as a global citizen. English was the way to ‘de-root’ from the local, and supposedly understand other cultures. This conception was recurring in the comments from other students:

Cecilia: I think English is a common language in the world so we need to learn how to communicate in English with others. If not, we cannot communicate with our thoughts or our partner in the company but they may be an expat. It is necessary for us to understand what they mean and communication will become more effective.

Adam: The importance of English is wherever you go, if you do not know the local language then you use English.

Interviewer: So English is very important then, or I don’t know, for some of you that haven’t spoken, do you agree or disagree and think it’s not actually necessary to have English?

Kelly: Yes, I think English is absolutely important. Actually, we seldom use it in our daily lives, we talk with our friends and family in Cantonese but it’s important to improve ourselves because we can broaden our point of view through English. Everyone learns English, and if you know English you can communicate with people from around the world.

(Students, Southwest Secondary School)

What is interesting here was how English learning organised students to assume self-responsibility for linguistic mastery, as evident when Kelly spoke of the importance to ‘improve ourselves’. Tied to this notion, many of the students’ narratives unmasked the belief that individuals and groups with proficient English were smarter or more intelligent. There was an underlying assumption of learning English as intrinsically beneficial (Choi, 2008). When I challenged the assumption of the necessity of acquiring English, students defended
by associating those with English capability with admirable qualities, such as cosmopolitan outlooks:

Pamela: I think they just run the risk of being (Inaudible), because as Kelly said, people who gain a higher level of English will give an impression to people that he’s more clever.

Sammi: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you think that? Do you think people with better English, maybe give a better impression of their intelligence?

(Apple nods head)

Fonnie: I think that’s because they are more cosmopolitan, and they know many things about the world, and yeah, they are just more smart than we are.

Pamela: People will appreciate you because given that you have initiative to study English, because we don’t have much chances…better chances in Hong Kong to speak English, but if you can speak it well, it means that you put a lot of effort in it. So they will appreciate your initiative.

Interviewer: Ah okay. So, that’s interesting. And you mentioned cosmopolitan.

People think you are more international?

Apple: Yes. (Students, East Bay Secondary School)

Students were predisposed to consider proficiency in English as the meritocratic reification of investments in capital, more specifically the individual’s labour and time dedicated to its acquisition. The symbolism could not be more apparent as students imagined English proficiency as deserving of other people’s appreciation, and therefore legitimated an English speakers’ moral superiority. This supported the imagination of ‘naturalised’ English as the result of superior mental ability and ‘heavy’ hard work, all the while concealing behind the dominant neoliberal discourse the power relations which were the basis of its force. The differential rates of familial investment in this accumulation, as outlined earlier in Section 5.7, shows the deep impact of socioeconomic position, and the falsity of this meritocratic notion. These students were in effect reflecting and acting out their own awkward, disjunctive habitus, with beliefs of their limited English and experiences of struggle in acquiring English, that identified them simultaneously and inseparably as members of their class. The described doxic belief was consistent with studies in neighbouring South Korea by Park (2010)
analysing the mass-media’s disregard of the privileged backgrounds of successful English learners, instead focusing on the individual’s sense of responsibility and diligence that deserved the assignment of a morally superior position, while other ethnographic research showed that English speakers’ in fact construed their own proficiency as the result of higher moral worth and character (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009; Song, 2009). This socially-construed moral worth based around English proficiency, was elaborated by Fonnie:

I think many people judge you by how well you speak English. Like we all admire the international school students, they are just so fluent in English, and we admire them. And people just think, people who speak good English are more smart or just….better. (Fonnie, Student, East Bay Secondary School)

In a way, the existence of English as a capital was not only a marker of distinction, but a recognition of ‘linguistic relations as relations of power’ (Wacquant, 1989, p. 46), and anticipated as the entry ticket that mediated belonging to the middle class community, the middle class family and beyond. This continual indoctrination from discourses surrounding English gradually assigned students a sense of their place, through a potent normative enforcement, with ‘appreciation’ and ‘admiration’ heaped on students’ possession of this capital, and a constituted embarrassment from the stigmatisation attached to those without:

People who are not good in English are ashamed of themselves. Yes. And those who have the high ability are proud of themselves…because in Central we met a lot of foreigners and Central is the major commercial centre in Hong Kong. And all the smarter people and the elites from all kinds of industry are concentrated there so if I want to be the best in any industry, I need to speak good English to be able to communicate with those foreigners. (Pamela, Student, East Bay Secondary School)

To Pamela, Central district as an aspirational space objectified the powerful imaginary of internationalism that English admitted, the alleviation of economic uncertainty and an elitism that compelled the student to harness resources in attaining English proficiency under the guise of meritocracy. The interplay between capital and family habitus therefore had the potential to align students’ aspirations towards classed routes, altering the subjective sense of limits on what was conceivable and achievable - what Archer et al. (2013) referred to as ‘patterns of alignment.’
The acknowledgement of the problem associated with English’s dominance within Hong Kong was debated by a group of students, highlighting the resistant habitus of students as a minority, but the intricacies undergirding the symbolic violence imposed by the linguistic device:

Calvin: Actually, for me I don’t like English so much. Because I think Hong Kong people is focusing on English so much.

Andrew and Doris: I don’t think so (Speaks almost simultaneously)

Calvin: I don’t think so. I object your opinion (jokingly in response to Doris and Andrew). Because I think they focus too much on English and they do not even take seriously Chinese. And this even creates something called Chin-glish. We always have some English vocabulary in our Chinese sentence. I don’t think it’s good for us…We mix two languages together.

Doris: But I think it’s a special culture of Hong Kong.

Andrew: But you can never say you speak fluent English or Chinese.

Doris: If you can learn traditional English, then it’s very important for you to communicate in other places of the world. But if you are able to speak English that is understandable by others, I think this is good.

Calvin: This is a funny phenomenon but I don’t think it’s a good practice to do so. And Chinese culture even, no one wants to keep this culture because we don’t take the Chinese language as an important role in Hong Kong society. Yes, we mainly concentrate on English as an official language, although Chinese is also one of the official languages. (Students, Town Secondary School)

In this extract, Doris clearly embodied an appreciation of English transposed from past experiences, and evidenced in the assuredness of her articulation, and a sign of the relative comfort of her habitus to the orthodoxy, and the middle class logic. This was backed up by her written e-mail correspondences, which demonstrated a surprisingly strong command of English. On the other hand, Calvin articulated disdain for English several times in the interview, including dismissing Hong Kong’s societal emphasis on English, and showing
relative unease with English, although this did not dampen his expressiveness and confidence in articulating his contrary point of view. In this instance, Doris had naturalised the dominance of English and its hybridity as distinguishing Hong Kong’s cultural identity. Calvin’s argument on the symbolic violence exerted by English was met with resistance from the wider group, as he was expressing an opinion that was contrary to the doxa. It is fascinating to see how the languages of English, Chinese vernacular, and the code-mixing hybrid of ‘Chin-glish’ were being considered by the students as metonyms of contesting cultures that constituted Hong Kong’s multiple ambivalent positionings. As witnessed in the same conversation, Andrew showed a conflicted ambivalence, and struggled with the legitimacy of using the ‘right’ English, resonating with the assertion by Pang (2003) regarding Hong Kong people’s ambivalence towards English.

The neoliberal social imaginary of Hong Kong acted as a symbolic beacon that engaged students towards learning English to competitively broaden perspectives, but, yet again assigning the doxa of self-responsibility and meritocracy in this pursuit. As such, this misrecognition produced within students certain dispositions that could be regarded as pride or embarrassment, depending on the students’ English proficiency, and congruence to the ‘acceptable’ and dominant form of English. This concern over forms of linguistic legitimacy played into furthering the symbolic violence of English, as investigated in the next section.

5.9.2. A ‘Right’ English

The broad awareness and misrecognitions of students’ internal ambivalences over speaking ‘legitimate’ English emerged from the excuses and qualifiers voluntarily offered by students over their English proficiency. Apologies for not finding the ‘right’ words to articulate a response were frequent, as in Swift’s example, although this was surprising given the student’s proficient capabilities in communicating a wide range of topics, and even complex ideas:

My English is not good and I’m afraid my presentation skills is not that good either.
(Swift, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

8 Refers to the English language influenced by the Chinese language, or vice versa, often with deprecating connotations.
These practices affirmed students’ *reconnaissance* of a system of domination based around a legitimate form of English, and their subordination under this misrecognition, nurtured by what Cecilia bemoans as an atmosphere of ‘everything must be correct’ within Hong Kong classrooms and assessments:

Here, I think the education system in Hong Kong, the exams is not allowed student to have any mistake in English. You must speak English in the correct way and if you make a mistake, the marker will deduct your mark. And answering, answer the writing paper, you have to choose the correct answer. Everything must be correct. So we think that when we miscommunicate with others, we have to use English in the totally correct way. If not, we have no confidence to speak English. (Cecilia, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

For the students, compliance to these standards was non-negotiable as the pedagogic paradigm and assessment criteria embodied an important juncture in gateway to fulfilling aspirational dreams, holding a monopoly over legitimate violence in relation to English. Examinations represented the ‘structural exercises tending to transmit…practical mastery’ (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 88) of English, and students that could not incorporate its distinctions were expected to feel ‘very stupid’. In this instance, the unproductive response of ‘no confidence’, arising from Cecilia’s compromised habitus, had the potential to predispose her to avoid English. This unresourceful belief was similar in the sentiments of anxiety echoed by Kelly:

It is usual for us to feel nervous before we speak English because we worry our sentence is incorrect and others will think us is very stupid because we can’t speak English correctly. (Kelly, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

Furthermore, the lowered confidence extended into prevalent ascriptions that their accents were not representative of imagined legitimate English speakers. This was additionally complicated by norms of ‘attentive silence’ practiced by Hong Kong students within the classroom environment, which limited the opportunities for English oral practice (Albright & Luke, 2008; Cheung, 1993). Particularly students from East Bay and Southwest Secondary showed such self-perceptions of non-legitimacy, referencing international and elite EMI school students as legitimate speakers. The postcolonial concept of ‘subaltern’ resonated strongly within the students comments:
Erica: Actually I don’t think my English grammar is good but in the aspect of oral I think I’m okay. (laughs) I think. (Pause) Because I feel like if I can try to speak more English, and I can also be fluent and more confident.

Interviewer: What about the rest of you?

Queenie: I don’t think my English is good.

Taylor: Compared to some others, pre-teachers college, their grammar or their accent will be different from us.

Interviewer: Because accents are different. Do you think there’s a right accent or wrong accent?

Erica: Well, I think uhm… USA and UK they speak in English as their what….mother language maybe uhm… so I do think their accents maybe kind of majority, and we maybe minority.

Interviewer: And does that affect your confidence in speaking language do you think?

Erica: Yes, because previously when I studied in Form Four and Form Five, I joined the program where some international enterprise, trans-international enterprise. Their staff may come with us students to explore Hong Kong and they need to speak English and they come from different countries like Korea, Japan, UK. We need to speak English with them. At that time I feel like I’m so, you know… because they are so fluent and I seem [like]… nothing. But after Form Five, the oral practice, I will sometimes talk with my students in English and I become more confident. Yes. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)

Erica was cognisant of the limitations to her English proficiency through experiences with English speakers from other countries, and she sought remedy through the practice of mimicry, becoming fluent in spoken English which allowed her to legitimise herself, thereby overcoming part of her anxiety of feeling like ‘nothing’. In this case, English, as a symbolic power, had command to govern body and belief, as remarked by Bourdieu (1990b):

Symbolic power works partly through the control of other people’s bodies and belief that is given by the collectively recognized capacity to act in various ways on deep-
rooted linguistic and muscular patterns of behavior, either by neutralizing them or by reactivating them to function mimetically (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 69).

Even in spite of Kelly’s downplaying of accents, her expression of dissensus faced symbolic violence from her teachers, reinforced by the subordination of peers, compelling her to conform and respect the ‘correct’ English. In effect, there was the imposition of a ‘practical faith’ (Bourdieu, 1990b) as a condition of aspirational passage, ‘not only by sanctioning and debarring those who would destroy the game’ but also through ‘arranging things, in practice, that the operations of selecting and shaping new entrants (rites of passage, examinations, etc) are such as to obtain from them that undisputed, pre-reflexive, naïve, native compliance with the fundamental presuppositions of the field’ (p. 68). Sarah recounted how her written English, which resembled her ‘localised’ English, was criticised by her teacher:

Because when you talk, I would never think of the grammar, so in my writing, there is always the grammar mistakes. And my teacher said it is trouble, it is a trouble for me.

(Sarah, Student, East Bay Secondary School)

In other words, there were contested forms of Hong Kong English, and the local, non-standard English was repressed and branded labelled as ‘strange’:

Cecilia: Cos some students speak English in...just like speaking Cantonese. Their tone...
Adam: Flat.
Cecilia: Not fluent...frequent, not frequent. Just a little bit...
Adam: Strange. I don’t know how to describe.
Kelly: I don’t think the accent is so important because even in English country, they have different accents and not so weird. And we are Hong Kong people and we have our accent, but our teachers you know have to teach us the right pronunciation and in examination if we speak just like uhmm...we speak in Chinese [accent], they don’t like it. ...They want more intonation and things like that. Like practice speaking like a foreigner.
Interviewer: Does that mean if you have a more UK accent or a US accent, it’s better for you in the exam?
Jessica: Yes (Kelly nods in agreement)
Cecilia: Not only the accent may but it can be something like the pronunciation, because you have one pronunciation others can’t understand what you actually mean so it is important for us to improve our pronunciation and speak without too much Hong Kong accent in examination. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)

Effectively, the students reiterated how the education system sustained the consecration of English through seeking to maintain the orthodoxy of a ‘right’ English. This was accomplished via the power of the teachers, and especially the examination assessors to adjudicate aspirational chances by favouring certain pronunciations, or forms of the English language which ensured that students complied to this symbolic arbitrary, even in spite of students’ ambivalences. Pang (2003) affirmed how local varieties of English were resisted by Hong Kong English teachers in pedagogic practice, despite its more common and everyday usage, and this disciplining of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ English carried across into students’ aversion to using this non-standard and local English for school. As such, Hong Kong English has continued to be denied recognition and validity, overshadowed by external, Anglo-centric standards that were sought and legitimated. This in part ensured that ‘true’ proficiency in English and membership into the dominant class could not be widely attained, except through concentrated investments, or through familial inheritance. In other words, the mythology of ‘standard’ English, through inculcating permanent dispositions through bodily hexis, in speech, grammar and modes of expression were forms of opposition to the working class, evoking ‘virtues and states of mind, (where) these two relations to the body are charged with two relations to other people, time and the world, and through these to two systems of value’ (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 70). Given the doxic inculcation of competitiveness and self-responsibility within students’ habitus, this had the effect of perpetuating and intensifying the competitive game played by middle class students, with heavily invested familial stakes, and assuring the unceasing privileging of English through its illusion ‘as a “real” and “fair” marker of distinction [which] undergirds the ideology and practice of competitiveness’ (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 26). As such, it is illustrative of how the dominant values permeating through the neoliberal social imaginary sustained the illusio. The contestation between the habituation of English’s relevance to aspirational futures against this symbolic system meant the inevitable assertion upon students’ conceptions of their futures, by mediating the inclusion and exclusion of future possibilities, both objectively and subjectively.
As an aside, I therefore felt that these apologies and excuses, whilst an ascription to the deeply inculcated symbolic violence of English, were simultaneously declarations within focus groups as practices of resistance that established temporary permissive and liminal spaces, to diverge from using the ‘right’ English. Such practice of ambivalence, in regard to dominant relations, ‘sanctioned’ students with the voice to engage in English, thereby diminishing embarrassment and shame arising internally, via habitus, and externally from the disqualifications of others.

Thus, together with the neoliberal social imaginary, the dominant form of English was arbitrarily legitimised through teaching and assessment practices. This sequestered contesting, local and ‘non-standard’ varieties of English practised by many students, generating an ambivalence of not possessing the legitimacy to speak the right English. Arguably, this has deleterious effects on students’ aspirational framings, inducing misrecognition about the future routes possible, with an influence upon aspirational confidence.

5.10. Conclusion

Chapter Five has focused on how the broader field of power via globalisation and neoliberalism sustained relations that parochialised students’ aspirational imaginations, inducing dispositions that confined spatiotemporalities, and the absence of recognition to plural routes to the future. The competitiveness and economic demands of this milieu spurred middle class familial inculcations that annexed English as a capital in safeguarding the future aspirational probabilities of students. However, this linguistic capital operated within a symbolic system, to the disfavour of these students, where a fully legitimated form was beyond easy acquisition.

In arguing this, I opened the chapter through charting the broader field relations, specifically exploring how the forces of globalisation and dominant neoliberal values, interwoven within the Hong Kong milieu, were mediated by the students, cultivating imaginaries of freedom, opportunity and cosmopolitan capital that formed optimistic local attachments in relation to imagined futures, while concomitantly destabilising students’ spatiotemporal conceptions of the future. This internalisation - the habitus - predisposed students to a spatial ambivalence that emerged through contestation between transient and liminal notions of mobilities,
characterised by aspirations for transnational mobility, and attendant hesitations reflective of students’ understandings and experiences to date.

This led into an exploration of Hong Kong as an ambivalent space via its geopolitical position and historical circumstances, marked by a postcolonial legacy that fostered contradictory hybrid identities and positional insecurities, that were fertile grounds for a neoliberal paradigm focused on staying competitive. Whilst reaping economically and borrowing from the nationalistic pride through a return to mainland Chinese sovereignty, Hong Kong was also a collective depository of accumulated historical memories and incompatibilities that marked mainland China as inferior. This social imaginary, legitimated by popular consensus and the public discourse, drew upon the distinctive logics and differences in the valuing of capital and, in part, instigated within students a reluctance or exclusion to imagining transborder opportunities within their aspirational spheres, despite an emerging recognition of mainland China’s growing aspirational opportunities.

Another location of ambivalence can be traced from the doxa of competitiveness durably inscribed within students’ habitus, and interwoven into students’ imaginary at the junctures of schooling, future employment and notions of identity. The paradox of competitiveness was that, whilst such a disposition was valorised and naturalised for future aspirational success, in the habitus of these middle class students, a competitive disposition co-existed uneasily with dispositions to anticipate lesser success than that of ‘elite winners’. This resulted in states of anxiety and ambivalence towards the future. These feelings were provoked by the uncertainty, foreboding sense of hopelessness, and the unrelenting fear of becoming uncompetitive and being out-competed that populated the students’ future imaginaries. More notably, it manifested through the misrecognition of educational competitive struggle as meritocratic, activating a burden of blame and self-responsibilising, when students failed to attain routes to success.

Within these middle class Hong Kong students’ narratives, there was a privileging of economic capital, imbued through the heavy financial demands of living in Hong Kong under competitive pressures. This made the pursuit of economic capital and material goods an ever-present thought and a source of anxiety, tied as it was to notions of the good life, and reinforced saliently by familial narratives. Invariably, future aspirational imaginaries such as those pertaining to tertiary educational and career trajectories revolved around the
preoccupation towards economic capital, and were characteristic of middle class aspirations, which served to constitute students’ aspirational routes, subjugating other interests and values not seen as conducive to the reproduction of this, albeit conflicted, middle class habitus. Economic pursuit however was ambivalent, bounded and divided by a class-based logic that invalidated extending beyond what was appropriate or ‘possible’ within class and location.

The logic of economic imperatives and competition can be traced to inculcations through middle class familial socialisation practices sustained through the uncertain yet financially challenging milieu of Hong Kong, arguably demonstrating the embodiment of middle class logics that prioritised the safeguarding of social class position. Subsequently, this was illustrated through students’ articulation of university attendance as taken-for-granted, and aspirations towards middle class professions, whilst invalidating working class vocations. Furthermore, parental narratives, demonstrations and practices attempted to resiliently instil within the students’ habitus the importance of English and its centrality as a supposed mandatory capital within aspirational pathways. Confirmation of this durability within the primary level of the habitus was evident through student narratives largely echoing the deployment of English’s centrality within future aspirational imaginations. Evidently, though English acted as a symbolic capital and was therefore subject to a misrecognition, which thrived within the neoliberal doxic milieu dominated by values of competition, individual responsibility and the illusions of meritocracy. As a symbolic system, it also relied on teaching and assessment practices that valorised a dominant form of English that was difficult to attain for these local middle class students, at the expense of plural varieties of English. Together, these influences had the effect of inducing anxieties, embarrassment and guilt, and an ambivalence towards the English language itself, consequently extending to students’ middle class aspirational imaginations.

In the next chapter, I will turn to a consideration of how relations to non-elite EMI schools and schooling practices induce disjuncture within the students’ habitus constituted by the specificities of the broader Hong Kong milieu and familial relations. These conditions lead to further heightening of what I term ‘aspirational ambivalence’.

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6. The Disjunctive Logics of Middle Class Habitus and English Medium of Instruction Schooling

6.1. Overview

This chapter continues the discussion on English as a capital central within the future imaginations of these middle class EMI students, and how English plays out in relation to schooling, constantly foregrounded by the neoliberal social imaginary. I will outline how Hong Kong and the specific spaces these students reside do not support English learning, and its implications in the privileging of EMI schools. I then chart the students’ relations to EMI schooling, and how certain assured dispositions are conceived through deficit conceptions of CMI schooling. I highlight how the practices engaged by non-elite EMI institutions were driven by systems of performativity and indicative of a type of institutional logic, but also negatively internalised and mediated into the non-elite EMI students’ habitus. This reveals the logics within the non-elite EMI schooling field, and how students responded to schools’ attempts to appropriate English to maintain their legitimacy and positionality as middle class educational institutions. The chapter highlights the contradictory practices within this schooling field, including challenging a broader, more economistic social imaginary, and how these practices had a disjunctive effect against the middle class habitus of students, contributing to feelings of unease about the future, and the heightened sense of aspirational ambivalence. It further reveals the extent to which the interplay between the broader social imaginary characterising Hong Kong society, with the social conditions within which they live (family) and learn (school), can enable confident and competent dispositions, or dispositions characterised by unease at the future, or perhaps even fraught with anxiety.
6.2. An ‘English’ Learning Environment?

The contradiction of Hong Kong as a global milieu was evident in how the English language was understood locally, both physically and within the social imaginary, where a popular consensus and legitimacy resided. Despite English’s recognised dominance as a global lingua franca, a language of globalisation and in the field of production, such as public service and the economy, for many students, there was a common agreement that Hong Kong lacked an environment that nurtured the development of the English language. Most evidently, students talked of a linguistic logic of ‘lacking’ within Hong Kong, where English was ‘seldom used in our daily lives [as] we talk with our friends and family in Cantonese’, and where ‘the chance for us to speak English is very little.’

My personal experiences of English within Hong Kong affirmed the notion of how the Chinese vernacular was very much grounded within the daily life of the city, and where local people were generally reluctant, hesitant or at times panicked when confronted with the need to speak English, unsurprisingly because 97% of the population are ethnically Chinese. Examples of the speed with which local cold callers hung up after requests to speak English, when salespeople fled to ask for assistance from English-speaking colleagues, or how phone calls to international schools were answered by non-English speakers revealed a general habitus dominated by unfamiliarity and anxiety in relation to English, despite its status in the territory as an official language. The prevalence of this condition was confirmed by Evans and Morrison (2011) who found local students studying at local EMI universities lacked the appeal or need to speak English outside of the classroom environment, and citing the existence of this practice for over half a century. This is consistent with the absence of quotidian conditions to engage in English conversation within Hong Kong society, and underscored the attitudes and beliefs of Hong Kong students towards learning English. Students equated English learning with hard work, expressing a sense of overcoming

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9 Living in Hong Kong, a frequent occurrence was receiving marketing phone calls, commonly promoting financial products, mobile packages and beauty salon services. The telemarketers speak Cantonese Chinese, and are willing to speak Chinese Mandarin if prompted. But if requested to speak English, the caller sometimes apologises for their lack of English skills and disconnects, or as is most often the case, abruptly hangs up without further conversation.
weaknesses and emphasising the importance of practising listening and speaking to attain success (Fan, 1999).

This was despite an appearance of the abundance of English within Hong Kong, from street signs to warning signs, public transportation, government notices, down to product labelling in the supermarket aisle. Indeed, English was largely regarded as a foreign language, except in pockets of expatriate ‘communities’, within or closer to the commercial districts, spatially bounded within upper class and central business districts, which constituted ‘privileged’ spaces. The naming of private development housing estates seem predominantly occidental, compared to the almost exclusively Chinese origins of names given to public housing estates, providing clues to how language structured taxonomies within the Hong Kong social imaginary. These manifestations seem incongruous with the public policy to orientate Hong Kong towards biliterate and trilingual capabilities, raising doubts whether this policy is simply a rhetorical derivative shaped by cosmopolitan expectations from its assumed global city status. Here, I direct attention to government-funded advertisements encouraging English learning as a means to better serve foreign tourists, driven by Hong Kong’s status as preeminent tourist destination, recording 54.3 million visitors in 2013 and the industry constituting 4.7% of GDP in 2012 (HKSAR Government, 2014b).

The narratives of students from Southwest Secondary affirmed these points, as they talked of the exclusion of English especially within the traditionally working class socioeconomic landscapes where they resided, which contrasted with the forms of symbolic capital perceived to be accumulated amongst students residing in Hong Kong Island, and those attending international schools:

Swift: I think the location is very important. Southwest district is not a well district and people are not having many money and their family is not rich. Therefore most of us cannot grow in an environment that is…

Queenie: Full of English.

Swift: I think there’s more opportunities for people who live on Hong Kong Island to have more opportunities to communicate in English.

Erica: Because they go to international school. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)
Swift’s comment hinted at the potentially lower middle class, on the boundary of working class backgrounds, of these students, and the conception of English as interwoven and preferentially distributed within the cosmopolitan environments that were characteristic of ‘better’ socioeconomic environments within Hong Kong Island. Ironically, despite the recognition of the spatial and ‘position’ bounded conditions to English acquisition, the students still suffered misrecognition through the doxic privileging of English embedded into their narratives, compelling them to contrast and remark in awe at the ‘naturalised’ English proficiency of students from international schools, elite schools, or their fellow students that who had previously studied abroad. Access to international schools and study abroad were inaccessible because these ‘full of English’ institutions and experiences were only available to families with significant financial capital. Considering the familial emphasis on English, especially its symbolic value to middle class identities and aspirational imaginations, students’ habitus were primed at the outset to link the lack of access to competent English language learning environments to a deficit conception of their place in the world. So the ‘capacity to aspire’ seemed limited by such conditions. Lu (2003) argues how the artificial scarcity created by government MOI policy has helped to fuel this sense of ‘eliteness’ at the expense of the vernacular Chinese dialect.

The absence of English environments also precluded a public sphere associated with a discourse supporting local forms of English to be debated, indigenised and legitimated (various forms of dissensus). This is in contrast to Singapore’s non-selective monolingual streaming policy, which ensures all students have a working knowledge of ‘Singapore English’ as the common official language. This meant English institutions exercised a symbolic violence by monopolising the legitimacy of English, debarring those who would disqualify or replace its authority, as discussed in the previous chapter from students’ accounts of teaching and assessment practices. Given this condition, and the privileging of English afforded within the social imaginary, it was then logical and a strategic practice that middle class families sought avenues and milieux for the development of English. Schooling was the primary environment to learn and reinforce this English:

> [English] probably helps very much, but in Hong Kong the main language is Chinese and we don’t really use English in our life, so where we learn and use English is just in our school. If we didn’t learn English here, we do have [the subject] in Chinese schools. (Darin, Student, Town Secondary School)
Consequently, the schooling environment was a socially-accepted space whereby English as a capital was accumulated, within the dominant imaginary where there was inadequate recognition given to the possibilities of confident and capable engagement with English. Specifically, EMI schooling, as remnants and evolved institutions of the British colonial legacy, itself historically the legitimated authority for English, were seen as the dominant establishments to nurture this linguistic capability. The next section will discuss the process in which this legitimation plays out in favour of non-elite EMI institutions through leveraging this misrecognition, and to detriment of CMI schools and their students.

6.3. **EMI Schooling and the Appropriation of English**

Through its association as one of the limited environments to acquire English, EMI schooling was afforded a privileged position in the psyche of Hong Kong middle class families and students. This is in contrast to the field relations towards CMI schooling. EMI institutions tapped into the desire to appropriate English amongst members of the middle class through its future economic relations, which were inseparable from notions of social preservation and mobility, compared to working class students who struggled with the terms of recognition, without the capital to appreciate or access EMI schooling. I will discuss how, in this way, the field of relations to these non-elite EMI secondary schools contributed to the constitution of symbolic power and a powerful social imaginary in which EMI schooling was construed as propagating social mobility, or sustaining middle class status, hence favouring middle class familial selection. Or so it seemed.

6.3.1. **Relations Between EMI and CMI Schooling**

The privileged position EMI schooling was imagined to possess was manifested in how this type of schooling was understood by students as preferentially selected by parents, as opposed to the majority of schools that used the Chinese vernacular as the medium of instruction (CMI schools):
Adam: When they are choosing the secondary school, they usually choose the EMI school first.

Kelly: I think CMI school usually labelled to be having…

Adam: Lower level.

Jessica: The level of the school. (Quickly clarifying Adam’s comment)

Interviewer: Why is that?

Joby: The government said that. (Group laughs)

Cecilia: Because I think as, as Hong Kong’s people have little chance to speak English, because the parents will think that it is good for their children to study in English, EMI school because they can speak and learn more English. It is their…idea. Their…

Adam: Opinion.

Interviewer: Do parents have an influence in this?

Cecilia: That it is better for me to choose English, yes. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)

Curiously, students confronted to think about how EMI and CMI schools differed initially refuted any disparities, until prompted as to their own rationale for EMI schooling selection. The absence of immediate reflexivity was likely a reflection of ascribed dispositions that ‘made ordinary’ the conscious acknowledgement of this trajectory into EMI schooling, shaped by the meritocratic logic. However, as seen by the barrage of enthusiastic responses from students’ above, further probing unveiled a network of deep-seated beliefs or ‘deficit assumptions’ (Appadurai, 2004) that positioned CMI schooling as inferior and relatively ‘lower’ by these students, underlying a tacit acceptance of EMI schooling’s legitimacy. Indeed, this ingrained belief can be traced through recounting the ferocious resistance of parents and students during the Education Department’s announcement in 1997 to switch mediums of instruction, with outbursts like ‘our school is now labelled as second-rate by a set of unfair government policies’, ‘I can’t even hold my head up in the street’, and other similar deficit discourses discussed in Chan’s (2002) research. Joby’s jest about the government’s discourse in legitimising the deficit position of CMI schools and therefore prejudicing parental choice encapsulated this point. There was a normative belief perpetuated and embedded within the perceptive schemata of students’ habitus, mimicking states of shame and inferiority similar to dispositions elicited by the symbolic violence of English, offering clues into how this symbolic system was interweaved and mirrored within EMI schooling. As
such, students described how English and EMI schooling were alive in the parental imaginations of their children’s aspirational future; there appeared to be little serious dissensus, at least insofar as English was perceived by these students and their families. Cecilia reiterated the narratives from familial logics that were fixated upon English, and associated probabilities of aspirational success:

Cecilia: I think in Hong Kong, most of the good schools use English to teach students. Most[ly] because all people think that English is important in Hong Kong, and if the school is not use English to teach students, then the parents will think ‘Oh, that school is not good, because you don’t teach my son English, and how can he speak English with others if they can’t find a job.’ (Mimicking a serious tone) So it is necessary for schools to teach children in English, and I think it is a…

Adam: Strength.

Cecilia: One of the cultures of Hong Kong. Yeah, you can say [that].

(Students, Southwest Secondary School)

The objectification of English embodied by schooling institutions through MOI policy granting the right to practice English as the instructional medium allowed non-elite EMI schools to become associated with the elite EMI schools that were rich with historical links to colonial power, although I shall argue later that this association did not translate to ‘elite’ pedagogical practice. This desire for schooling to be associated with English was already observable during colonial rule, where, given the freedom to adopt MOI, 91.7% of schools in 1990 chose EMI (Lee, 1997). The temporally constituted association of English with power, conflated with the Confucian doxa that held education as a tool for social mobility, and English’s growing global hegemony, led to a perceived privileging of EMI schools.

Objectification through EMI status allowed the ‘permanence and cumulativity of material and symbolic acquisitions which can then subsist without the [schools] having to recreate them continuously and in their entirety by deliberate action’ (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 130). Thus, EMI schooling institutions were imagined as valued apparatuses that imparted social and cultural capabilities/ capital required for the fulfilment of aspirational futures, thereby enhancing their position as ’good schools’ relative to other schools – namely CMI schools. The assurance and security that EMI schools bestowed was grounded temporally within the collective historical memories of the parents, and was a narrative well-versed by the students:
Before 1997, all of the schools are stuck EMI schools. And most of the Chinese CMI schools is the new schools and people don’t think they have the…*wong zit* (Cantonese), how do you say…the past achievement and experience is not that good. Therefore, most of the better students are willing to go to get into the EMI schools. (Swift, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

Non-elite EMI schools’ supposed communion with the English language, and its associations with elite schooling, induced a common understanding, or imaginary (Taylor, 2004) of a ‘prestigious’ education that imposed legitimacy through the illusio that it was an institution for aspirational capacity building and for the cultural capital required for its fulfilment. The habitus primed at the familial level, coupled with the competitive and financial anxieties from the neoliberal, imaginary functioned as the precondition for coordinating middle class students to strategically prepare, mobilise and compete for entry into these institutions, which reinforced their prestige. Symbolic exhibitions of EMI status by the schools thereby guaranteed enrolment from middle class students endowed with the cultural capital needed to maintain and improve assessment performance. The struggle and domination around the poles of the cultural capital of English ensured its continued patronage by the middle class, and continued survival by government funding. This manufactured the situation whereby MOI status corresponded to practices of performativity, witnessed by notions of a higher quality education in EMI schools, dichotomised against the dominant imaginary of deficiency and disadvantage surrounding CMI schooling:

Only a few CMI [schools] are prestigious in Hong Kong. But you know, EMI schools are preferentially treated as famous, well-educated, no…the resources are better than CMI. (Taylor, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

This imagination of better resourcing attributed favourable characteristics to EMI schooling that were sought as essential for the fulfilment of the middle class imperatives:

My parents said it is more qualified to study at this kind of school, because it is English-based, and probably you think that the teachers will have higher quality and that will mean the teaching is better. (Mary, Student, Town Secondary School)

Mary’s parents and many students assumed that English as MOI somehow implied the school had higher quality teachers that transmitted the appropriate types of capital to their children; capital that enabled students to improve aspirational prospects. When students were asked
about why teacher quality was different, students supported their claims by incorporating schooling heritage and a comparison of teacher attitudes, relating their own experiences interacting with students from CMI schools:

Darin: I think in EMI schools, they put effort to teach, they have the passion to teach us. For CMI schools…(Hesitates)… I don’t know. I think the teachers in EMI schools will just pay more attention to us instead of leaving it to learn yourself, to read the book yourself. But [our teachers] will teach us.

Interviewer: What has given you that sense? Has someone told you that?

Darin: Friends from CMI schools.

Lloyd: Usually, the CMI schools have been established recently, and a lot of EMI schools are perhaps even over a century old, and people will think the history and teachers there…the tradition of teaching there is higher quality. (Students, Town Secondary School)

Similarly, the teaching quality and the level of education within CMI schooling was described by students from a deficit stance, as these students described personal experiences of interacting with CMI students. This was related through binary and dichotomous narratives, giving insights into the lack of understanding into the nuances of (working class) students from CMI institutions:

…I have some friends in CMI schools and even when I communicate in English, even some simple sentences, they can’t really understand. And this is very unexpected because the sentence is so simple. (Andrew, Student, Town Secondary School)

Andrew’s disposition towards valorising and acquiring the capital value of English was apparent in the surprise he felt at his friends’ inability to comprehend the ‘simple’ level of English deployed. This influenced the formation of his imaginary apropos the quality of CMI schooling. Hence, EMI schooling settings were perceived as the tried and tested institutions for transmitting the capital required for competition with other students, especially the high-stakes game of improving objective probabilities for fulfilment of future aspirations. This deeply held belief was affirmed by colonial reports published by the Education Commission that noted:
It is very difficult to change parents’ preferences for sending their children to English-medium schools because they believe that such schools lead to a relatively more successful career than Chinese-medium schools. (Hong Kong Education Commission, 1995)

Lai and Byram (2003) pointed out that this symbolic association of English with an imaginary of ‘better’ schooling was no more evident than in the case when an elite EMI secondary school that previously received Band One (category for schools with highest academic results) primary school student enrolments voluntarily switched to CMI education, and suffered immediately from a drop in enrolments and examination results, and within three years only attracted Band Four to Five\(^\text{10}\) pupils, many from working classes. The school only gradually reversed this decline when it reverted back to EMI, discouraging other EMI schools from adopting such practices.

The predisposition to select EMI schooling was exacerbated by middle class family practices of utilising the resources and encouragements to instil into their children the importance of proficiency in English for realisation of social class preservation. These dominant practices and logics came together with students’ decisions to ‘choose’ to attend secondary schools on the basis of understandings of English:

Well, actually, in primary school when we choose our secondary schools choice and for the students better in English, they usually choose EMI schools. For students not so good in English, they choose CMI schools because they may worry about when they are in secondary school if they use English to study chemistry, physics, they may not be that familiar. This may be an obstacle to…and they may not get good results in EMI schools, so they may choose CMI schools. (Erica, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

Middle class families undertook a common, sometimes intense, process of consciously strategising and preparing their children for chances for access to this valued institutional capital. In this way, these institutions were ‘protected’ as middle class reproducing institutions, with families appropriating the capital that defined them (Ball, 2003). Suspicions of an anxious and hypercompetitive primary school life mired in the ‘training’ of English

\(^{10}\) School banding was cut from five to three under educational reforms in 2000, in an effort to reduce the ‘labeling effect’ and stigmatization within lower bands (Ng, 2013).
were affirmed by Kelly’s comments where she was aware of the higher English proficiency that her relative’s primary school children possessed:

Not only do students choose EMI secondary schools but many parents, like my relatives would like their children to study EMI private school – they study mathematics, they study English literature since they are just primary one. And they…their English level is very higher than… (Gestures to herself).

(Kelly, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

In this way, students who commenced the accumulation of English at a younger age improved their probability of appropriating the cultural capital, and thus raised the chances of entry into EMI schooling settings thought to increase aspirational success. Of this Bourdieu (1990b) points out that:

But, because the profits provided by these institutions are subject to differential appropriation, objectification also and inseparably tends to ensure the reproduction of the structure of the distribution of capital which, in its various kinds, is the precondition for such appropriation, and in so doing, it tends to reproduce the structure of relations of domination and dependence (p. 130).

With the habitus attuned to English appreciation, the middle class students were more likely to orient themselves towards these English-rich capital institutions. And it was these students with the socioeconomic resources skewed towards accumulation of English not readily available in Hong Kong who were given access to the legitimised institutions, and had the capacity to appropriate English required for preservation of their middle-classness. In contrast, students who were not proficient in English by the end of primary school would naturally ‘choose’ CMI secondary schooling - more likely students from working class families without the capital, inclinations, and access to the aspirational imaginaries which referenced English as a desirable cultural capital. Here, I am reminded of the comments from my American expatriate friend who worked as an English teacher within the CMI secondary schooling environment. His descriptions of CMI students was revealing of the dominance of a working class population within CMI schools, that showed students lacking in rudimentary standards of English, with low motivations to learn English, which he inferred would inevitably guarantee a struggle in future university life that required English. The teacher admitted that he was urged by the school to pass the students in order to ‘move them along.’ Interestingly, this recognition of the criticality of English in schooling has prompted an
increasing number of CMI secondary schools to adopt EMI in senior years, in the hope it would boost public examination scores and the school’s position, as revealed by several students interviewed. Yet, CMI schools lacked the validation of official policy to legitimise the value of their transmission practices, facing a challenge to negotiate the terms of recognition in relation to the aspirational imaginaries of middle class families. The doxa of school choice for the middle classes was characterised by Swift’s normative assertions on where better students should study:

It is classified as only the top students can use English to learn other subjects, but the student that has a poor performance, they are supposed to have no ability to learn the subject in English. Therefore, CMI school is for them to study, and the EMI schools is supposed to be for the better students. (Swift, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

This validated arguments by Choi (2008) that the entrenched prestige of EMI schools as positional goods perpetuated the devaluing of CMI schooling institutions. These normative assertions influenced perceptions of how students from different MOI schools physically conveyed themselves, as discussed by Andrew:

Yes, I see many of the students from other EMI schools get more resources from their school and [are] a little bit more arrogant about themselves, and they can always stand up for themselves, because they think they can do that. But for a CMI school, I can see that from their speech, and I can see that they somehow they think they will never do anything better than us. (Andrew, Student, Town Secondary School)

Andrew’s observations, as a co-analyst, revealed his view that EMI students embodied a relatively confident disposition, working through working through the level of body hexis. The infused habitus within familiar schooling structures transmitted across as confidence and linguistic capacity, whilst manifesting as a symbolic violence in relation to CMI school students through ‘no expression more indisputable than the silence of shyness, abstention or resignation’ (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 112): ‘…and I can see that they somehow think they will never do anything better than us’. This apparent lack of ‘voice’ (Hirschman, 1970) as an expression of their internalisation of the arbitrary truth of MOI status further complicated the struggle for renegotiating recognition of CMI schools within the pre-existing social imaginary. CMI students faced the dilemma because by either rebelling against the dominant social norms or accepting assimilation, they became increasingly locked into conditions of the dominated, the choice between two equally bad solutions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 112).
By subscribing to these norms, the social effect was to ‘further diminish their dignity, exacerbate their inequality, and deepen their lack of access to material goods and services’ (Appadurai, 2004, p. 66). Similarly, Doris, standing from her social position, described the ‘failure’ and difficulty of her friends studying in CMI schools to communicate and synthesise a logical argument, illustrating a differentiation in practical mastery of the cultural capital acquired and deployed:

**Doris:** I think the views of CMI students are a bit narrower because sometimes when I’m with my other friends in CMI schools, we talk about political issues and they are just simple stance and simple evidence to support themselves. But EMI school students are able to tell and…

**Calvin:** Give more evidence.

**Doris:** An all rounded explanation. Yes. I think this is the most different point in these two. (Students, Town Secondary School)

Once more, the student used firsthand social interactions to assemble a deficit stance, the lack of recognition, in relation to students within the CMI schools. With the previous two examples, it painted CMI schooling as producing students without the basic capital to navigate opportunities as expressed and framed by the dominant imaginary of success in neoliberal Hong Kong – without the capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004). The perceptions from the student interviewees painted a narrative that constructed an imagined ideal of ‘elite’ EMI schooling – a fantasy of an imagined ideal with the possibility to convey a symbolic privilege.

Appadurai (2004) argued that aspirational capacity was influenced by the exercise of linguistic voice/capacity. Interestingly, when asked whether students from CMI schools had an equal ability to express themselves compared to EMI students, Francis spoke of how CMI schools, as working class populated institutions, were not provided equal resources, and how the stigmatised schooling milieu forged CMI students’ habitus. The cultivated dispositions of rebellious behaviour were a product of their difficulty or refusal to affiliate with or assimilate to the dominant orthodoxy of the schooling field - a clash between the working class habitus and the incompatibilities of the schooling field with middle class logics:
Maybe they think, uhmm...there are really no resources provide by CMI schools to instil those activities so the students might think the people within society or in the schools does not give a lot of emphasis to them. And to gain more attention, they gain more attention in other categories, and they will do a lot of abnormal behaviour.

(Francis, Student, Town Secondary School)

The non-elite EMI students perceiving from their middle class habitus, for whom assimilation into the middle class logics of schooling was manifested practically without considering the possibility of doing otherwise, criticised the CMI students’ attempts at ‘unsubscribing’ to the orthodoxy, through ‘abnormal behaviour’. Coldron, Cripps, and Shipton (2010) discussed how there was an ‘anxiety projected onto less advantaged social groups, whose way of life and the places they live [were] demonised’ (p. 26). As Steedman (1985) argued, middle class genres are kept central through the marginality of working class narratives. This struggle for recognition was complicated by an imaginary constituted by EMI originated cultural capital amongst middle class students, who were instinctively inclined, through a habitus disposed to English, to relegate students without English in CMI schooling to limited future options. CMI students were thought to inscribe lower self-esteem; EMI students ‘propped up’ a socially stratified imaginary by a symbolic violence supported by the competitive and meritocratic logic that pre-determined working class students as oriented towards working class aspirations:

Andrew: The thing is because they can only go to CMI schools, because they didn’t do well in the primary schools so they are somehow, say forced to study in CMI schools. And somehow, I don’t think they are…it’s more about their self-esteem which will affect their…they already think they…

Doris: They think they are lower. (Students, Town Secondary School)

Here, Andrew described CMI students as bounded by the symbolic power of EMI institutions wrought by a historically and socially grounded imaginary that imparted the normative sense concerning how CMI futures are likely to unravel. The description placed CMI schooling as a forced default position, distinct from EMI schooling where students were presupposed to possess certain configurations of cultural capital for passing through aspirational gateways, for example excelling in English within primary school. In this way, students were imagining CMI school students as embodying ‘inferior’ experiences such as lower relative academic
results, imaginations of stigmatisation, resulting in lower self-esteem and a disposition to give up because of a sense of hopelessness about their circumstances. There was a portrayal of CMI school students relegated to socially undesirable positions in the field, because of a misrecognition and ascription to a diminished cultural arbitrary. Moreover, there was a sense that CMI schooling for students could potentially carry negative symbolic value. The field of EMI schooling relations was similar to how Piller and Cho (2013) described the South Korean context, asserting that it imposed ‘structures of competition [that] allocate[d] a central place to English—as an index of global competitiveness—as a mechanism to distinguish those who are allowed to progress to better opportunities from those who are forced to bear the burden of underperformance by being relegated to a progressively shrinking sphere of opportunity’ (p. 31).

And yet, within this ‘misrecognised’ privileged position, Andrew voices the notion that CMI schooling could provide other cultural capital in the form of ‘soft skills’ within a knowledge-based society, which could potentially endow a practical competitiveness in the aspirational context:

Yes, they think that no matter how hard they try, they can’t still reach us but actually I don’t really think so because although this is a knowledge-based society, you really have to process a lot of soft skills, communication skills and CMI schools, can provide that. But just the students, they think they cannot, and they somehow just give up. (Andrew, Student, Town Secondary School)

However, as Bauman (2011) argued, the belief in the ‘knowledge-economy’, as some sort of force for good, perpetuated this doxic illusion of meritocracy, and forced failing students to assume self-responsibility for educational performance, despite apparent and growing systemic and positional inequalities. This effort to affirm to the ideals of meritocracy, and mask a presumed advantage was a common phenomenon amongst the students interviewed, and worth elaborating in detail in the next section.
6.3.2. Downplaying the Distinction

In discussing the relations between EMI and CMI schooling, there was an attempt to downplay an understanding of relative advantage of English language education by these EMI students. The difficulties faced by CMI students were not always verbalised explicitly, but revealed through various slippages, mixed with an undertone of an ambient ambivalence. This was observed when Joby claimed that EMI students’ capacity to study subjects in different languages, other than the vernacular, proved the relative superiority of EMI students:

Actually, you can imagine that when you are learning another subject besides just language, when you are learning other subjects like uhmm, econ[onmics], maybe chemistry. When you are learning in your mother-tongue, and you can have better understanding. So sort of CMI students can have these advantages. And when you are an EMI student, you have to learn it with another language, English and it is not your mother-tongue. And then, but students in EMI school, they can still handle it. That means EMI students have a higher ability than the CMI students. (Joby, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

Joby, like other students when they described the ‘inferior’ position of CMI students, attempted to balance this with positive aspects; in this case, this related to the advantages of comprehension using vernacular Chinese instruction, a common argument used by proponents in favour of policies advocating CMI schooling instruction. However, Joby’s contradictory statement, showing her belief that English learning was only for the high achievers, pointed to her lack of conviction about whether learning in Chinese was actually an advantage, indicating a struggle of recognition. But her need to voice something she did not believe probably also revealed an ambivalence in her own ‘positionality’. Another example of the students trying to justify this difference was when students were asked if CMI schooling would influence students’ aspirational considerations:

Interviewer: And do you think that it affects their ability to think about the future, like their ambitions about life?

Doris: I think it’s similar to EMI schools because although they are not good at English, they can try to work in other aspects which do not require
English, like they can go to mainland China to work and I think the opportunity is equal to them.

Calvin: I think except those professional jobs that require English, everyone has the same opportunity to get the job because what your job in the future may be totally different to what you learn in university. So I think EMI or CMI schools is not so important for them to find a job. Because there are many jobs that don’t require such high standards of English. English is not the only way for them to find a job. (Students, Town Secondary School)

In this case, Calvin and Doris strived to argue how aspirational opportunities were equivalent for students regardless of EMI or CMI schooling, playing down the importance of English, despite earlier recognition of English as the cultural capital that broadened aspirational horizons. Students emphasised the other pathways available to these students, where mainland China was often mentioned as a spatial pathway for CMI students’ educational and vocational futures, even though most EMI students interviewed excluded this from their own aspirations, citing the dangers, pollution and differences in culture. These assertions were not only attempts to mask EMI students’ relative advantage, but also suggested that these students imagined CMI students’ aspirational trajectories differently from their own. Without English, CMI students’ spheres of opportunity were marginal, and excluded many professional ‘middle class’ vocations, thus logically biasing them towards working class jobs. In other instances, students attributed relative ‘differences’ to individual students’ ability and motivations to learn, evidence once again of a misrecognition within a meritocratic system perpetuated within the neoliberal construction:

Calvin: ...because of high ranking EMI schools, the students at EMI schools usually have better learning abilities. So it’s even easier for them to learn a new language, rather than CMI schools. So it’s not really closely related to whether EMI and CMI schools, but the learning abilities of the schools.

Francis: It tends to be that CMI schools, as he said, the ranking is lower than EMI schools and those students are not really intent to learn. They just like to play and don’t care about the future. And they don’t have a lot
of questions on learning so they can’t make it easier for each classmate
(Inaudible) (Students, Town Secondary School)

As such, responsibility and blame could be attributed to individual students’ capabilities and exertions, with ‘the failures’ portrayed as a matter of lower learning abilities or ‘not really intent to learn’. This permitted denial rather than recognition of socioeconomic advantage that privileged middle class students for EMI schools and the complicity in ‘locking out’ working class students from EMI institutions.

There were also other instances when students on one hand expressed notions of admiration for the qualities of CMI schools, but shortly after affirmed the invalidity of this type of schooling for them. Mary, for example, initially pointed out how CMI schools pursued avenues other than academic results as a struggle to build recognition against the historical and academic strength of EMI schools:

I think the CMI schools will emphasise the extracurricular activities and joining the various competitions because as I know there’s a lot of CMI schools, the schools are really new. So they don’t really have those prizes showing in the hall. So they will try to push their students to join more competition and because their academic results are generally not better than EMI schools. So they will just try to develop their students in another way. And lead them to gain more prizes, to build up their reputation. And also they will put a lot of resources to make students join the competition. And they will encourage every single student to join the competition rather than like our school, they will really push a few students who are good at something to join. They will join extracurricular activities as the whole school so they will have very strong spirit.

When I join the CMI students, they will say ‘My school is very good at…’ something like that. Students have different habits in their circle. I think the strong spirit really impressed me. (Mary, Student, Town Secondary School)

What Mary described here is how the struggle for social identity, complicated by the stigmatised status of CMI schools, induced these CMI institutions to focus on non-academic endeavours to compensate for their lack of recognition in academics, which was what was most important for parents. However, whilst Mary endeavoured to valorise the efforts of CMI schools, she understood that the shortcomings of these schools were really what mattered aspirationally, and later admitted this quite explicitly:
Because most of the bad schools are CMI schools and because we want to go to a better school, so we choose an EMI school, not CMI school. The difference between an EMI school and CMI school is the difference between ‘not that good’ and ‘very good’. (Mary, Student, Town Secondary School)

These shallow attempts to mask the perceived advantage of attending EMI schools, in relation to students’ aspirations for the future arguably showed the students’ struggles to reconcile notions of meritocracy that were dominant within the neoliberal social imaginary with clear evidence of the lack of egalitarianism within Hong Kong society in relation to different groups of citizens. Ultimately though, students’ responses betrayed an understanding and acknowledgment, whether explicitly or implicitly, that the imagined opportunities were relatively less, and there was a sense of domination taking place:

…the most important point is sometimes they feel less confident in speaking English because they say to me ‘Oh you are so good studying in EMI school and you know much other vocabularies in the school and you may get good results in the [HK]DSE.’ Yes and actually they have less opportunities to practice English because they have less time to speak. (Erica, Student, Town Secondary School)

As Erica pointed out, EMI schooling’s perceived probabilities of aspirational success through the HKDSE public examinations, and passage into the restricted places amongst the local tertiary institutions, with a preference for English linguistic capabilities, warranted the consecration of EMI schooling within the strategies of these middle class students.

6.3.3. Public Examinations (HKDSE) and University Access

Through the expectation of improving future aspirational probabilities of achieving middle class professions as instruments for the appropriation of material capital, EMI schools were considered ‘safe’ institutions for middle class families. This reflected a broader imaginary of EMI schooling’s legitimacy in producing higher public examination scores and university entrances. Swift mobilised statistics from parental narratives illustrating this point:

My parents are always concerned with the percentage of students that can go to university. And most of the EMI schools have a higher percentage. Almost 60 to 90.
The percentage is around this range, but in CMI schools it is cut off. (Swift, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

The importance of schooling for university entrance was evident in the inclusion within schools’ annual reports indicating success rates of recently graduated students in HKDSE public examination results. Analysis across the three schools showed how these reports highlighted to the public the proportions of students that had acquired university entrance, under different domiciles, highlighting also the minority that sought vocational trajectories immediately upon graduation. In this regard, EMI schools were privileged through English’s favoured status as the gatekeeping mechanism into local, predominantly EMI universities, competitively applied for by middle class students and parents who believed university was a prerequisite for middle class reproduction and mobility. Kirkpatrick (2011) critically argued how the practice of local universities’ continued engagement of English as a MOI has been due to the increasing Anglo-Saxon paradigm of Hong Kong universities, enabled through a discourse of internationalisation and globalisation, which undermined and contradicted government policies for producing trilingual and biliterate citizens. Furthermore, 75% of government funding of the universities were directed towards EMI institutions (Kirkpatrick, 2011), at the expense of local publications and scholarships (Mok, 2007), if not the local and Chinese language, marking out English as the capital of value, and EMI schools as legitimised institutions that improved aspirational capacity for pragmatic transition and improved success navigating through local universities.

From this standpoint, EMI schools were not only mostly accommodated by middle class students, but through their very constitution, were also institutions where middle-classness, in habitus and practice, was reaffirmed and reproduced. Consequently, the field of non-elite EMI schooling was driven and characterised by a logic of upholding middle-classness, reinforcing arguments by Reay (2001) that the educational system privileged middle class interests by reproducing historical elite prejudices. In contrast, CMI schooling was viewed as producing students that scored lower in public examinations, and that did not prioritise the same trajectories as for these middle class students:

Antonia: (CMI students) can’t compete with the EMI students in the public examination. Some of them don’t plan to go into university and will start working after Form Six.
Lloyd: Maybe we have a specific subject we want to study whereas they just want to get into a university and that’s enough, they don’t care about the subjects. (Students, Town Secondary School)

In aspirational terms, the students were describing the relatively limited aspirational nodes and pathways available to working class students, ‘a thinner, weaker sense of the pathways from concrete wants to intermediate contexts to general norms, and back again’ (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69). This unequal access to cultural, social and economic capital showed how middle class students were automatically inclined to tertiary education, whilst for working class students, tertiary educational engagement was not common sense. As suggested by the research of Reay, Davies, David, and Ball (2001b), this led to processes of selection and self-selection which marginalised the possibilities available through such opportunities; the ‘lack of positive images of the working classes contributes to them being educationally disqualified’ (Reay, 2001, p. 335). In contrast, middle-class students of this study justified EMI institutions’ capability to fulfil this mandate through increased opportunities to use the ‘right’ English needed to qualify for university entrance:

In an EMI school we have more chance to speak English and teacher will teach you how to speak English in a better way ‘cos if we say something wrong in the lesson, the teacher will correct our mistake and tell us, ‘don’t do that, don’t do that’. In the examination, if you do something like that, you will be deducted your mark. So it is good for us to improve our English. (Cecilia, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

The students’ habitus were being disciplined through English to ensure success in high-stake examinations that weighed heavily on entrance to university. Added to this, the MOI policy of Hong Kong universities to use English meant that CMI students without the proficiency in English struggled and perpetuated the class stratification between the middle and working class. This was illustrated in the way Tollefson and Tsui (2004) argued that MOI policy in Hong Kong was a means of power distribution and social construction, by determining which social and linguistic groups have access to political and economic opportunities, and which groups were disenfranchised. Studies of graduates of CMI schools showed these students struggling academically relative to their EMI counterparts after gaining admittance into university, and having to adapt to the English medium curricula (Evans & Morrison, 2011), embodying discomfort and lack of confidence about their English ability (Evans, 2009); this is a sign of a field/habitus disjuncture – of a fish ‘out-of-water’. Hence, EMI students’
relatively higher exposure to English constituted an important marker of distinction, and contributed to the nature of students’ aspirations, including solidifying a sense possibility within EMI students, compared to the weaker sense of future possibilities horizon of aspirations of CMI students, as expressed in relation to performing well on university entrance examinations:

Erica: Well, some of my primary school friends study in CMI schools and ummm, how do you say? They may think that because all the subjects is using Chinese except English…and in their situation they may not be good or familiar in English…how do you say that? So, it is the disadvantages that in the examinations, they may not get good results in English. Because they have less opportunities to have…what…

Swift: Practice.

Erica: Yes, to practice English and…what…and the most important point is sometimes they feel less confident in speaking English because they say to me ‘Oh you are so good studying in EMI school and you know much other vocabularies in the school and you may get good results in the [HK]DSE’. Yes, and actually they have less opportunities to practice English because they have less time to speak. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)

This symbolic power of EMI schools, albeit non-elite schools, resonated with students from CMI schools who in turn accepted their subordination, and affirmed the beliefs of consecrated positions inhabited by the non-elite EMI students. The perceptions from these students paint a narrative that constructed an imagined ideal of ‘elite’ EMI schooling – a fantasy of an imagined ideal with the possibility to convey a symbolic privilege. There was a logic of subservience at play (Bourdieu, 2001):

When the dominated apply to what dominates them schemes that are the product of domination, or, to put it another way, when their thoughts and perceptions are structured in accordance with the very structures of the relation of domination that is imposed on them, their acts of cognition are, inevitably, acts of recognition, submission (p. 13).
Nonetheless, even though they occupied the dominant position of advantage in relation to CMI students, the non-elite EMI students were consistently subjected to self-doubts regarding the value of investments in the capital that they were accumulating, and anxieties about losing this position. Narratives of advantage were as much about self-affirmations, as they were discourses of domination. Swift affirmed the veneration that EMI students obtained from their CMI counterparts through an assumption of superior academic performance, but her response exposed an uncertainty and ambivalence that was mixed within her narratives of assuredness:

   Interviewer:  So do students from [CMI] schools look at your school and students at your school, and because you perform better academically, then that lowers their self-esteem?
   Swift:  But I don’t think that only happens on the English, but other subjects. Those students in the EMI schools are supposed to be the top students…supposed to be. (Student, Southwest Secondary School)

There was an undertone from Swift, and other students, that they were somehow not embodying the expectations prescribed within the broader social imaginary which ascribed a sense of privilege to pupils within EMI schools. The forging of another level of ambivalence can be traced to the disjunctive practices of non-elite EMI schooling, that marked EMI’s distinction and prestige as principally symbolic.

6.4.  ‘English is Just for Show’

Despite the appropriation of English within these non-elite EMI schools to project a state of symbolic power, and the imaginary of prestige, schooling practices and institutional habitus were often disjunctive with the middle class familial hopes and expectations that these were educational institutions that could provide the cultural capital to foster social mobility or preserve class standing. One of these ambiguous practices was the treatment of the English language within the classroom teaching environment, (and the school more generally). Arguably, these practices had a constitutive effect upon students’ habitus, particularly the cultivation of a sense of anxiety evident in the aspirational ambivalence of these students.
Consequently, although students’ comments were often characterised by narratives of relative advantage, there was a sense that schools had somehow failed them, as students felt they should be further ahead than they were.

Earlier, within Chapter Three, I alluded to the findings within Kanno’s (2003) study that exposed the importance of schooling in the students’ formation of linguistic relations towards English within their aspirations. However, just as the lack of English learning environments within Hong Kong was a contradiction against its self-proclaimed stance as a global city, the practices of teaching and instilling English proficiency inside non-elite EMI schooling were also blatantly inconsistent with its aims of developing practical English. This manifested visibly in the agency of teachers in their adoption of vernacular Chinese as the MOI, and other aspects of how English was practiced within these schools. As alluded to in Chapter Five, familial narratives and investments moulded students’ habitus to value English as part of cultivating a logic of aspirational success, relegating those without a functional grasp of English to positions of shame. These practices therefore dissuaded students of the value of the schooling they were receiving, and harboured anxieties regarding the probability of fulfilling the familial focus of class preservation ingrained within students’ habitus. The failure of non-elite EMI educational institutions to immerse these middle class students in the English environments they had expected and hoped for was expressed through the students’ comments of disappointment. Many students came to the conclusions that their EMI schools were not committed to English teaching, even as English teaching within school was a marker of distinction for students outside the school, who registered it as a symbol of better quality teaching prior to attending the school:

Pamela: When I was in primary school, I thought this school was quite well because it uses English to teach, but after I get into this school I think…it is a big difference from what I’m thinking. I did regret why I didn’t choose the branded schools11, although it’s far away from my home, but my English and other subjects will be much better than now.

Zack: Why I chose this school was because I wanted a better environment to learn English but when I enter this school I know that even when we

\[11\] ‘Branded schools’ referred to elite or recognized international schools.
are having an English lesson, we still speak in Chinese Cantonese, so it cannot provide me a good environment to learn.

Interviewer: Even in English class?
Zack: Yes, even in English class.
Sammi: And in English we are always practicing with comprehension, we are always doing papers, past papers. And that does not really help to improve my English. Because in some (Inaudible), I went to Australia for some exchange tours and I went to some English training classes there and the teachers, they don’t just read out the book, they talk with us and through the conversation we learnt a lot about the culture and how to use different expressions. Because that’s really helping and not just doing papers and just remembering the vocabulary. I just don’t remember it after a week or something. (Students, East Bay Secondary School)

The dismay of Pamela regarding her school’s incongruent practices was a disappointment in relation to the broader social imaginary of advantage associated with EMI schooling. This then propagated feelings of regret over her past decision not to pursue elite (‘branded’) schooling. She was agonising over the apparent recognition of the shrinking aspirational opportunities that were available to her because of this choice – her aspirational horizons were liquid indeed. The cultural capital she was hoping to acquire and activate was missing or dormant. Similarly, Zack described how experiences of English classes dominated by Chinese Cantonese instructions showed the school was not committed to helping him develop the English that he wanted, whilst Sammi compared exam-driven English learning in her school against the memorable, contextual and discussion-based learning of English during her exchange program to Australia. These comments illuminated the friction between a student habitus that was grounded in familial expectations of the importance of English for middle class progression, and a schooling field dominated by artificial and superficial English teaching practices that students did not feel were practical. Here, this stated artificiality reflected the feelings of disappointment the students felt because what the school promoted to the public and through policy documents did not reflect the stated practice. The students’ expectations of EMI schooling were being thwarted.
‘Authentic’ to these students would be the promotion of the holistic education and EMI classroom teaching, as promised by policy. I do not believe these students had reason to doubt this would not be implemented in practice. But perhaps to believe non-elite EMI schooling could provide equally rewarding experiences of elite EMI schooling might be misconstrued. EMI schooling practices did not provide the English that developed the aspirational capacities of these students, but instead, akin to the broader Hong Kong milieu, gave students the sense that speaking in English was contrived:

Calvin: It’s terrible to use English to communicate.
Interviewer: Only in the classroom?
Calvin: Yes.
Interviewer: And even when you negotiate with the school on certain issues?
Calvin: Sometimes because some teachers will generally use English to chat with us. Especially those English teachers.
Andrew: Because they have an obligation to do so.
Calvin: But with most teachers, they do not do so. Usually they use Chinese to talk. (Students, Town Secondary School)

The overwhelming sense, deriving from the students’ experiences interacting with teachers, was that teachers preferred to communicate in the vernacular Chinese. They were also playing into and further affirming this artificiality of EMI when the teachers felt obligated by their role to use English. There seemed to be complicity between the school, teachers, and students, via their subordination, in supporting this artifice as both students and teachers exhibited preferences to speak Chinese Cantonese. Even within the classrooms, the pedagogic experiences that enabled students to naturalise the externalisation of conversational English was absent, as many teachers chose not to instruct in English, which seemed common practice in these schools:

Fonnie: Hong Kong students are good at reading English but not speaking English, because we don’t have many chances to speak English with native speakers.
Sammi: And also some teachers don’t speak English when teaching (Group laughs) (Students, East Bay Secondary School)
EMI school teachers were therefore using Chinese vernacular to teach the subjects with English textbooks, English terms and examinations written and requiring English. This teaching practice within Hong Kong EMI institutions has been extensively documented within educational research. Man, Coniam, and Lee (2002) argued that the Chinese vernacular instruction within EMI schooling was part of teachers’ ways of ensuring time was spent on the teaching of content at the expense of developing English proficiency. This was confirmed by Kelly as she described how teachers’ exercise of agency in using Chinese Cantonese to instruct could be excused as a response to students’ pedagogic needs, but argued that it also stemmed from the teachers’ own lack of competence to instruct in the language:

Actually, I think for teachers, it is easier for us to understand the content of the subjects by using Cantonese, and I think that actually we can even be…I can find some mistakes grammatically in our teachers, but not English teachers I mean, but some other teachers. (Kelly, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

The claim contradicted the publicly available annual reports presented by the schools that highlighted full English competencies of the teachers. These annual reports acted as instruments that showcased the schools’ potential worthiness to students and parents, building the expectations and broader social imaginaries of the cultivation of a capable and competent student disposition within such schools. The potential for acquisition of such capital was responsible for secondary school selection on the part of students and their families, however, actual practices did not live up to such expectations. In this case, the students’ commentary about teachers’ refusal and lack of proficiency to speak English was met with group laughter and criticism of teachers’ English, highlighting the students’ ambivalence towards the quality of education that was imagined around EMI schooling institutions. The games their teachers were playing regarding instruction in English were made more obvious as teachers showcased in front of students that English was for exhibition, rather than for the substantive purposes of learning:

Sometimes I think it’s a paradox because usually teachers here, they lecture in Cantonese but when there are other supervisors or principals come to watch us and assess how they teach… (Group laughs) the whole thing becomes English. And it
signals to us that English is just to show in front of principals. (Andrew, Student, Town Secondary School)

The example powerfully highlights how teachers were subverting policy implementation, while staging a performance to satisfy audit procedures, and in the process moulding students to become ambivalent about their schooling experiences. However, the inflexible categorisation of schools as EMI or CMI in MOI policy also encouraged the schools to continue this charade, or risk the possibility of losing their symbolic and (discursively) legitimated status. This diffused into how students conceived of their imagined position, in effect fostering ambiguity about whether non-elite EMI schooling could deliver on the promises instilled through a middle class logic of success and attainment. This widespread practice of teachers precluding oral English whenever possible seemed doxic:

Fonnie: In this school? No. Our school is called an English Medium Instruction School but I think most classmates and even teachers, they are avoiding to speak English whenever they can. Like our class teacher (Group laughs). I think he often speak English but worse than we! Whenever the principal comes and watches his lessons he speaks English but other than that, he speaks Chinese any time.

Interviewer: So is that because some teachers are afraid to speak English to you? And you think his English language skills are not as good?

Sammi: Some teachers can speak English well but they don’t speak it.

(Students, East Bay Secondary School)

This recognition that some teachers’ English capabilities in a supposedly fully English-proficient EMI school were poorer than those of the students themselves had a potent disjunctive effect, as students once again reacted with a mix of humour and disappointment. Teachers demonstrating their lack of English capital were not only contradictory to the familial narrative, but suggested the possibility to students that English was possibly unnecessary. Even the fact that teachers with strong English proficiency found speaking English ‘out of place’ in the non-elite EMI schools suggested to students that it was not an environment that nurtured the forms of capital imagined. It also reinforced findings that teachers considered English as a foreign language (Choi, 2008).
An example of the unnaturalness of English in this schooling context was evident in Town Secondary's implementation of ‘English Speaking Days’, originating from recognition of the requirement for language immersion within the schooling environment. However, despite pedagogically sound intentions of the principal, this schooling practice made the students painfully aware of the shortcomings of practical and communicative English proficiency within their EMI school:

For example, sometimes we will have English morning assembly (Group laughs)...but we do not enjoy it so much. Because we are all student council members and we always have some announcement on morning assembly. And it’s so handicapped for us to speak and announce in English...firstly, we cannot announce it so well, and also the students cannot understand, or get the message clearly. I think it’s so handicapped for us, but not so beneficial. (Calvin, Student, Town Secondary School)

The use of the term ‘handicap’ itself showed the sense of unfamiliarity with English – of a habitus grounded in a set of practices contrary to those professed by the school, or evident within the broader social imaginary. The absence in the ‘feel of the game’ within conversational English environments was striking. While familial narratives deeply embedded English as the capital required for aspirational success within the habitus, schools failed to deliver this in classroom learning. This sense of not quite learning English adequately was exposed in other experiences, recounted by students’ tales of speaking with native English speakers, where they struggled to communicate to their own satisfaction:

Jessica: When we talk with the native speakers, I’m hard to understand what they are talking about when they are speaking local language. They have some specific term but we don’t know, we cannot find in the textbook. So it is hard to communicate with them. (Sighs)

Adam: Only learn English in theory but not practical. We are not using English in practical way. I think the foreigner is not concerned with grammar when they are speaking English, just they know the meaning, that’s fine. But when we are speaking English, we are thinking ‘is this correct in grammatical way’? We are not using it enough. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)
Jessica’s struggle to understand native speakers made her cognisant of the deficiencies of her English education through non-elite EMI schooling; the sense of the ‘feel for the game’, the illusio (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), was lacking. Furthermore, because the communicative English was not demonstrated and practised within the classroom and general school environment, these students were learning English from the textbook. The feeling of artificiality was conveyed powerfully by the students, referencing the school’s requirement to adhere to a form of English that was examination-driven, but impractical outside of the schooling field. The ambivalence was unmistakable between the orientations of students to learn communicative English, against the pull of the artificial variety that was mandatory to satisfy gatekeeping mechanisms for their imagined aspirational success. The realisation of non-elite EMI schooling’s shortcomings made students fearful, losing confidence in their sense of positionality and supposedly middle class trajectory:

Jessica: Yes. I think English in Hong Kong is for technical exam, not for daily life.
Adam: Not really learning English.
Interviewer: But there is that hurdle you have to then get past, you have to have a certain level of English to progress into university or certain careers?
Cecilia: In Hong Kong, ten students, when you ask ten students are they truly love English, I think half of them are just for exam. They are necessary to learn English, but they are scared. They don’t know. They hate English.
Adam: In fact, you know nothing about English culture through the English subject. I think it is the problem. We do not know. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)

Doubt extended not only to schooling English, but for some students, this influence created paradoxical dispositions towards English learning, as evident in how Cecilia, for example, referenced the deeper feelings of anxiety and animosity. As a consequence of non-elite EMI schooling’s failure to instil English as a capital, some students sought tutorial classes to improve English proficiency, but were often disappointed by an equally artificial pedagogical experience, that did not enhance the practical cultural capital that would uplift future aspirational fulfilment beyond satisfying performativity requirements:
Cecilia: I have gone to tutorial classes because I think my English is not good and I have to face an exam in the coming year. And I think it is necessary for me to improve my English because I can’t be competitive with other students. Because many Band One students, their English is very [fluent] and they can express their feelings in totally correct ways and without mistake. And it is something I can’t do…

Adam: I think studying in tutorial classes is not improving my English ability, but the answering skills. How to answer the question paper is the purpose. In fact, I do not really know more about English in tutorial class, I just know how to answer the question.

Jessica: (Pointing to Adam) I agree with his comment. Because we can only learn examination skills in the tutorial class, not uhm…not English. Just the skills to answer these questions and then time management in the tutorial class.

Joby: (Nodding) That’s true.

Kelly: I don’t like it too. (Students, Southwest Secondary School)

This anxiety and discomfort were evident in Cecilia’s understanding that, in her final public examinations, she would be competing against the Band One schools, composed mostly of elite schooling students with English capabilities she admired, and strove to emulate. There was an instrumental treatment in that students’ descriptions of tutorial classes in developing English proficiency unveiled a logic based on improving the competitiveness within assessments in a technical manner, similar to the logics of the school. Within the student’s interpretation of English’s artificiality in schooling, there was a weakening of the constructed illusion of prestigious schooling, and heightened ambivalence about the students’ pursuit of English in improving aspirational capacity. Schooling practices were inducing students to narrowly associate English acquisition with its performative capacity of passing exams, defusing other linkages between the linguistic capital and habitus.

This mismatch between expected and actual experiences was inducing some students to contest the prestigious distinction of EMI’s association with the English language against CMI schooling. This was evident in how Calvin and Andrew highlighted how deeply held
imaginaries within and beyond the schooling field were misconstrued, and inconsistent with actual practice:

Calvin: I think the whole society is not focusing on whether you are studying at an E-MI (Emphasis on ‘E’) or C-MI (Emphasis on ‘C’) school because EMI school will always have a higher ranking than CMI schools. But I think if the students in the CMI schools are like the students in our schools, I think it’s okay to study in the CMI schools and normally there are not big difference because even if we are studying in EMI schools, we do not use English very often. But that’s because of the society thinks the students studying in EMI schools will always be better than those in CMI schools, so the university also prefers those studying in EMI schools. I think if the quality of the school is high, equal or similar to those schools that will be a big difference.

Andrew: Similarly, I think the EMI is just a title. What we are studying, most of them is motivated by ourselves. If you really want to study English, no matter if it’s CMI school students or EMI school students, you can always find a way if you want. And as I said, for EMI schools, I don’t see that we are heavier on school resources and pressure. I think it’s true. As my fellow student has mentioned, if we have problems, we will ask our classmates not the teachers. (Students, Town Secondary School)

Calvin reinforced earlier arguments that dominant logics advantaged EMI schools with populations of middle class students that were already socially privileged with the cultural capital to perform better than working class students relegated to CMI schools. In effect, Calvin was recognising a cultural arbitrary taking place within society that legitimated EMI schools, together with English as a valued cultural capital. The student expressed scepticism about this legitimation, stating the fact that EMI schools did not even foster an environment to learn English, other than supposedly using English as the mode of instruction, which was actually subverted by teachers’ exercise of agency. Furthermore, Andrew contradicted his earlier comments regarding the better resourcing in EMI schools, and provided insight into
how students were predisposed to asking for assistance from each other instead of teachers, illustrative of students’ collective ambivalent relations to their schools. This reinforced the notion that the capital value of the school, such as quality of teaching, curriculum or resourcing, was being misrecognised. The class of position of the students constituted schooling quality instead. It also highlighted the neoliberal schooling practices in which students were treated as competitive individual agents. This was the case in spite of what Conroy and de Ruyter (2009), referencing Arendt (1968), say about how students should not be burdened with the anxieties or responsibilities of the world as full actors in the political arena.

In fact, a sense of frustration at the difficulties of English communication was present in admissions by few students to the same difficulties in Chinese written communication. Adam admitted to making ‘many grammatical mistakes in Chinese’, while Kelly gave the impression she had to be linguistically hybrid:

> Sometimes if I can’t…I don’t know how to express in English, Chinese is better but sometimes if I know how to express in English, English is better than Chinese. (Kelly, Student, Southwest Secondary)

Thus for these students, there was evidence how, despite the policy of promoting bilingual education amongst them, feelings of ambivalence were engendered as their middle class dispositions to aspire to upward mobility encountered the practical realities of the non-elite EMI schooling field, in relation to both English and Chinese.

The dominant imaginary of English and EMI schooling was, in essence, a rhetorical diversion to the realities of schooling practices, which fostered anxious and ambivalent feelings for students by not transmitting cultural capital imagined for fulfilling middle class aspirational imperatives. This was further evident through examination of the institutional logic of these non-elite EMI institutions.

### 6.5. Disjunctive Institutional Logic

As well as the artificial appropriation of English within these non-elite EMI schools, challenges to the ‘prestigious’ social imaginary were also evident in: observations of the
spatial manifestations of these schools; the normative limitations towards the rhetoric of advancing student agency; and resistance and incapacity to appropriately teach the interdisciplinary subject of Liberal Studies. These facets of schooling are constitutive and constituting of a particular institutional logic, or what has been controversially coined ‘institutional habitus’\(^{12}\) (Reay et al., 2001a). I illustrate how this logic undermines and deepens the students’ ambivalences to the perception of schools as institutions for developing aspirational capacity via elaboration in each of these domains.

6.5.1. ‘Disciplinary’ Spaces

I begin with observational descriptions of the schooling environment to provide an understanding of the practical logic of these institutions, and how it amplified students’ ambivalences regarding schooling. Before starting, it is relevant to reference the work of Chung and Ngan (2002), in their analysis of the historical records and account of Hong Kong primary school-building development within the colonial period. Chung and Ngan argued how the British colonial government from the 1950s up to handover of sovereignty in 1997 mostly constructed and ‘mass produced’ primary schools to be more functional and factory-style, in order to cater for influxes of migrants and higher birth-rates. The transient demography of the territory was used as an excuse by the colonial government for the generally low investment and avoidance of long-term planning in education, and hence lower regard for the physical environment compared to earlier quality constructions characterised by more historical (particularly Greco-Roman) aesthetic design. Chung and Ngan point to the fact that it was not until the handover to Chinese sovereignty that the focus diverted from tertiary education to investment in enhancing schooling space. The non-elite EMI schools I investigated occupied buildings that were constructed during the 1970s and 1980s, and were austere disciplinary spaces. Whilst secondary schooling likely received more colonial attention in terms of funding and consideration, I would contend that the basic designs were similarly functional and factory-like. This was evident, as argued by Chung and Ngan

\(^{12}\) I will use the term institutional logic, but with the recognition to the ongoing debate about how ‘institutional habitus’ is defined and how it is ‘contracted’ distinct from the collective habitus of those who are part of the institution. What I am attempting to argue here is a description of the specific ‘culture’ of these non-elite EMI institutions, which is at odds with the students’ habitus.
(2002), through examining the visual, acoustical, aesthetic and thermal environment (Chan, 1996), and making a comparison to CMI schools.

The visual architecture of the schools was devoid of any cultural, historical or contemporary attachment, association or design; the classrooms stressed function over form, and were usually painted in white, or neutral tone colours. Even the reception areas, whilst showcasing numerous trophies and awards accumulated over nearly half a century, which, given the dominant neoliberal social imaginary, might be expected to signal prestige and success, felt timeworn and weary. The entrance area at the lower levels bordered on the recess and student mess ‘halls’, which were generally open, multipurpose recreational spaces. These government schools were spatially constricted, located in rectangular blocks, built as solid concrete buildings and secured by high concrete walls, and depending on configuration, many areas were poorly illuminated. Like the rest of Hong Kong, the layout utilised minimal land space, with a preference for building vertically. The absence of sporting fields in the schools meant extracurricular and outdoor activity spaces were integrated within the multi-functional courtyards centrally situated within these schools, or on the rooftop. The awareness of this condition by the students was evident in Jessica’s disclosure, to her embarrassment, of her school’s limited space:

[Coming to this school] was not my choice. (Laughs embarrassingly) I think this school is very tiny. We have not enough facilities for us to study. So it’s not my choice. (Jessica, Student, Southwest Secondary)

And yet, although Jessica verbalised her discomfort, it was curious as to what alternatives were available to her, given most non-elite government schools were comparable in layout. It seemed that whilst funding has been provided to schools for fitting out selected special-purpose rooms, there was a mismatch between the new and the old. For example, I was surprised to find in one of the schools an impressive, high-quality assembly hall, such that the rest of the schooling environment conveyed blandness. The concrete rooms also necessitated the installation of ventilation and air-conditioning devices, especially in summer as insulation was poor. From personal experience living in Hong Kong, insulation seemed to be a widespread problem such that the use of air-conditioning and heating devices was almost mandatory as the seasons changed. The impact of this minimal space utilisation also meant that classrooms were observed to be acoustically poor, especially impacted by machine noise from air-conditioning units and fans, and the neighbouring noise from the classroom next
door or students in the recreational areas. In several instances, these sounds drowned out the voices of students, making it a struggle to communicate, and were especially noticeable in the sound recording equipment used during the interviews. Students had to increase modulation, and at times pause to allow certain noises to reside.

These conditions point to the constraints of physical space imposed by the historically fixed design, constructed within a traditionally disciplinary mindset. Arguably, the architecture and the space were indicative of this institutional culture that aligned with the status quo. I compare this to the extravagance of space present in prestigious shopping malls, and indeed, even the space allocated to client meeting rooms of multinational investment banks that I consult for in Hong Kong, that would comfortably surpass the size of the average family apartment. The stark contrast in physical space was exemplary of Ranciere’s (2009) observation that these prevailing distribution of landscapes were ‘embodied allegories of inequality’ (p12), and against the passivity of the observer, it was pre-structuring the expression and forms of power relations. This pre-construction powerfully signalled to students the relative unimportance of their education compared to private international schools, and the elite EMI institutions populated by contemporary, historical or other aesthetically-pleasing buildings, to which these students made frequent references. It seemed a contradiction to the students’ narratives affirming non-elite EMI schooling’s consecrated stance, as CMI schooling shared similar configurations and aesthetics in space. This situation also contrasted with the broader social imaginary which seemed to convey a sense of congruence and ease between EMI schooling and improved life opportunities.

6.5.2. Holistic Rhetoric

This ambiguous disciplinary space was also reflected in practices that included the focus on academic performativity in order to sustain the school’s relatively privileged position, despite the rhetorical discourse within the schooling mission and planning documents stressing the development of a broader range of competencies to cultivate valued capital amongst students. Terms like holistic development and whole-person promotion within the schools’ mission and development plans were frequently mentioned, but these proved rhetorical, and did not reflect the actual practices within non-elite EMI secondary schools. Arguably, this was the attempt by schools to comply with the government policy’s ‘magisterial discourse’ (Bourdieu
& Passeron, 1977) for the provision of diverse and balanced education. That students were disposed to a more holistic education was evident in their irritation and annoyance that the schools were too focused on academic achievement, especially competitive results in public examinations that helped to maintain or raise the school’s profile relative to competitor institutions. The pupils from Town Secondary School described the obstacles in trying to campaign for holistic development activities outside of the schools’ conservative frameworks, or what might be considered the school’s ‘institutional habitus’ (Reay et al., 2001a):

Doris: Most importantly, most teachers are not encouraging of us organising activities or any effort to get welfare for the students but encouraging us to study, study and study.

Calvin: Focusing on academics.

Interviewer: So you said you think this school doesn’t focuses much on academics?

Calvin: It focuses a lot.

Francis: Mainly.

Doris: They hope us will focus on academy, but it’s not as good as expected.

Interviewer: So you feel like there’s a lot of pressure.

Francis: And restrictions.

Doris: A lot of restrictions.

Interviewer: Restrictions in what kind of aspect?

Calvin: They will not write down something like the rules, but sometimes they will say something to us individually. For example, sometimes they will talk to us, members of the student council, tell us not to hold too many new activities. It’s okay for us to organise activities that are held as usual but not to hold some new ones.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Andrew: The school is kind of conservative. And I can see it’s not ready to accept new ideas. Especially the artistic category. They deny, they ban it because of their misunderstandings, but not letting us the chance to have it. (Students, Town Secondary School)

In these descriptions, students in Town Secondary understood there was a normative expectation to undertake safe, ‘conservative’, conventionally recognised forms of
extracurricular activity, to ensure it did not detract from the academic focus. An example was how playing guitar as a musical instrument, or the students’ desires to experiment in avant-garde artistic activities, were actively discouraged by the school, while participation in the Chinese orchestra, where the school had excelled historically, received particular endorsement. Town Secondary’s publicly available development plan disclosed its main concern of improving academic results, reflecting an anxiety within the school to protect its competitive and historical status within the secondary schooling field. The prescribed doctrine of academic focus symbolised a conventional and time-honoured doxa, and the use of this doxic status in an attempt to discipline students to practices of preservation. The boundary-challenging practices of the students were viewed by the school as a liability. Hence, students with habitus and capital already aligned to improving test scores were preferentially treated by the school, and better public examination results were seen as important for attracting better quality students needed to sustain examination results to maintain the school’s competitive standing and preserve the position of the school within the field. In this case, the broader systems of governance and measurement built upon the competitive values of the broader field of power to foster an ‘institutional logic’ disposed to internalise competitive practices to maintain or raise academic results.

Under these circumstances, students’ dispositions, interacting with the thwarting conditions and logics of the school, generated resistance towards their schools, a sense of disillusionment with the ‘illusion’ laid before them. As a result, the students experienced ambivalence within their imaginaries of the future. This resistance was laid bare by the students’ comments outlining their doubts and concerns about the contradictions inherent in the school’s rhetoric:

Andrew: The school’s major concern is to develop whole-person development, but it’s only suggested by the school but I don’t know if the policies are really matching this major concern. Because sometimes they will get us to do some whole-person activities as normal, as usual but they do not appreciate us to make more than normal. I think they think if we have those usual activities, it’s okay. For them to develop the whole-person, that’s enough.

Doris: Yes, they promote whole-person development but there’s contradiction between the teachers’ views and the school’s view, and also students’ views. (Students, Town Secondary School)
Similar to the artificiality of English within non-elite EMI schooling, the students’ normative expectations of whole-person development through non-academic endeavours within these schools were not fully realised, leading to tensions amongst the students in relation to the institutional logics of the school, which did not privilege these creative pursuits. The romanticised imaginary of cosmopolitanism and prestige, pulling students forward, was retracted by an almost unsympathetic schooling relation that presented a pre-determined aspirational route based on traditional exam-focused, academic excellence. This institutional habitus or doxic state in turn influenced students to become more strategic in learning strategies, and fostered ‘artificial’ peer-driven practices. An example was found when students spoke about attending tutorial classes to improve performance scores because others within the school were doing the same:

Sammi: Your friends go to the tutorial classes and…
Interviewer: And you kind of go along as well?
Pamela: Peer pressure.
Interviewer: But do your parents put pressure on you to get good marks so you go to tutorial?
Fonnie: They want us to go to tutorial class, but when they see your marks don’t turn out like they expect, they start to say ‘you are wasting my money.’ (Students, East Bay Secondary School)

In this case, there was naturalisation of the transfer of responsibility from schools to students, indicative of the dominance of a diffused matrix of control (Deleuze, 1992) that pervaded the after-school time of the students. A system of encoding and measurement was described by Fonnie, where students were held accountable by parents if their attendance of tutorial classes did not translate into objective improvement in schooling performance on report cards. Tutorial classes also highlighted the pervasiveness of economic realities that beset these middle class families, which necessitated weighing up the sacrifices of sending their children to tutorial classes, with the uncertainty of academic improvement and aspirational fulfilment. Such practices contrived to create a state where students were made to feel guilty for their own performance, recalling earlier discussions regarding the competitive anxieties and burdens of self-responsibility students were constructed to feel. The logics of schooling and tutorial institutions seemed no longer concerned about substantive understanding, and in turn
students and parents learned to become more superficial and deliberate in the acquisition of specific cultural capital that enhanced academic performance at the expense of other educational considerations. The recognition of this contrived high-stakes game was encapsulated in the students’ further comments and uneasy laughter:

Pamela: Tuition in Hong Kong is quite filling because nearly every student in Hong Kong would take tutorial class to strike for the examination.

Interviewer: Is that mainly for the exam? Or do you go to…

Pamela: (Interrupts) Mainly for exam because Hong Kong is very exam-oriented. It’s very exam-oriented.

Interviewer: You go there to help you with examinations. Does it add to your knowledge? (Pause but silence from group) Sometimes?

(Group laughs) (Student, East Bay Secondary School)

The orthodoxy of schooling practices is further demonstrated through their incapacity to provide meaningful teaching of the core subject of Liberal Studies.

6.5.3. Interdisciplinary Pedagogy

This lack of practical learning within schools was further witnessed in students’ expressed perceptions about the teaching and general perception towards the subject of ‘Liberal Studies’, which was introduced via NSS academic structure in 2009 as one of the four mandatory core subjects in senior secondary schooling. As Liberal Studies constitutes part of the final year formative assessments, performance in this subject is implicated in the grading of students for entrance into tertiary study, and thus tied to future aspirational probabilities. The Hong Kong Education Bureau promoted this interdisciplinary subject as a way to:

…broaden students’ knowledge base and enhance their social awareness through the study of a wide range of issues…focus on themes of significance to students, society and the world, designed to enable students to make connections across different fields of knowledge and to broaden their horizons. The learning experiences provided will foster students’ capacity for life-long learning, so that they can face the challenges of the future with confidence. (HKSAR Education Bureau, 2014).
The government discourse promoted the potential for deepening aspirational capacity of students by strengthening application of cultural capital acquired from disciplinary subjects into practical competencies embodied through a ‘feel for the game’ across a variety of endeavours. Students’ relations to Liberal Studies, and their formulation about critical discourse about the subject, were therefore indicative of capability for dissensus, ‘repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation’ (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69). The schools’ capacity to teach the subject was implicated in the constitution of such relations.

Unsurprisingly, Liberal Studies was largely greeted by many students with a mixture of feigned agony and disdain. For example, a pained expression was evident in Darin’s comments about the struggles with the subject, saying ‘I don’t know, I can’t take it’, making evident the hopelessness of the obstacle. Such a response illustrated an inability to bring previously relevant cultural capital to bear in relation to this particular set of understandings and knowledge. Fung (2014) pointed to mediatised discourse, citing the lack of support and consultation with the teachers and schools on implementation, and how the lack of structured guidance and the requirement of teachers to keep abreast with practical, real-world developments for subject preparation added to teaching pressures. The students interviewed affirmed this problem, mentioning how ‘teachers will also have trouble’ teaching Liberal Studies’. Arguably, the students’ interpretation of troubled teaching practices of the subject only complemented concerns over of the schooling they were receiving. School and teacher resistances through unintentional subversions were signs of the difficulty of schools in accommodating to a practical and critical curriculum, which was incongruous with the institutional logic focused on more traditional disciplines. As with the issue of school architecture, this was a common and shared phenomenon within public schooling, not simply amongst non-elite EMI schools.

The MOI selection also complicated the teaching of Liberal Studies, as students were caught up over the difficulties of English comprehension. As I previously argued, schools played on the misrecognition of English to create a hierarchy of schooling prestige. So in spite of the flexibility given to schools to adopt their own MOI policy for Liberal Studies, two out of the three schools sampled voluntarily chose the adoption of EMI, which according to the students interviewed represented the minority of EMI schools that used EMI; even certain elite schools selected CMI under these circumstances. In this case, using English actually had deleterious consequences on the teaching of Liberal Studies, considering how students have so far framed teachers’ English proficiency. Additionally, a few students remarked how
success in Liberal Studies required awareness of social and cultural issues, and therefore the match between students’ media consumption habits (in English or Chinese) against the language used in teaching of Liberal Studies, in relation to students’ language proficiency, was critical.

For example, Swift believed that her peers with competent English ability, which matched the English language of instruction chosen by the school for Liberal Studies, represented an advantage for passing assessments. Some students preferred using English in Liberal Studies when contrasted to their ability to express in Chinese, which they believed was poor. In comparison, others like Swift felt that it was difficult studying Liberal Studies using EMI, in which she was uncomfortable expressing herself. This was also the case because she read and watched Chinese media at home, and had trouble translating the ideas into English. It showed policy goals to foster critical thinking and broaden horizons were probably being subverted and dominated by more immediate apprehension over language capabilities, which the schools were ambiguously developing. This is embodied in Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) argument that mismatches in linguistic backgrounds within the family context adversely impact on students’ content acquisition (Grenfell, 2007). Furthermore, the high-stakes performativity, linked to Liberal Studies status as a core subject next to the languages of Chinese, English and Mathematics, encouraged active and competitive strategising by students. Indeed, diachronic document analysis of extensive print media undertaken by Fung (2014) confirmed students’ concern about how the subject was considered an obstacle to university, citing examples of students attending tutorial classes in order to pass the subject.

Paradoxically, recent discourse surrounding how Liberal Studies catalysed and contributed to the widespread involvement of students in the recent Occupy Protests has purported to be prompting the Education Bureau to review the subject’s curriculum (Cheung, 2014b). From this viewpoint, there was an assumption that the subject had provided students with the cultural instruments to foster the rise and recognition of a contesting social imaginary tied to a ‘political awakening’ that permitted political activism by youth to address their malaise. Whilst Jacob Hui Shing-yan, president of the Hong Kong Liberal Studies Teachers’ Association, defended Liberal Studies by stating that the examination required students to maintain a balanced view, lawmaker and law professor Priscilla Leung Mei-fun contended that although Liberal Studies has enabled students to discuss politics, it has not taught students to thoroughly understand difficult political theories and put them effectively into action (Tsoi, 2014). This meant how students were mediating the transmission of these
critical capabilities from their teachers was important in how this political consciousness was practised. A pertinent question was to what degree ambivalences towards mainland China played a role in constituting Hong Kong students’ political orientation. From Cecilia’s perspective, she did not believe critical thinking skills were developed sufficiently amongst her student cohort, which manifested as a disappointment against a broader imaginary of her school as prestigious:

…it’s related to the student’s lateral thinking and their answering skills because they may not understand the logic between the different events and the cause-effect relationship. They may not understand what is the relationship between two things. And the poor result is…partly it’s because our critical thinking skills is not very good. (Cecilia, Student, Southwest Secondary School)

Consequently, instead of offering educational environments and opportunities that inspired and broadened students’ life experiences, enabling the capacity to aspire and the cultivation of rich, alternative opportunities, these non-elite EMI schools could only compete for distinction through propping up academic results and drawing constantly upon a social imaginary associating EMI schooling with educational excellence. Under such circumstances, students’ experiences of the ambiguous disciplinary space and corresponding logic (disjunctive against the demands of a control society) made them ambivalent about the value and legitimacy of cultural capital they embodied through exposure to non-elite EMI schooling. This was reflected in levels of disparagement in relation to their schooling experiences, and what Bourdieu (1984) called the ‘practical suspension of doxic adherence to the prizes [each institution] offers and the values it professes, and a withholding of the investments’ (p. 144). This disappointment, together with uncertainties inculcated from broader field relations further reinforced the aspirational ambivalence of students, with the recognition of the relative lack of relevance of their schooling to their aspirations. In the next section, I shall finalise by outlining the process of collective disillusionment. In so doing, I reinforce how the dispositions of non-elite students with aspiring middle class habitus, in interaction with thwarting conditions of the schooling field that they encountered (and the wider context that surround and enters into the schooling field), generates an ambivalence that was reflected in their aspirational feelings and logics.
6.6. ‘Collective Disillusionment’

What I have presented so far in this chapter paints these middle class students as structured by the broader Hong Kong milieu and familial relations, including the misrecognised sense that attendance in non-elite EMI institutions imparted the cultural capital (such as English) which purportedly enriched future aspirational routes. Yet, the lived schooling experiences of these students made them simultaneously aware that their schools did not prioritise the development of the capital imagined to be dominant within their school settings. Instead, the schools were caught up in a game of self-preservation through a focus on performativity, and attracting and compelling middle class students through the artificial processes to perpetuate this misrecognition. In a way, the students were disappointed with their schools for thwarting their sense of entitlement for upward mobility, implicitly implied by the non-elite EMI schools, and for marking them as ‘second best’. However, this realisation gives way to a strategic practice of trying to make the best of this compromised situation, in trying to manage their non-elite middle-class positioning. Thus, I argue that these disjunctive conditions, the deviance from students’ common understandings, gives way to the sense of a ‘collective disillusionment’ (Bourdieu, 1984) within these students, at the realisation that their imagined futures might be problematic or limited. Bourdieu (1984) summarises this point succinctly:

This collective disillusionment which results from the structural mismatch between aspirations and real probabilities, between the social identity the school system seems to promise, or the one it offers on a temporary basis, and the social identity that the labour market in fact offers is the source of the disaffection towards work, that refusal of social finitude, which generates all the refusals and negations of the adolescent counter-culture...finds expression in unusual forms of struggle, protest and escapism (pp. 139-140).

The cruel optimism described by Berlant (2011) rears its head; the investment across time, and the anticipation of hope from EMI institutions, could not guarantee the futures imagined. But as one of the students, Calvin stated, ‘the situation has changed, but [parents and teachers] are still pushing us to walk the same road as them. So they think we can have a better road ahead, a better future.’ These conditions powerfully signal the diffusion of responsibility back on students to seize more control of their aspirational futures, but at a time when the warning
comes ‘too little, too late’. Bourdieu (1977b) talked of how ‘crisis (was) a necessary condition for a questioning of doxa but is not in itself a sufficient condition for the production of a critical discourse’ (p. 169), given the shortage of exploratory spaces (spatiotemporally) for dissent and conjecture. The result of this crisis was what Bourdieu (1977b) referred to as ‘hysteresis’, whereby students’ aspirations embodied by a habitus moulded by past experiences were out of sync with the shifting and destabilising landscape of opportunities and risks. As such, students ‘dare(d) not rely entirely on the regulated improvisation of orchestrated habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 182), but were also relatively powerless to influence the system of symbolic violence, resulting in an uncertainty of the way forward. There was a superseding of a part of the habitus within this situation of crisis, and a more conscious improvisation, but at the same time, the conditioning of this crisis assailed the habitus, resulting in the deepening of ambivalence.

6.7. Conclusion

Chapter Six centred on the place of English within the Hong Kong milieu, its appropriation by non-elite EMI secondary schools for distinction, and how the non-elite EMI secondary schooling practices more broadly (including school architecture, restrictions on student agency, and the teaching of Liberal Studies) further reinforced the ambivalence evident in relation to students’ familial (‘primary’) habitus. The result was a further compounding of the conditions conducive to aspirational ambivalence.

The chapter began by outlining the scarcity of English learning environments within an ethnically Chinese Hong Kong milieu. The local landscapes described by the students set English as a foreign language, despite the political rhetoric of biliteracy/trilingualism within the framing of Hong Kong as a world city. This meant the absence of quotidian spaces within which students could acquire the legitimated and standard form of English, or foster contestation through the development of plural identities. As such, these conditions constituted EMI institutions as legitimate authorities for the learning and acquisition of English, even as actual practices in these schools were found wanting. Even in the face of experienced dissensus in the processes of learning through an English language of instruction, there was still a gravitational pull towards these dominant poles of cultural capital.
in favour of English acquisition for future (economic) success, driven by concerted familial investments in providing the conditions for the production of middle class students’ habitus that oriented them towards English for success.

Indeed, non-elite EMI schooling tapped into the desire for English acquisition by becoming a conduit for this cultural capital, drawing upon its symbolic power and inducing illusions of quality teaching and resources – thus constituting schools as institutions for middle class aspirational success. Students invested with English, particularly those from middle class families, were also more likely subjectively and objectively to enrol into EMI schooling. This was in contrast to CMI schools that struggled with negotiating the terms of recognition. In this light, EMI institutions, albeit non-elite ones, attracted students from middle class backgrounds already predisposed to, and possessing, the cultural capital that contributed to the perceived quality of these institutions. This predisposed these students to a sense of some confidence about their futures, at least in relation to students within CMI institutions. This was achieved via a deficit discourse about the latter in relation to the former. The imagined improved chance of success of EMI students in passage across examination, and EMI dominated tertiary institutions, also seemed to favour EMI secondary institutions as sites for aspirational success.

At the same time however, non-elite EMI students’ relations to schooling were clearly disjunctive because English was practised ambiguously within these schools. Teachers’ use of Chinese vernacular as the MOI, and the perceived English standards of teachers, subverted the MOI policy. Furthermore, various student encounters with English within and external to the school confirmed to them the inadequacy of English acquired within the secondary schooling field, and the realisation that the acquisition of linguistic skills within their schools prioritised English largely for examination purposes. These schooling practices were motivated by schools’ competitive tendency to maintain their symbolic EMI status, and perpetuate the enrolment of middle class students. This was evident in the schools’ focus on academics and the normative limitations concerning which activities were permissible - discouraging or disqualifying many activities, despite schooling rhetoric promoting holistic learning. In effect, such responses encouraged strategising based on performative measures, with attendance of tutorial classes to learn how to answer examination questions, without any other expressed pedagogical purpose.
The performative logic (perhaps a form of ‘institutional habitus’ (Reay et al., 2001a)) of these schools was reflected in the manifestation of their physical space, which was devoid of significant cultural, historical and contemporary references that might foster the capacity to aspire amongst students. Instead, there was a overwhelming sense of the school sites as functional, disciplinary spaces within which it was unlikely students were convinced of the symbolic power embodied by those who endeavoured to work and learn in these institutions. This was evident, for example, in perspectives around the teaching of the interdisciplinary core subject of Liberal Studies, where students felt a struggle to apply the impractical disciplinary knowledge and skills from other subjects. There was a perspective that teachers could not properly teach the subject, further contributing to the sense of disjuncture experienced by these students. Arguably, this contributed to the students’ view that their school lacked the capacity to develop balanced and critical perspectives, reducing its relevance to foster a more robust aspirational capacity – a productive capacity to aspire.

Consequently, I argue that there was a ‘collective disillusionment’ on the part of students that non-elite EMI schools were ambiguous institutions that did little to broaden aspirational capacity beyond the narrow and orthodox routes offered. As institutions of the middle classes, these schools seemed to reinforce the disjuncture these students already experienced through the realisation of their own familial limitations in relation to what constituted success within the broader Hong Kong milieu. From this perspective, there was diffusion of responsibility back to the student. Owing to the lack of foreseeable alternatives, students seemed powerless to effect change, and were subordinated to these educational institutions; this was especially so considering the broader field relations that reinforced the destabilising and uncertain tendencies these students already experienced. This crisis was a ‘hysteresis’, resulting in a suspension of continuity afforded by the habitus, and displayed in a logic of aspirational ambivalence from dominant/doxic relations.

The next chapter, Chapter Seven summarises the key findings of the research. This includes elaborating the concept of ‘aspirational ambivalence’ derived from the analysis, and outlining the principal theoretical, methodological and empirical/practical contributions of the research.
7. Reprising the Research: Futures Diminished

7.1. Overview

In this final chapter, I reprise this doctoral research study and outline my ‘findings’. This research attempted to understand how the lived experiences of middle class secondary school students from non-elite EMI schools in Hong Kong negotiated their future aspirations. English as Medium of Instruction is very important in the Hong Kong context because of the significant place of the language in its colonial past, in the present, and in respect of its citizens’ possible futures. To research and theorise the future aspirations of these students, key theoretical resources of Bourdieu, Taylor and Appadurai were applied. This was deemed to be possible because of their compatible epistemological and ontological stances and complementary conceptual resources. These resources included habitus, field, practice, social imaginary and capacity to aspire, although the analysis also presented some evidence of the incompatibilities of the theoretical resources. These theorists/researchers’ work was also utilised to conceptualise the research design. Additionally, the data collection was framed by the work of these theorists and entailed focus group interviews, observations and content analysis of documents produced by the schools that the students attended. The data analyses of Chapters Five and Six demonstrated how apposite my theoretical and subsequent methodological approach has been for understanding students’ aspirations and their possible futures.

As a result of this theoretically informed empirical research, the concept of ‘aspirational ambivalence’ has emerged and will be elaborated further below as a key contribution of this research to the cognate literature. It is particularly important to acknowledge how the research demonstrated the intimate imbrications between the formation of ambivalent aspirations, as they relate to the very specific contextual conditions of Hong Kong – namely its residual colonial markers, contemporary global neoliberal forces, and emergent political and economic hegemony of China, and Hong Kong’s relationship to this emergence.
The chapter opens by reviewing the key findings of the research, and the contribution of the concept of ‘aspirational ambivalence’, which I argue is borne out of the specificities of complex relational forces impacting the lives of young people in the specific context of contemporary Hong Kong. I then identify the theoretical/conceptual, methodological and empirical contributions that my research has made, my understandings arising from this study, and the potential avenues for future research in this field. The chapter ends by repeating the call, also made by others, for re-imagining modes of conceptualising aspirations within everyday social lives, and examining the social and cultural systems that are conducive or otherwise to how youths imagine their futures.

7.2. Aspirational Ambivalence

What I have elaborated within my theoretically informed data analysis in Chapters Five and Six was the construction of a particular configuration of dispositions and logic, what the research has called ‘aspirational ambivalence’. This was shown to be constituted through and in relation to the distinctive assemblage of social structures and practices in the social experiences of the middle class, secondary school students from non-elite EMI schools that were interviewed in this research.

The first set of these specificities traces to the encompassing and subsuming influences of globalisation and neoliberalism that were simultaneously ascendant and submerged within Hong Kong’s milieu, via their power to structure students’ relations to family, class, language and schooling. Hong Kong’s status as a global financial centre embodied a social imaginary apparently saturated with cosmopolitan opportunities, but also evoking a manufactured anxiety arising from the sense of destabilisation, deterritorialisation and uncertainty accompanying its global positioning and relationship to China. This ambivalence emerged from incompatible social imaginaries grounded in colonial and postcolonial histories and discourses, and Hong Kong’s geopolitical and economic opportunities and vulnerabilities. It played out in the shared imagination of Hong Kong identity as hybrid, cosmopolitan and constituted by ‘Western’ values, against the temporally-grounded and mediatised ‘backward’ identity of mainland China. But this imaginary was plagued by the growing discourse and reality of mainland China’s growing regional and global economic and political power. In
this way, students sustained a cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), with the expectation that spatial proximity of Hong Kong to China would inevitably bring about the good life, even as there were concerns about the possibilities for transnational mobility, and the opportunities/risks present in transborder mobility.

This ambivalence and permanent state of crisis and vulnerabilities present in Hong Kong’s milieu provided fertile grounds for the expression and valorisation of neoliberal values. Neoliberal values constituted a powerful social imaginary, and were naturalised and intertwined into Hong Kong’s global city status. This manifestation of competitiveness and meritocracy translated into the diffusion of presumed control to individuals as self-referential and self-responsible units. The mechanism of symbolic violence sustained and constructed within the students’ habitus predisposed them to acting out of competitiveness and a belief in meritocracy, but also led them to construing failure as the responsibility of the individual, leading to an inclination to ‘give up’. Additionally, neoliberalism was complicit in the privileging of economic capital associated with the financial stresses inscribed within the city, arising from the combination of burdens associated with high cost of living, low affordability of housing, poor social welfare, expectations of filial piety, and inherent materialism within the conceptions of the good life. These conditions presented immediate and attendant concerns that occupied the temporal and attentive capacities of these middle class students, diminishing their capabilities for exploration and negotiation of future aspirational possibilities. Instead, students showed strategic inclinations for aiming for what was readily and seemingly achievable and imaginable within what we might see as somewhat mutable and liquid horizons of aspirations.

Within familial relations, globalisation and neoliberal values exerted influences that powerfully drove middle class families to strategies of intense cultivation in safeguarding the future social class of their student children, witnessed by the taken-for-granted trajectories of students (mandatory university attendance, middle class professions, and exclusion of working class professions). One of these dominant strategies was the appropriation of English as a capital of distinction, through instilling a common understanding of the implicit role of English in future middle class aspirations and their achievement. This was supported by English’s historical and contemporary importance within the field of power and global business, and the rise of English as the lingua franca of the modern world. The lack of serious dissensus within students’ narratives around English’s association with the good life and improving aspirational probabilities highlighted how the family and familial networks
acted as a central node and constant reference point in the aspirational capacities of students. Nonetheless, the acquisition of English was not a straight-forward process, existing within a symbolic system subject to misrecognition, and tied to a false meritocracy that constituted English learning as dependent on self-responsibility, instead of being seen to result from forms of capital made available through families’ socioeconomic position. As a result, failure to learn English cultivated a habitus characterised by embarrassment and shame in relation to students’ capacities to engage with English. Attitudes towards English learning were further complicated by the arbitrary nature of the form of English legitimated by teaching and assessment practices. However, given the general milieu of Hong Kong did not foster an environment for the practice of English, this arbitrary legitimation of English did not face serious contestation. Furthermore, English acquisition was imagined as spatially dependent and confined to specific districts/spaces, despite English being the official language in the territory. This created an ambivalent attitude towards English acquisition for these middle class students, and influenced their sense of aspirational limits.

The conditions here privileged both elite and non-elite EMI schools as temporally-grounded and historically safe institutions for the acquisition of English capital, driving middle class families to strategise for entry into these institutions. Considering the familial emphasis on English, especially its symbolic value to middle class identities and aspirational imaginations, students’ habitus were primed from the outset to link the lack of access to competent English language learning environments to a deficit conception of their place in the world. EMI schools, albeit non-elite, were imagined as academically better, and performed as such because of their middle class student clientele. In this way, parental inculcations surrounding English’s close association with aspirational probabilities were also reproductive and mutually constituting. The middle class social imaginary was based on the recognition of EMI schools through mythologies that sustained the marginality and demonisation of CMI schooling as working class institutions, and justified through the principles of meritocracy. Subsequently, students from CMI schools struggled with renegotiating the terms of recognition, and were placed in positions that further exacerbated their ‘inferiority’. This reinforced how language policies, poorly conceived and implemented, have unintended consequences for social inequality.

At the same time as students from non-elite EMI schools maintained the narratives that victimised students from CMI schools, they were also victims themselves of a friction emerging from a practice-habitus/capital-field disjuncture. Non-elite EMI schooling’s
disjunctive English practices, as manifestations of the schools’ institutional logic, were suggestive of how non-elite EMI institutions were structured by a doxa of performativity to operate in a self-referential manner, resistant to change as a disciplinary institution. This resulted in disjunction between non-elite EMI schooling and a habitus primed by the familial, and beholden to the symbolic power of English and EMI schooling, and that anticipated EMI schooling would bestow the cultural capital necessary to deepen aspirational anchors. Yet as witnessed by the students’ responses, many felt they were running up against the objective structures within schooling, which could do little but offer the narrow academic and doxic routes typically associated with success. This non-elite EMI schooling field was unresponsive to the demands of cultivating students for aspirational success, such as ensuring practical English proficiency, a truly holistic education, or promotion of critical pedagogies that had the potential to broaden aspirational futures. The logic was undeniably one that strived to sustain field relations, the status quo, by appropriating English to ensure the continual entry of middle class students, who already possessed the cultural capital and social class orientations to qualify for performance levels adequate to sustain EMI schools’ rankings.

These disjunctive outcomes offer insights for policymakers in how assessment practices and performativity measures can exacerbate inequality. Alongside students’ collective disillusionment and the sense of acquiescence to the rules of the game, there was the sense of inability on the part of these middle class students to bring to bear any relevant capital that could influence the ‘game’ more broadly, resulting in a clear diffusion of responsibility back to the students, as individual, self-referential actors in a neoliberal space. However, despite the malaise, a cruel optimism kept these students dominated and bound from the lack of foreseeable or immediate alternatives (Berlant, 2011), and oriented towards seeking security against the uncertainty and destabilisation evident through broader field relations.

So instead of producing confident economic ‘citizens’ (via competitive values ‘instilled into’/issuing from students’ imaginaries around schooling, employment, and considerations of opportunity), the interplay between the broader Hong Kong milieu, the symbolic system of English capital, and middle class familial and schooling logics were productive of a student habitus characterised by particular dispositions. These dispositions interacted with the conditions of the broader and schooling field, producing feelings of anxiety and uncertainty in pursuit of future aspirations. These are what I have called ‘aspirational ambivalence’.
This aspirational ambivalence was reflected in the unmistakable uncertainty in contemplating the aspirational path forward, co-existing alongside a general sense of readiness to ‘give up’, but a ‘striving’ determination to succeed. Hence, students’ aspirational constitution could be described as existing within perpetual states of abandonment and origination, mirroring the modern existence characterised by ‘continuous new starts’ as argued by Bauman (2000, p. 20). This specific condition arises from the simultaneous forms of resistance, and relations of complicity/domination: an excitement and romanticisation of Hong Kong’s situation in relation to processes of globalisation, yet burdened by its uncertainty and destabilisation; spatially bound to the local, yet longing for mobility; emboldened by Chinese national opportunities, yet deemed to be incompatible with Chinese national identity; a valorisation of competition and economic capital, yet attendant to their immediate demands, and limited by class; the feeling of relative advantage as EMI students, yet the feeling of disjuncture resulting from schooling practices; aspirationally driven towards English, yet with mixed attitudes towards its acquisition and critiquing its impractical form acquired through schooling. Despite the ‘linear’ presentation of my analysis with the appearance of a relatively ‘neat’ chronological arrangement, aspirational ambivalence was evident through the interaction between the habitus across space/time contexts. This logic results from internalisation of the social and cultural context, and a conflicting and contradictory social imaginary. In other words, aspirational ambivalences were arising through the slow process of ‘invention’ by the habitus responding to objective conditions characterised by this disjuncture. This disposition and logic of ambivalence seemed a symptomatic condition of liquid modernity witnessed by a privatisation of a public ambivalence (Bauman, 1991), and this ambivalence as diffuse.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, we see here the habituation of ambivalence as a product of the mediation of field relations, constituting the habitus; hesitation was caused by the incompatibility between rigid and changing relations. In a constituting and constitutive manner, these ambivalent relations were manufacturing the ambivalent mythologies that were creeping in as perennial residents within the collective social imaginary, possibly informing each new wave and generation of students’ aspirational practices to this norm. The ambivalence then becomes part of ‘the habitus – embodied history, internalised as a second nature and forgotten as history’ (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 56).

For these middle class students, specific arrangements within the Hong Kong social and cultural landscape were not those which simply produced confident, competent,
individualistic, self-serving and self-referential economic actors. This habitus was in stark contrast to the habitus of ‘assured optimism’ described by Forbes and Lingard (2015), where the students from elite schooling in Scotland were instilled with confident spatiotemporal dispositions in preparation for roles as global citizens and professionals. The recognition of the presence of aspirational ambivalence is important because limitations to aspirational capacities represent a form of violence that results in a growing inequality and polarisation of classes, which eventually extracts a social cost in the form of protests, unrest, suicide, crime, delinquency etc. as evident in concerns about the social conditions giving rise to recent protests. It might be argued that ambivalence is simply a phenomenon every youth faces at this pivotal moment of transition to adulthood. However, I differentiate this temporary liminality against aspirational ambivalence by pointing to the very specific sources and conditions through which this state is continuously manifested, and how these conditions are productive of such a disposition over time. Also, the consequential hesitant exclusions and compromises to spatiotemporal aspirational possibilities found are very different from descriptions of liminal moments. In saying this, it would be unsurprising to discover that some of the conditions sustaining aspirational ambivalence in Hong Kong are present in other milieux, sustained under varying social and cultural contexts, driven by the homogenising effects and far reach of globalisation and neoliberalism as a force majeure.

7.3. Contributions: Theoretical Methodological and Empirical

The theoretical contribution of this study involves the application of the combination of Bourdieu’s thinking tools (habitus, practice, field, capital), Taylor’s conception of social imaginary, and Appadurai’s capacity to aspire, to more richly chart out and interrogate the social world and its relations through which these students’ aspirational futures were constituted. The application of this combination of theories to data analysis as shown in Chapters Five and Six was demonstrated through their usefulness for elucidating actual practice, when worked together. Bourdieu’s theory of practice provided a central framework to encapsulate the habitus-practice and field-capital relations apropos aspirational mediations, and the alignment and dissonance of these relational forces. Taylor’s conception of social imaginary augments the research by providing the framework for better understanding the broader social imaginary within which these elements (individualism, competitiveness, push
to succeed, materialism, privileging of English, blind faith in EMI schooling etc) were constituted, overlapping and contesting against each other to inform students’ quotidian experience and shaping aspirational orientations, influenced as they were by broader processes of globalisation, neoliberalism, modernity, national identity. The recognition of cultural foundations that influenced the future aspirations, as encapsulated within Appadurai’s capacity to aspire, was critical in engaging with how conceptions of futures were mapped, explored and connected. The broad social/cultural links across these concepts allowed a form of conceptual ‘integration’, which enriched the analytical insights arising from the research.

Methodologically, my aim to understand the ‘lived experiences’ of my participants and the varied possibilities which characterised their lives, evident through their personal narratives, necessitated undertaking a ‘relational’ analysis into these students’ lives and hopes for the future. Such an approach made it possible to highlight points of contestation, dissonance and dissensus, as well as the presence of competing influences in the competition for valued capital (and subsequent field-habitus-practice disjunctures, and struggles for recognition), as these related to students’ capacity to aspire within a dominant broader neoliberal social imaginary. The taken-for-granted, ordinariness, familiarity and shared understandings around neoliberalism foregrounded by Taylor’s notion of a modern social imaginary, together with Bourdieu’s notions of the logics and doxa of the field, and Appadurai’s conceptions of the capacity to aspire, all informed the focus of the research, the processes of collecting the data, and subsequent analysis. That is, the notion of aspirational ambivalence as a primary contribution of this research arose through the application of these complementary concepts to better understand students’ aspirations for the future, under current conditions, and the broader socially constitutive relations which have characterised their lives.

The ‘methodological melange’ arising through the simultaneous application of these concepts stands as an example of a novel approach to understanding social practices as these relate to individual and collective aspirations. It is the working together of these concepts, through the research process (design, collection, and analysis of data), which constitutes the key methodological contribution of this research. The opportunity to live, work and study in Hong Kong also offered the opportunity to more fully appreciate and contextualise the array of struggles and hopes associated with residing within the Hong Kong milieu, especially in relation to China. I also found how engaging in research altered my relations to dominant
norms, particularly my own habituated perspectives on neoliberalism arising through an earlier career within banking and finance.

From an empirical perspective, contemporary educational research in a complex site such as Hong Kong revealed the exigencies of students’ ambivalent aspirations as a product of the past and present complicated by colonisation, post-colonialism, nationalism, modernity, globalisation and neoliberalism, amidst a fluid temporal rhythm. At the same time, the competitive struggles and neoliberal forces were so dominant and explicit that the consequences of these forces for how they produced a complex sense of students as both ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ were clearly discernible within the research. And as witnessed in the analysis in Chapters Five and Six, the students’ narratives, body language, schooling documents and practices, and the panorama of the Hong Kong milieu, provided rich accounts of the working of the social that underlay students’ aspirational capacities.

In terms of avenues for further research arising from the findings of this study, there is scope to undertake further study in different empirical sites to understand if aspirational ambivalence is indeed a more generalised phenomenon, or simply a localised and specific condition. Of interest is also how aspirational ambivalence plays out in the future lives after secondary schooling, the duration of this ambivalence, and how it is implicated in processes of social inequality or unrest. And of course, there is the need to understand how we can re-imagine beyond the dominant to conceptualise new and more equitable beginnings.

7.4. Re-Imagination

As we have seen, middle class students face a ‘muted’ form of suffering that is elusive to categorise, and which may not elicit sympathetic expression because of the relative advantage of these students in relation to working class students, and students forced into even more impoverished circumstances. In a fluid temporal and neoliberal milieu, the middle class endure a sense of heightened risk, pressure and insecurity in relation to their social reproduction (Ball, 2003). Furthermore, the aspirational ambivalence described in this research is problematic because the social mechanisms leading to this disposition have the potential to further exacerbate the socioeconomic divide by whittling away the relative power of those occupying the middle classes. Arguably, and in apparent contradiction to
manifestations of expressions of sympathy, the intensification of middle class anxieties has
the potential to further exacerbate and diminish the recognition of the working class and
underclass. This is because in the contestation for ever scarcer resources, those who are most
disadvantaged are most likely to be even further disenfranchised during any escalation of the
battle over scarce resources. Consequently, there is a need to consider how to dismantle and
change the processes and institutions that have led to this manifestation of aspirational
ambivalences. I frame this re-imagination’ in two ways.

Firstly, re-imagination revolves around finding ways to imagine alternative possibilities of
social and cultural formations that can reduce ambivalent relations towards the future.
However, as many have postulated, imagining within the framework of the neoliberal poses
the risk of (re)producing solutions that merely solidify or exacerbate inequality. Whilst
expanding research into emerging aspirations based on local familiar cultural values derived
from the funds of knowledge/aspirations (Moll et al., 1992) is one possible solution forward,
this poses a challenge in a fluid, hybrid and destabilising milieu like Hong Kong, where the
acceleration of changing relations is increasingly taken as the norm. We saw how the
ascendancy of the PRC in the region and internationally played out in complex, problematic
ways for Hong Kong’s distinctive identity, and how the ambivalent relations amongst
students were strong (and were arguably more muted in the previous generation). On the
upside, Hong Kong students are in an enviable position because the abundance of resources
within the local milieu allows for the potential of multiple possibilities and contestation. This
perhaps requires coordinated efforts from top-down policy (for example, truly establishing
biliterate/ trilingual education (Kirkpatrick, 2011)), and a shift in the mindsets at the grass-
roots level, that can bestow the political will needed to break the entrenched and mutually
constituting positions of the broader fields of power, EMI schools, and middle class parents
and students.

The second way of re-imagination is related to the field of social science itself. This is
associated in part with the urgency to address the diffusion of ambivalence because it leads to
a sense of an escalating need for certainty. The field of economics dominates social science
partly because economics provides the sense of assurance needed, able to unabashedly
‘sweep under the carpet’ its litany of erroneous predictions, and largely unquestioned and
problematic assumptions. That is precisely why policy from the Hong Kong government
frames economic progress as the dominant solution to social problems. Indeed, Appadurai
(2004) remarked that futurity has been hijacked by the language of economics. But as critical
sociological research has aptly confirmed, the presence of opportunity does not mean individuals will consider it a viable option and aspire towards it. And as Piketty (2014) asserts, the ‘myth’ of equal rights and opportunities does not guarantee egalitarian distribution of resources.

I reflect on how fortunate and privileged I have been to have stumbled into the pursuit of this sociological research, and consequently been provided the opportunity to become exposed to the wide gamut of ideas and postulations within branches of social sciences outside of my formation in economics. But I also walk away feeling a sense of concern that only through very contingent circumstances was this access made possible, and saddened by the notion that sociological ideas are ‘hidden away’, despite their exciting implications for renegotiating aspirational practices. This is the same point that Bourdieu (2010) encapsulated in his proposition that ‘sociology is a martial art’ and helps towards conceiving emancipatory practices that alter the underlying dominant social imaginary. In fact, Bourdieu (2005) started his book *The Social Structures of the Economy* with a quote by Bertrand Russell that ‘While economics is about how people make choice, sociology is about how they don’t have any choice to make.’ However, I feel that wider understanding of sociology seems elusive and inaccessible within the public sphere, as I reflect back upon my almost absolute ignorance when I first embarked on this research. The paradox of sociology is that sociologists generally embody dispositions of constant self-doubt about the assumptions made – the hallmarks of epistemic reflexivity – but this cautious disposition itself perhaps contributes to undermining the cultivation of a broader imaginary, which recognises the progress and benefits of sociology, even as it cautions against a sense of ‘blind’ optimism about the future.

Therefore, I feel that the second part of re-imagination requires an active educative process that can liberate sociological ideas (and the ideas from other branches of social science) and make them more accessible, along with their implications for practice, to the wider public. Only in this way can we challenge a social imaginary currently dominated by (neoliberal) economic thinking. Through this process, I hope the regard for human beings and their welfare can once again return as the nucleus of human ‘progress’ and ‘scientific’ endeavour – a goal perhaps ignored in the pursuit of economic growth. I also hope this educative process can then foster the conditions that can facilitate Piketty’s (2014) call for economics to engage more closely with other disciplines of social science. As such, I conclude with an extract from Adam Smith’s (1776) *An Inquiry into the Wealth of Nations*, regarded as the foundation
for modern economic thinking, especially the neoliberal movement. Herein, Smith reminds us that the pursuit of equity should never be regarded as an inconvenience:

Is this improvement in the circumstances of the lower ranks of the people to be regarded as an advantage or as an inconveniency to the society? The answer seems at first sight abundantly plain. Servants, labourers, and workmen of different kinds, make up the far greater part of every great political society. But what improves the circumstances of the greater part can never be regarded as an inconveniency to the whole. No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged (Book 1, Chapter 8, p35).

The risk of ignoring the collective disillusionment amongst our youth, borne through ambivalence to dominant relations, will only harden the frictions that will inevitably lead to fallout. What form this fallout will take, we can only fathom.

7.5. Postscript

My main contribution through this research has been to show how complex and specific ensembles of Hong Kong’s colonial past, its contemporary global present, and its emerging future, including in relation to China, have become imbricated with middle class familial practices, the English language and non-elite EMI schooling practices, and how these processes have fostered aspirational ambivalence within secondary school students. I also outlined the contribution of the theoretical and methodological approach of drawing upon and across the concepts of Bourdieu, Taylor and Appadurai to understand students’ future aspirations. The study opens up Hong Kong as an empirical site for further studies of this nature, and notions of aspirational ambivalence as a field for further investigation. Lastly, I called for the need to re-imagine studies of students’ aspirations in two ways: firstly by redefining the social and cultural relations that sustain students’ ambivalence about their futures; and secondly, to engage in an educative process oriented towards reinstating human welfare, instead of economic growth, as the core concern of modern practical debate.
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Appendices

Appendix 1  Personal Information Sheet

English Language and the Imagined Futures of Hong Kong Secondary School Students

Chief Investigator: Mr Jack Tsao (PhD Student, University of Queensland)

Dear Student,

My name is Jack Tsao and I am a PhD candidate in the School of Education at The University of Queensland, Australia. I am undertaking a study to understand how English language instruction schooling helps broaden students’ understanding and perceptions of their futures.

As part of this research, I will conduct short individual interviews and group interviews with students at different schools in Hong Kong. The individual interviews and groups interviews are expected to last for approximately 1 hour each, and will take place within your school. Interviews will be video recorded and will cover:

- Your past experiences and attitudes towards English language learning
- How you imagine/perceive your future and place in the world

The benefits of participating will be the opportunity to develop self-awareness of how past learning and social experiences are influencing how you think about your future.

If you volunteer for participation in this study, your name and school will not be identified in the study or final report. All responses will be anonymous and the individual responses will not be made available. The information will be stored in a secure environment and will only be accessible to the researcher (and his academic advisors). Your responses will be confidential and any information provided will only be used for the purposes of this research. A debrief will be provided to you after your participation for you to provide further feedback and comments on your participation.

If you would like to participate in this study, please return the completed participant nomination form to the school and I will contact you to arrange a suitable time. Please understand that you are under no obligation to participate and may withdraw at any time without penalty. Before the interview commences you will be provided with an informed consent sheet to sign.
Please note that this project has been approved by The University of Queensland ethics committee:

This study has been cleared in accordance with the ethical review guidelines and processes of The University of Queensland. These guidelines are endorsed by the University's principal human ethics committee, the Human Experimentation Ethical Review Committee, and registered with the Australian Health Ethics Committee as complying with the National Statement. You are free to discuss your participation in this study with project staff. If you would like to speak to an officer of the University not involved in the study, you may contact the School Ethics Officer on +61 7 3365 6502.

Please retain a copy of this information sheet for your future reference. Should you have any questions, you can contact me by e-mail or telephone (E-mail: jack.tsao@uqconnect.edu.au; Telephone +852 9136 1548).

Thank you for considering my request, and I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Jack Tsao

PhD Candidate
Appendix 2  Participant Nomination Form

Name of Project:  English Language and the Imagined Futures of Hong Kong Secondary School Students

Chief Investigator:  Mr Jack Tsao (PhD Student, University of Queensland)

Student Name: _____________________________________

Mailing Address:
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Contact Number: __________________ E-mail Address: __________________

I have read and understand the information sheet and would like to be considered for participation in this PhD research study. Please contact me on the above telephone number/ e-mail address to arrange a suitable time.

Signed ______________________ (student) Date: ____/_____/2012

PARENTAL/ GUARDIAN PERMISSION

I, __________________________________________________ [Name of Parent/ Legal Guardian] as the student’s parent/ legal guardian hereby grant my permission for the student’s nomination to participate in this PhD research project.

Signed ______________________ (parent/ legal guardian) Date: ____/_____/2012
Appendix 3    Personal Interview Consent Form

English Language and the Imagined Futures of Hong Kong Secondary School Students

Chief Investigator: Mr Jack Tsao (PhD Student, University of Queensland)

Please read the points below and sign in the space provided as evidence of your informed consent to participate in the interview.

- The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I have read and understood the information sheet given to me.
- I have been given the chance to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers.
- I understand my participation is voluntary and I can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and without having to provide a reason. If I choose to withdraw, all data collected from me will be deleted from the study.
- I understand that I will not be identified in the study or final report. All responses will be coded and will contribute to aggregate data of the researcher, so no individual responses will be made available or published in any format.
- My responses will be confidential and any information provided will only be used for the purposes of this research.
- I will be offered an opportunity to view the interview transcript to ensure I am satisfied that it reflects my responses and a summary of key findings will be provided to me at the conclusion of the research.
- I agree to the digital recording of this interview.
- I will receive no benefits, financial or otherwise, for my participation.

STUDENT CONSENT

I __________________________________________[Print Student Name] have read and understand the material provided in the information sheet and this informed consent sheet, and agree to participate in this interview.

Signed ___________________________ (student participant)  Date: ____/_____/2012
PARENTAL/ GUARDIAN CONSENT

I, ________________________________ [Print Parent/ Legal Guardian Name] as the student’s parent/ legal guardian grant my consent for my __________________________’s [Relationship to Student] participation in this PhD research project.

Signed _______________________   (parent/ guardian)   Date: ____/_____/2012
Appendix 4  Sample Interview Questions/ Topics

- So now that you are graduating from senior high school, what are you looking to do next? Is that what you most want to do? If not, what is your ideal?
- Are there expectations from other people on what you should do?
- How do you feel your previous experiences have prepared you for the future?
- How do you imagine your future place in the world?
- What has led you to think about your future like this?
- What subjects were your electives in your senior high and which subjects do you think are most important? Why did you select those subjects?
- How did you feel about using English to learn? Did you have any difficulties in the classroom? How do you think your life would be different if you had the opportunity to learn in Cantonese instead?
- How do you think your future will be different from students that have attended Chinese instruction schooling? Why do you say that?
- In your opinion, how was the level of English displayed the teachers in the school? To what degree is English used or not used outside of the classroom environment?
- What encouragement, pressure or support did you receive from your parents to learn English? (E.g. Private tutors, cram schools, study-exchanges, previous English schooling experience)
- Do your parents speak English and how do you measure their ability? Do you know if they use it English in their work?
- Discuss other experiences of English, for example overseas holidays, parent work trips, etc.
- How do you view English and its place in the world?