

Youth self-formation and the 'capacity to aspire': The itinerant 'schooled' career of Fuzile Ali across post-apartheid space

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This article is a narrative analysis of one young boy's encounter with his schooling across the rural and urban landscape. It is set against the backdrop of the changing social reproductive context of education in South Africa in the democratic period. Based on in-depth qualitative interviews, the analysis probed the subjective basis on which this young boy encountered his various spatial terrains in order to establish his schooled career. The article employs the lenses of 'aspiration', 'space', and 'technologies of self' to present the argument that his 'capacity to aspire' has to be understood on the basis of his active self-formation and disciplining, accumulated across the itinerant spaces of his life. The aim of this article is to open a window onto how young people now go about navigating their educational aspirations in the light of their contingent life circumstances.

Keywords: youth formation, subjectivity, aspiration, schooling, post-apartheid space

Introduction

This article is an analysis of the 'schooled' career of one young person who transacts his itinerant school going in a number of spaces across his life's geographies. The word 'schooled' is a referent for the ways this person encountered his school education as part of his life circumstances. His schooled body was constructed both inside and outside the institutional environments of the schools he attended. It is the argument of this article that his schooled career can be understood on the basis of a consideration of his self-representations that were cultivated in the light of the adaptations he made in his living spaces. The article is motivated by the position that qualitative work, in this case one story, can provide one view of the intersections of rapidly changing macro-societal processes and their micro-lived dimensionality (Dillabough, Kennelly & Wang, 2008:330).

An analysis of a story has the potential to reveal an embodiment of these larger social processes, of how young persons' subjectivities emerge as they navigate their socialities. The article is based on intensive qualitative work over a three-month period. I conducted nine in-depth semi-open-ended interviews with my subject, Fuzile Ali (pseudonym), which were initially intended to investigate the interaction between his life circumstances and his school career. The first six interviews explored the contexts of his life, from his birth in 1990 until his grade 12 (matriculation) year in 2008, at the age of 18 years. I probed him about how his circumstances led him to move back and forth between rural and urban terrains at regular intervals, and on the adjustments he had to make to these new environments and the schools he attended. My research assistant and I subsequently interviewed twelve of his intimate associates: family members, friends, teachers, classmates and religious associates, who played a role in facilitating his schooled career. Intended as secondary interviews meant to provide a basis for verifying his story, they proved invaluable in determining the unfolding trajectory of the research. They persuaded me to dig deeper into aspects of Fuzile Ali's self-formation. Having come to some understanding of the logic of his spatial navigations and how he performed his subjective transactions spatially. The next three interviews probed the inner dimensions of Fuzile Ali's becoming and were an excavation into his mode of self-representation and management and how he comported himself through cultivating a specific bodily adaptation in his different lived spaces.

The interviews explored the complex ways in which this young person adapted to his itinerant social world in which his mobility from one living space to another became a formative part of his life. I concentrated on bodily styling, adaptation and discipline established in lived space. I argue that it is bodily cultivation and discipline that enabled him to develop an appropriate ‘school’ career that served as an entry point into fulfilling his educational aspirations in the very difficult social terrain of his upbringing.

Theoretical considerations

The theoretical perspective employed here views youth subjectivity as fluid, ever-changing and unstable. My point of departure is a response to a question by Dillabough, Kennelly & Wang (2008:330): “What is the combined impact of [changing] social processes upon young people’s modes of self-representation and their conceptions of the urban life as they pursue social status and recognition in the new urban city?” One approach to this question is provided by Appadurai (2004:59-84), who constructs the notion of “capacity to aspire” as a way of understanding the complex webs of interactions by which people in impoverished terrains construct viable lives. Appadurai (2004) argues that people’s maps of aspiration consist of a dense combination of nodes and pathways. For him, people who live in poverty have available to them a much smaller number of aspirational nodes and thinner pathways by which to enact their desires for mobility. I will suggest that Fuzile Ali encounters his desire to access an education in the light of smaller and thinner social nodes and pathways.

Understanding young people’s capacity to aspire requires the researcher to focus on how the social repertoires, rituals and performances of aspirants “increase the density, variety and frequency of the loops between the nodes and pathways” (Appadurai, 2004:81) that they pursue. As a navigational capacity, the more the capacity to aspire is exercised, “the more its potential for changing the terms of recognition under which the poor must operate” (Appadurai, 2004:81). Appadurai suggests that specific forms of “*self-governance*, *self-mobilisation*, and *self-articulation*” (2004:82, my italics) are vital to the changing conditions under which aspirants establish their capacity to aspire, and thereby open productive aspirational routes. He argues that, instead of viewing social rituals, practices and performances as meaningless repetition of set patterns of action, they should be viewed flexibly as producing new social effects, feelings and connections out of which sets of individuated practices are generated (Appadurai, 2004:83). The capacity to aspire thus provides a lens to understand how young people like Fuzile Ali, who are caught up in impoverished contexts, use what Dillabough *et al.* describe as the agency “that young people may accumulate as spatial divisions and social relations intersect” (2008:331).

I deploy two interconnected theoretical constructs to bring Fuzile Ali’s aspirant navigational routes into view. ‘Space’ and ‘self-formation’ provide lenses through which to understand how he opens up a viable schooled career. The notion of space draws on the work of spatial theorists such as Lefebvre (1991/1971), and Massey (1994), while self-formation draws on Nesor (1997) and Reay (2000; 2005). Lefebvre (1991/1971) lays out the analytical territory of space, viz. the interaction among physical or material space, representational space and lived space, and points out that production of space is tied up with power and politics, and the production of inequality. Lefebvre suggests that the uses of space are classed, gendered and racialised (1991/1971:5-40). The point to emphasise is that space, or ‘lived’ space, is produced by human agency. Space is not an empty container separate from human action; rather, the notion of lived space suggests that human action is constructed of dynamic interaction with the physical attributes of the environment. Space is socially constructed within multiple and interwoven social relations (Massey, 1994: 3). It involves the production of material and symbolic practices in specific localised contexts, themselves produced within wider circuits of global, national and local scales (Lefebvre, 1991/1971:2).

Fuzile Ali’s mobility across different spatialities (in reference to the relational production of human agency in space), across urban and rural environments, is a fundamental dimension of his aspirant schooled becoming. Space plays a crucial part in “both extending and limiting a young person’s ‘horizon of action’, and operates as a productive context” (Dillabough *et al.*, 2008:333) for his unfolding subjectivity. Space also provides the formative texts in terms of which he exercises his aspirations against the odds imposed by

his environment. Important about his story is how he subverts and invents space, how he moves to extend beyond its physical limits.

A reading of the ‘body in space’ makes an understanding of such spatial inventiveness possible. Capturing the iterative relationship between space and bodily experience, Nespor (1997:122), argues that bodily dispositions are formed in the flows of human activity in and across specific spatial environs. My focus is on how bodies are constructed and how their relationships to space are constructed – how, for example, Fuzile Ali’s self-construction takes place across space in which his relations with people and institutions are important. I will suggest that a key part of Fuzile Ali’s self-formation across his lived spaces entails the affective aspects of his aspirant adaptations, what Reay (2005:911) calls “psychic economy”, which refers to “affective aspects of class – feelings of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority, visceral aversions, recognition, abjection, and the markings of taste”. Key to his spatial expressions is his ability to comport himself in relation to the normative expectations of each situation, in effect constituting effective self-management. Reay (2005:912) points out that a key aspect of self-formation is that it is constituted in dynamic interaction among thinking, feeling and social practices. For her the emotional or psychic dimension is a key aspect of self-formation. As I illustrate below, it is Fuzile Ali’s ability to adopt appropriate comportments in his various living environments that enables him to maximise his capacity to aspire. His ability to control and adapt his body (see Reay 2000) to the expectations of the “psychic economy” of the spaces in which he finds himself, is crucial to how he thickens his social nodes and networks. I will argue that it is his ability to adapt to, and manipulate these psychic economies that provides him with the platform to cultivate an aspirant schooled body in the light of his spatial terrains. I proffer the argument that his ability to marshal a specific self-representation depends on his inventiveness in utilising his acquired knowledge, which is key to establishing his aspirant schooled career.

Fuzile Ali’s mobile spatial tapestry

This section sketches the spatial tapestry against which Fuzile Ali wove his aspirational mappings. His life is an example of Massey’s (1994:337) view that lived space is constituted through social relations and material practices in the light of the material textures of the environment. Fuzile Ali was born in 1990 in a poor rural village in South Africa’s Eastern Cape province. The closest town, Umtata, is 50 kilometres from his family’s homestead. He initially lived with his father’s parents, but from the age of two he stayed with his mother’s family some distance away, in the same village environs. His father was away working in Johannesburg and his mother lived away from home, practising to become a *sangoma*. They played a very minor role in his upbringing. Instead he grew up with his maternal grandparents until he was eight years old. Through fortuitous circumstances, he spent a large part of his middle childhood, from age eight to fourteen years, with his paternal grandfather’s family. From an early age Fuzile Ali learnt to adapt to the changing domestic circumstances which were the result of changing family dynamics.

His maternal family’s ties to a tradition-based village-lifestyle shaped his early childhood. He spent his childhood as a village boy who played an indispensable role in the family’s domestic economy. Fuzile Ali learnt to look after cattle, tend to the yard, run errands and generally play a role in day-to-day family life. He came to understand the importance of cattle in this rural cosmology. It was through his commitment to shepherd work that he learnt the values of responsibility, commitment and hard work, which played a crucial formative role throughout his childhood. Fuzile Ali’s cultural experiences were made up of an amalgam of traditional rituals and social texts, and sporadic interaction with the Christian church in the village. He spoke of a syncretic interaction with African traditional rituals, on the one hand, and church attendance, on the other. The socialisation context of his rural village-upbringing provided him with a firm grounding as a proud boy who loved to render poetry. He basked in the adulation of his elders, who adored him because of his articulateness and respectable nature.

He attended the single- building, multigrade primary school in the village, where he received rote instruction from a strict teacher in the isiXhosa language. He learnt to enjoy the rhythms and routines of attending school. He explains that it provided him an escape from his daily chores, while introducing him to reading books in isiXhosa, new friends from surrounding villages, and an opportunity to partake

of the food that periodically arrived at the school via the new government’s nutrition programme. School attendance, however, was subordinate to the vagaries of rural existence. Tending to cattle early in the morning, as well as taking cattle for periodic dipping, meant that he often arrived late for school or missed full school days. This seemed to be acceptable in the context where the school had to fit into the tradition-orientated rural culture. Nonetheless, this is not a case of Fuzile Ali being “trapped by place” as Bourdieu (in Dillabough *et al*, 2008:333) suggests, with his horizons being closed by the sporadic and halting commitments of his community to school going. Instead, his rural school provided a basis for his ongoing engagement with his school going. Attending the school laid a basis for cultivating a mental image of becoming a schooled person, which he could marshal as his early childhood unfolded.

Fuzile Ali had begun to enjoy schooling and had marshalled the oral, reading and memorising skills gained at the village school as part of his self-image as an ebullient, responsible and likeable young boy. Until then his cosmological universe was limited to this rural village, the rhythms and semiotics of his Xhosa oral culture and the spatial vistas in which his tradition-based upbringing took place. This rural village was not left untouched by modernities that played out in the city, especially through the cultural influences of itinerant migrants who worked in big South African cities (Bozzoli, 2004), nor were its cultural and political orientations and economic organisation left unscathed by the larger processes associated with global reorganisation, economic reconfiguration and reforms that accompanied the democratic order. As Ngwane (2001) shows, the changing nature of mining in South Africa rearranged the political economies of rural villages, affecting their ritual and cultural organisation, the nature of authority relations between elders and the youth, and the spreading of newer forms of gendered power relations. Rural villages were also caught in deepening poverty as the remittances of migrant labourers dried up.

As his withdrawal from the village school shows, change on global and national scale impacted the local cultural economies of villages such as Fuzile Ali’s. The impact of educational reform played out in his village school in the middle of his third year at school in 1998. Informed by neo-liberal principles of choice and partnership funding for schools, the South African Schools Act (DoE, 1996) that was promulgated in 1996 made it possible for schools to charge user fees to augment the under-funded state allocation. His school decided to charge an annual fee of R20, a pittance for middle-class urban families, but an enormous sum for someone living in an impoverished rural village. Lack of affordability and the overriding survivalist and subsistence orientations of his family led to his grandfather simply withdrawing Fuzile Ali from school, interrupting his school going at the age of eight years in the middle of grade 3. Consequently, he became a full-time participant in his grandfather’s domestic economy, spending most of his time looking after the homestead’s cattle. He fulfilled his domestic duties dutifully, if ruefully. His two and a half years of schooling had planted in him a desire to attend school, to perform poetry, learn to read, make new friends and escape the tedium of domestic life. He had at this stage not tied his school going to larger ambitions of becoming educated, rich and middle class. The school provided a site for him to practise his unfolding self-parallel to the constrictions of domestic life. Tied to the social attribution of this far-off rural village, Fuzile Ali might have continued along a path that would have inserted him firmly into this rural space and removed education as an option for him to exercise his youthful becoming. As with many other children in similar situations, his life would have unfolded without his being exposed to the possibilities of aspiration that inhere in becoming educated. The aspiration maps of rural children generally, are operable in relation to other texts, such as rural subsistence, itinerant migrant labour and unemployment, as is more and more the case in the post-apartheid cultural landscape (see Comaroff & Comaroff, 2008).

Fuzile Ali’s life then took a dramatic turn. His paternal grandfather, who lived in a nearby village, came to hear about his withdrawal from school. He arranged for his grandson to accompany him to Cape Town, lured by the promise of going to school. At this stage Fuzile Ali had minimal contact with his father’s family, but the promise of going to school in the big city persuaded him to accompany his grandfather to Cape Town. Fuzile Ali explained dramatically how he escaped from his maternal grandfather’s house in the middle of the night to embark on the journey to the city. Instead of being regarded as an abduction drama, his move to the city was not unusual. Unlike his maternal family, who were rural dwellers, his paternal family were urban itinerants who lived their lives between the big city and their rural village. His polygamous paternal

grandfather had two wives in different parts of the city and a third wife in the rural village. This family had sent their children to schools in the city. Two of the grandfather's sons had completed high school and were studying at a technical college and his daughter is a qualified and practising teacher. The move to Cape Town was therefore not as unexpected as the dramatic account of abduction might suggest. I argue, though, that his move from the rural village to the city was made possible by accessing a dormant family network which was crucial to his unfolding subjectivity as a school-going child. His mobility in urban space played a determining role in his ability to insert himself into novel educational territory. His encounters in the city were neither uncomplicated nor straightforward. The aspirational map that he built for himself emerged as a result of his active engagement in these tough newer spatial terrains.

This engagement started in a school chosen for him in Langa, the oldest township for black Africans in Cape Town. Although his grandfather lives mostly with his wife in Khayelitsha, he decided to place Fuzile Ali with another wife in Langa, so that he (Fuzile Ali) could accompany this wife's children and grandchildren to what is regarded as a choice school in Langa. This family lived in cramped hostel quarters where he shared a bedroom with five of his cousins. Choice of an appropriate school in the township involves a careful judgment of the school's safety and educational quality (see Fataar, 2009a). The chosen school was a twenty-minute walk from their hostel. It was the only school in this predominantly Xhosa township whose language of instruction was Sotho. Apparently the difficulty of adjusting to a new language was trumped by the school's image as safe and of relatively good quality. Choosing the Sotho school had consequences for Fuzile Ali's schooled career. He failed a placement test because he didn't understand the questions, which were in Sotho. He had to be persuaded to start back in grade 1 at the age of nine, having finished two grades at his village school. Having had a head start in the rural village school, coupled with enthusiasm and an above-average intelligence, according to the teacher I interviewed at this school, Fuzile Ali excelled during the five years that he spent at the school. He thrived in an environment where he could attend school with his cousins, aunts and uncles. His grandfather paid his fees and Fuzile made many friends in his new environs. His teachers, who regarded him as respectful, diligent and clever, noticed his ability to perform and his love of poetry recitation. He was a top academic achiever in his class. He also began to participate in the social networks of Langa township and attended Love Life workshops, went to church with his step-grandmother, ran errands and played with the children who lived close by. Above all, Fuzile Ali became a city child, who saw his surroundings as inspiring and pregnant with possibility, despite what my aesthetic sensibilities and ability as a researcher later recognised as somewhat grim social surroundings of this impoverished black township. This was not an aesthetic judgment of the urban terrain on which he based his urban becoming, but rather on the promise of and possibility for subjective inventiveness inherent in the city. Fuzile Ali came to play a more active part in how he occupied this urban space. Here he discovered the power of his own inventiveness, of what he could potentially become in the city. It was his ability to access his schooling that provided him with the aspirational text for his encounters with his subject formation in the urban terrain.

Fuzile Ali's spatial agency across the city

This urban text was abruptly short-circuited immediately after he completed grade 5 at the age of 13. Changing family circumstances again affected his domestic circumstances. His grandfather decided to take a fourth wife on his retirement in the village and his step-grandmother in Langa retaliated by banishing Fuzile Ali from her home. He reluctantly returned to his Eastern Cape village, where he stayed in his paternal grandfather's homestead. The latter arranged for him to attend the village high school. A story about a report card destroyed in a fire at their Khayelitsha home was presented to the school in a successful attempt to enrol him in grade 8, instead of grade 6. The memory of being put back into grade 1 at the school in Langa served as a justification for Fuzile Ali wanting to skip two grades in the village context. Without a national surveillance system for detection, grade-skipping among migrant children who frequently move between rural and urban areas is not unusual in South Africa. Fuzile Ali was therefore inserted back into a rural space at the age of fourteen in 2004. He fell back into the routines of this environment easily. He had by now learnt to make relatively seamless adjustments to his changing domestic environment and excelled at his

schoolwork. He demonstrated the literacy skills he had acquired in the school in Langa, where the curriculum offering was of a better quality compared to that of the village school.

Yet Fuzile Ali was looking for a way to return to the city. He spoke in the interviews about the smallness of his rural village. He missed the excitement of the city, his many friends and the opportunities to attend youth activities. His persistent search to move back to Cape Town was rewarded when his mother’s family presented an opportunity. The memory of his abrupt departure from his maternal grandfather’s home a few years back had faded and his family persuaded his grandmother’s sister, who lived in Philippi township in Cape Town, to take him and his younger sibling into their shack dwelling. He was back in the city in 2005 where he endured the discomfort of this extended family’s meagre circumstances. He had to do many daily chores and take care of his sibling and was constantly reminded about the burden their presence placed on this desperate and struggling family.

It was at this stage, at the age of fourteen, that Fuzile Ali began to play a more assertive role in creating his life’s destiny. He began to actively cultivate his own agency within his environments. He attended Phakama High School in Philippi, where he completed grade 9 and 10. The teachers spoke of him as an eager learner, determined and charming, who quickly became popular with his peers. Grateful for the opportunity to go to school in the city, Fuzile Ali was able to work the formal and informal networks of this township to his advantage. While he remained focused on his schoolwork, he became thoroughly immersed in the religious, welfare and youth activities of an evangelical Christian church, which ran youth and social welfare activities at an impressive centre in the township. He diligently attended church services three times a week, participated in its youth programmes, and made use of its social welfare provisions such as food, health services and clothing. The church environment also presented him with the opportunity to become involved in a drama programme that was provided in association with the church.

Fuzile Ali’s religiosity in this environment has to be understood in the light of the many associations of which it is a part. Eschatological commitments for Fuzile Ali combined with material need, on the one hand, and his youthful navigations, on the other, to find sustenance for his aspirations in particular environments and networks. His religious commitments generated certain understandings of life as well as the broader possibilities that inhered in such understandings. The specific readings and aspirations that he brought to the exercise of his religiosity help explain his youthful subjectivity. The attributions of space are crucial, of being inside specific spatialities that organise, articulate and give meaning to his subjective being and becoming. This understanding can be applied to his Christian commitments and his ‘Christianness’, in the space of the black township, and his ‘Muslimness’ in the space of a subsequent environment, as I will now go on to explain.

His mother, until then relatively absent from his growing up, migrated to Cape Town in mid-2006. She initially lived with her sister in a deeply impoverished township in Cape Town. Fortuitous circumstances led to her obtaining a rudimentary house structure in an area of this township that was hurriedly laid on for victims of a fire in an adjacent informal (squatter) settlement. The South African National Zakaah Fund (SANZAF), which became involved in relief work in this area, had set up a social welfare office in response to the needs of the refugees. They also established a *madrassah* (Muslim school) structure, where they provided basic Islamic education to people who converted to Islam. Fuzile Ali and his sibling were now required to live in this new area with their mother and had to travel to school by taxi. Fuzile Ali thus became somewhat cut off from his Christian-based social networks, although the church continued to pay his school fees and his taxi fare and he still travelled to Philippi township for his drama classes every Saturday. Clearly, becoming Muslim had not cut him loose from his Christian-based networks. Nor had it alienated him from his Christian and traditionally orientated family and friends, who were spread across the Cape sub-region. He visited his family in the Eastern Cape regularly and stayed in touch with his many cousins and friends. Fuzile Ali became Muslim after three days of attending the *madrassah*, the only religious structure in close proximity to their home in his mother’s township. He speaks of having been under the impression that the *madrassah* was a church, of people worshipping there, dressed in a particular way, reciting in a somewhat strange language. It seems from my interviews that the *madrassah* provided an effective religious environment in a very depressed situation. The *madrassah* assisted people with their immediate social welfare needs.

Fuzile Ali and his mother were possibly attracted to becoming Muslim because of the access it provided to symbolic and material sustenance in a deeply impoverished and alienating environment. He suggested that access to food played a major role in their family's attendance of the *madrassah* and in their becoming Muslim. His mother left the faith after three months, but Fuzile Ali engaged more actively with the discursive material and opportunities that becoming Muslim in this space offered. He began to associate a successful and moral youthful existence with his becoming Muslim. He explained that his conversion was not based on any strong conviction about the eschatological veracity of his new religion.

His move from the high school in Philippi to the Balaagh Institute (pseudonym) in 2007 proved decisive in his youthful Muslim becoming. This move afforded him the opportunity to step out of 'black space' into the cultural and ethnically ambiguous space of a middle-class Muslim private school controlled by Indian ethnic interests and attended by coloured (mixed race) and Indian children (see Fataar, 2005). Children then paid about R12 000 per year in fees to attend the Balaagh Institute, situated on a newly built and fairly sophisticated campus. The South African National Zakaah Fund and the missionary organisation, Discover Islam, active in his new township, had decided that it would be in his educational and religious interest for him to complete his high school years at the Balaagh Institute. Viewing him as an asset to their missionary efforts, these organisations decided to secure Fuzile Ali a place in the school. He was exempt from the annual fees and the missionary organisation paid his taxi fare to the school at which he was one of the first black African children.

Fuzile Ali's resilience, courage and adaptability were severely tested in this new environment. He struggled to adapt to the expected academic rigour and standards of the school where he had to take mathematics on the higher grade and English as a first language. He never wavered in his commitment to his educational improvement. He immersed himself in Islamic Studies, proving much more eager to learn about his new religion than his classmates. This commitment endeared him to his teachers and the school governors, but his presence became unnerving for his classmates, who ended up bullying him periodically. They challenged the school about the fuss it was making about a "stupid black kid" who didn't pay school fees, wasted the teachers' time asking "irrelevant" questions, and didn't deserve to be at the school, let alone command all the attention and time teachers spent on him. Fuzile Ali felt deeply hurt and alienated from this environment when he experienced these verbal and physical assaults. The teachers and school management did not countenance the assaults. They managed to establish a tolerable context for him in which to complete his studies. He eventually succeeded in making friends with many of the students. He remained committed to his educational aspirations and continued to work hard at accessing the educational resources of the school, all the time figuring out and taking on the appropriate religious and educational commitments necessary for success at his new school and in his new religious environs.

The decision by a director of SANZAF to have Fuzile Ali live in a Muslim family, proved to be decisive in his successful completion of high school and his 'Muslim becoming'. He lived as a full member of this stable middle-class nuclear family, which consisted of parents and three daughters. They lived in a comfortable home within walking distance of the school. The family followed strict domestic etiquette and Fuzile Ali initially struggled to adapt to these vastly different domestic circumstances, to be on time for dinner and prayers, to observe the family's table etiquette and its spatial arrangements based on a relatively strict gender separation. Having mastered the domestic decorum of this middle-class religious family, he went on to use the space of his new home to commit himself to his studies, establishing a productive and rigorous routine in its protected confines. Fuzile Ali wrote the final matriculation examination, which he failed, at the end of 2008. He rewrote the three subjects he had failed during the supplementary examination the following March, passing two, and matriculating successfully in mid-2009. He is currently studying at a Muslim theological seminary and has plans to study law at a Cape Town university.

Self-formation and bodily discipline

I now consider aspects of Fuzile Ali's self-formation that played a role in cultivating his schooled career. The argument pursued here is that a focus on his specific self-expression and disciplining can help explain his adjustments and adaptations during his young life. These have been key to his aspirant navigations. I

consider aspects of his self-formation which he develops across his living spaces, how he actualises himself in their discrepant psychic economies, and finally his bodily disciplining as an important adaptive strategy.

Fuzile Ali’s ebullient personality was already firmly established during his early childhood. His personality was shaped in his early childhood in his rural village. His family members spoke of him as a proud and confident boy who commanded admiration and respect from the villagers. He was an obedient and expressive child, and kind and helpful towards older people, while his male peers seemed to love his company. He appeared to be a natural conciliator who never became involved in fights, although he was confronted with the occasional jealousy of some of the boys, who demurred at what they regarded as his unduly favourable treatment by his community. According to them, the attention he received was at their expense. Some of his urban friends felt invisible in his company. This elevated sense of self was the result of a respectful and helpful demeanour and displays of deference towards others. His performative personality was key to these displays. It was particularly his poetry recitals in the village, later his acting ability in Philippi, and his love of public speaking that gave clues into his public persona. From a young age he loved the public spotlight by means of which he cultivated a visible and commanding presence. He could entertain and hold people’s attention and his precociousness and handsome physique positioned him favourably in the various spatial arenas. People generally warmed to Fuzile Ali when he was in their presence.

His move to the city provided a larger context for his self-formation. Here he cultivated a style of self in the light of larger social relations and networks. His interactions with a wide range of institutions, friends and associates in various community interactions provided a platform for him to practise his urban becoming. Here he came to understand the personal requirements for his own social advancement. Unlike the limited horizons of the rural village, the city provided with a social context in which he could cultivate his personal ambitions. This explains his active and persistent search for an opportunity to return to the city after being forced to return to his village at the age of thirteen years. Living in decrepit shack conditions on his return to Philippi township was a price he was prepared to pay for the opportunity to return to his urban itinerary. While his schooling in various city schools played an important role in his navigations, it was his ability to access and utilise various social processes and practices in his living spaces that proved to be decisive in producing his ambitions.

His unfolding self-formation from his middle childhood onwards was tied to his urban environments. He had to learn to negotiate vastly different environments, each with different expectations of acceptable behaviour and had to develop the skill of reading these new expectations in each space. He did this on the basis of displaying sensitivity to the social mores and temper of each space. His ability to read each space was built up by quickly learning what the boundaries of acceptable behaviour were, and how to position himself favourably within these limitations. It is apparent that he acquired this adaptive skill through a process of “morphing” (see Nuttall, 2008:93), which refers to the ability to accumulate knowledge of cultural practices over time and in different spaces. One’s ability to morph into an urban sophisticate depends on the quality of one’s accumulated readings and adaptive capacity. Fuzile Ali had lots of practice gauging the acceptable behaviour in each space and determining how to maximise his presence in these spaces. Morphing also suggests that one never discards the cultural impact and residue of previous experiences, but that these serve as a stock of memories whose lessons are deployed in a new situation. It seems that Fuzile Ali managed successfully to maximise the opportunities in each space for the bigger purpose of thickening his aspirational map on which he built his schooled career.

Fuzile Ali’s morphing could be described as accumulative and future-orientated. He was able to bring together the skills, friendships and networks in each space into a formidable capacity to aspire, but he also acquired the ability to identify the new opportunities and skills he deemed necessary for his journey. He always sought ways to maximise the opportunities that inhered in his environments, without becoming wedded to them. His is a mobile identity based on the anticipation of becoming successful in the future and space is coincidental to his aspirant mobility. Consequently, I argue that he has developed a utilitarian connectedness to his living spaces. It is not the physical environment that is important to his self-formation, but what he can become in the environment and how it can be maximised.

His enormous leap into ‘Muslim space’ on becoming Muslim, I argue, is one example of Fuzile Ali’s accumulated ability to maximise his spatial readings and transactions. Adapting to an environment that is differently raced, classed and ethnicised required enormous courage. Drawing on Reay (2005), I suggest that Fuzile Ali had entered a cultural environment whose cosmological or psychic universe was unfamiliar to him. Until then he had lived most of his life in black African communities. That he was able to function successfully should be understood in the light of earlier adaptations he had to make as he traversed his living spaces. Emotional capital refers to “emotionally valued assets and skills, love and affection, expenditure of time, attention, care and concern. Emotional capital can be understood as the stock of emotional resources built up over time within families and which children could draw upon” (Reay, 2000:572). Fuzile Ali had accumulated the emotional capital that made such an affective leap possible.

Fuzile Ali always resided with people other than his immediate family: with both sets of grandparents; a step-grandmother in Langa, who kicked him out after five years; in a shack dwelling with distant aunts of his mother in Philippi; and in the middle-class home of an Indian Muslim family. He didn’t grow up with the direct emotional security that a parental home provides and remained an outsider in most of the homes in which he lived. In the interviews he spoke about how he had to learn to adjust to these somewhat distant domestic situations and to find his way in all of his domestic environments as a relative outsider. This required Fuzile Ali to take on a kind of self-discipline and an acceptable comportment in relation to these changing domestic circumstances. He pointed out that he could never be himself, how he had to “bite his teeth” lest a critical comment about his living circumstances jeopardised his stay. He explained how he had to endure the pain inflicted by racial taunts and insults at the hands of his classmates at Balaagh High School, and how on separate occasions, he was beaten up, hung by his feet, and made to jump from a balcony. He had to struggle to remain focused on his education. Similarly, in the shack in Philippi, he often went without food, but was afraid to complain, for fear of being sent back to the Eastern Cape. In the Muslim home he struggled to adapt to the strict gendered arrangements and expected observance of rituals. He was often punished with extra chores and seclusion when he infringed these expectations. Fuzile Ali learnt to adapt to the requirements of each space. With his eyes set on his schooled career, and based on the disciplining experiences in the other spaces, he managed over time to adapt to the psychic economy of the Muslim home. This proved decisive in his ability to negotiate the last two years of his schooling at the Balaagh Institute.

Self-formation and bodily discipline were crucial parts of Fuzile Ali’s schooled career. These abilities enabled him to access the city and its social practices and networks. His ebullient personality, ability to actualise his spatial adaptations, and adopting an appropriate self-discipline proved decisive in his ability to establish and navigate his aspirational map, and provided him with the appropriate adaptive capacity to maximise his potential of becoming someone significant. I will now discuss how he went about thickening his capacity to aspire in the light of his encounters with his different knowledges during his spatial routines.

Classification struggles in Fuzile Ali’s aspirant schooled career

Appadurai (2004:67) suggests that aspirations are formed in interaction and in the thickness of social life, that they are part of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from cultural norms. A young person’s educational aspirations are thus shaped by the cultural context of which they are a part. Unlike middle-class children, whose cultural capital transfers between home and school are closely aligned, Fuzile Ali’s life circumstances were incommensurate with his desire to become educated. He had to transact his life in difficult material circumstances, interrupted by periodic movement from one living quarter to another across non-synchronous terrains. This forced mobility disrupted his school going. His schooled career therefore has to be understood in the light of his navigations across his living spaces and the schools he attended. The challenge is to understand how he and other youths in similar circumstances manage to become educated. Central to such a consideration is how they access and accumulate their everyday and school knowledges, and how they go about establishing a schooled career.

Commenting on their work among working class youth in a Canadian city, Dillabough *et al.* (2008:343) suggest that,

Young people who are tied to particular geographical spaces might be seen as engaging in ‘classification struggles’ over the social meaning of being young. ... This shapes the ways in which young people construct cultural meanings of everyday life and education, creating perhaps more (rather than less) anxiety about their ability to perfect themselves for an imagined future in new times.

These classification struggles involve daily battles over survival and attempts to break free from the limitations of spatial containment. Fuzile Ali’s struggle for an education is an example of such a classification struggle, which played out across his various living spaces, in the social networks that he managed to access and the schools he attended. His is, however, not a story of straightforward achievement. It involved complex personal battles to open up a path into his schooled career in which self-management, discipline and single-minded determination were decisive.

The first ten years of his schooling took place in schools meant for black Africans under apartheid. It is commonly accepted that the educational standards at these types of schools were low compared to their middle-class counterparts (Fleisch, 2007). This situation has not changed during the post-apartheid years. He spent his first years in two rural schools in the village and in two city schools in the Langa and Philippi townships. The routine didactic transfer of prescribed content, repetition, rote learning and memorisation made up the pedagogical platform of these schools. Fuzile Ali excelled at his schoolwork and he was a hardworking and diligent learner. He accomplished his schooling in an environment bereft of social or familial support and had no one to turn to for help with homework. Educational resources were minimal and he had no access to reading books and internet-based information. His main learning resource was comprised of school-issued textbooks, from which he memorised sections that were prescribed for tests and examinations. He also studied from copies of typed notes received from his teachers. The lower cognitive load at these schools later impacted his educational struggles when he entered the middle-class Muslim school.

Fuzile Ali managed to sail through his first ten years of schooling, but his educational aspirations were severely tested when he entered the Balaagh Institute to complete his final two years of school. Apart from the affective adjustments he had to make in this middle-class space, the educational adjustments were immense. The school, for example, offered mathematics only on the higher grade. According to one of his teachers, his level of mathematics proficiency when he arrived for grade 11 was estimated as being at grade 4 level. Similarly, the school offered English as a first language subject only. Fuzile Ali was automatically disadvantaged because of his much lower level of English proficiency. He was thus confronted with the challenge of having to address enormous cognitive and conceptual backlogs in these and other subjects. Having jumped space into a middle-class school environment, he now had to struggle to survive in the light of the educational standards expected there. Cultural adaptation thus had to be accompanied by educational adaptation, and it seems that his commitment to the latter overshadowed considerations about the negative impact of the former. It became for him, a case of his utilising this opportunity provided by the school to succeed educationally, which required him to suppress his experiences of racism and exclusion there.

He threw himself into his schoolwork. He used every available opportunity to do his homework and study for tests. He requested and was granted additional classes during break and before the start of school. What is remarkable is that in addition to his daily attendance of school during school hours, Fuzile Ali took extra tutorial classes in mathematics and English four afternoons per week. In addition, he had to take Xhosa first language classes on Saturdays, which were offered by one of his former teachers at his old school in Philippi. The school covered the additional cost for these daily tutorials, which was eager to offer him an opportunity to pass his matriculation examination. The school invested in a success story of a black African boy who would make good on an educational opportunity it provided. He assumed what could be described as a perpetually ‘tutored body’, having been compelled to attend endless and exhausting remediation classes for two years. His strong aspirant desire to be educated translated into a disciplined and focused approach to his educational remediation. He threw all his energies into addressing the gaps in his education and succeeded in his matriculation examination on a second attempt. As unlikely as his story may seem, his personal commitment and skills to adapt to a novel environment opened a path into his school career.

Conclusion

This narrative analysis is an attempt to prise open a window onto the lives of young persons' educational navigations in a democratic South Africa. Its starting assumption is the view that the terrain of social and educational reproduction has undergone fundamental changes during the last twenty years, and young people are precariously located in this complex newer terrain. The narrative analysis of one young person's encounter with the youth landscape allowed me to capture an understanding of the iterative links among broader social processes and educational becoming. Fuzile Ali's story exemplifies the uneven terrain on which working class youth have to construct their educational aspirations. His is an uneven and impoverished spatial text, given life by his active agency. The article illustrates how this young person went about cultivating and navigating his capacity to aspire, and the basis on which he thickened his social nodes and pathways into his future.

He forced open a generative route into his schooled career across the socialities of his various spaces, and his ability to steer along a productive path by cultivating strategic relations and networks, and developing a performative persona, played a large role in the exercise of his aspirant desires. I have argued that it is an understanding of a specific self-formation and bodily discipline that is key to his youthful subjectivity. His ability to adjust his comportment to the requirements of his living spaces, based on acute readings of his varying terrains, is decisive in his navigations. He has learnt to maximise his living spaces in relation to his future-orientated ambition of self-improvement and landing a good job. Finally, I suggest that it was his capacity to engage with his uneven knowledges based on discipline and commitment that allowed him to establish a relatively successful and mobile schooled career.

There is a dearth of academic work on young people's engagement with their education. This article brings this engagement to the fore, showing that a number of systematic inquiries into the ways young people encounter their education in the light of a rearranged youth landscape are required. It is my view that youth studies must capture the recursive impact of social change on young people's lives. The school is a crucial site for understanding the composition of these newer youth subjectivities. This article provides one example of the ways young people encounter the worlds of their schooling, and what they become as they exercise their capacity to aspire in the light of their educational and broader social practices.

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