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Thesis

# **Dreaming for Change:**

**An investigation into the aspirations of high school seniors  
who are new immigrants to the US**

“In a true prophecy, the future is not inexorable; it is problematic” (Freire, 2004, p. 105).

By examining the aspirations and dreams of young people, it is possible to unlock how and what aspects of change they seek to make in the world. Through investigating the dreams and aspirations of high school seniors who are new immigrants to the United States, I will investigate how those dreams subvert or support the dominant structures of power existent in the United States. The practice of dreaming provides opportunities to confront the systemic flaws inherent in our institutional structures (like racism and sexism) rather than being unconsciously swept along by the flows of cultural expectation. However, not all dreams demonstrate a desire to confront the structures of power. Not all dreamers seek to change the world. As a result this study will look closely at how the dreams of these high school seniors either confront or maintain the status quo. Also through this project I hope to show how significant the practice of dreaming is for young people.

First, before examining the dream data I need to situate this project within the context of dreaming in the United States, the American Dream being the most influential cultural force acting on the dreams of young people. Also I will define the theoretical framework this project operates under and describe the population I will be working with.

### **The American Dream**

All dreaming in the US is affected by the American Dream. Thus any examination of dreaming needs to start with an examination of the American Dream. The term “American Dream” was probably first used by James Adams in 1932 in his brief but sweeping history of the United States, *The Epic of America*. He spoke of “that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world.”

(1934, Page viii). The idea of the American Dream (though it was not called the “American Dream” at the time) can be traced even further back to the English propaganda from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. To encourage settlement in the “New World” posters and pamphlets were printed by the likes of William Penn and John Smith that promised fecund lands where hard work would lead to certain prosperity (Hawk, 2003). The idea of the American Dream, where the United States is a land of opportunity and anyone if he or she works hard enough can advance socially and financially, has become resident in the minds of people all over the world. Despite a broad understanding of continuing discrimination that restricts opportunity for many people and stymies advancement, people from the United States and elsewhere continue to believe the American Dream functions healthfully in the United States.

The concept of the American Dream limits dreaming in two ways. First, the idea of advancement, the linchpin of the American Dream, is anchored on external measures and rewards, which “edges out intrinsic satisfaction” (Hayes, 1998, p. 19). Charles Hayes argues that due to the competitive meritocracy of the American Dream and the American economic system, standards are set using external measures and having external rewards (1998). The acquisition of a large house or a fancy car are examples of a reward for a job well done and a job well done is measured by units sold, stock price movement or similar extrinsic measurements. The result is that “intrinsic satisfaction,” or doing something because you receive satisfaction from doing it, gets edged out. The concept of the American dream teaches young people to dream for the external rewards of social status and financial riches instead of personally satisfying activities that contribute to the community, locally and globally.

Second, the American Dream frames aspirations in such a way to preclude dreams of change. Because the idea of advancement presupposes a static society with different levels of success, there is no room within the concept of the American Dream for dreaming of remaking the structures of society.

To subvert or seek to breakdown social institutions is certainly not to seek advancement. Another way to put it is: seeking to breakdown the system of advancement and deprivation all together is antithetical to the American Dream.

### **Rethinking Dreaming**

The American Dream is far from perfect and it limits dreaming that seeks change. The problem is that we need change. American society is plagued with many social problems. Before one can make change one must dream and plan. Thus it is imperative that we consider other ways of dreaming. Pablo Freire, Brazilian education philosopher, says we need to think about dreaming not just as advancing in a predetermined world, but we need to think about dreaming in terms of changing that world. Freire uses the term “prophetic thinking” when referring to dreams for the world (as distinguished from personal dreams for one’s own future). Freire argues that “prophetic thought, which is also utopian, implies *denouncing* how we are living and *announcing* how we could live” (2004, p. 105). Any dream of change is a dream of subversion because to change something first you need to breakdown what already exists. Freire terms this subversion “denouncing.” Anyone who seeks change, which is a form of rebellion, risks being branded an insurgent or a deviant. Consequently, prophetic thinking, or dreaming, is an emancipatory activity. Freire insists that it is “every human being’s right to show up for history, not only as its object, but also as its subject. Human beings are by nature inclined toward intervention in the world, as a result of which they make history” (2004, p. 105). Through dreaming we place ourselves into the line of history and see institutions that define human ways of being and relating as malleable and open for change. Freire says that humans that recognize themselves as unfinished have the capacity to conceive of history as unfinished and open for change. Those that do

not see themselves as unfinished “simply contribute their support, have a history, but not one of their own creation” (2004, p. 106). Freire sets up a dichotomy between intervening and supporting, insisting that to reach one’s full emancipatory potential one needs to be a participant in history. Freire’s “prophetic thinking” is a radically different way of conceiving dreaming from the American Dream. It functions in direct contradiction with the “normal” way of conceiving dreaming as desiring social and financial advancement.

### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory**

The arguments of this paper and research project utilize the theoretical framework of critical theory. Freire whose ideas I have just referred to also employ critical theory. Early Critical Theorists sought “to articulate a view of theory that has the central task of emancipating people from the positivist ‘domination of thought’ through their own understandings and actions” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 130). Critical Theory has continued to develop providing a framework for critiquing the social order as well as effecting change in society. By “social order” I mean the establishment and maintenance of “normal” behavior and thinking in order to achieve social stability. This is done by the dominant group through a complex system of “economic compulsion, political and legal coercion, and bureaucratic routine” (“social order”). The social order is also maintained through cultural means in schools and through popular culture. These systems that make up the social order are able to maintain themselves. In other words, part of their role in society is to reinforce and reproduce the conditions to maintain their own validity . As a result, seeking to disrupt the social order is a daunting task.

Another important aspect of Critical Theory is the concept of hegemony. Hegemony is a system of dominance where the dominant group has some degree of consent from the subordinate group

(Roger, 1991, 24). The hegemonic group does not function as a unified whole or a singular entity. Instead it works as a diversified collection of “experiences, relationships and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits” (Williams, 1977, 112). The dominant group does not acquire and maintain its power primarily through force. Instead the hegemon, the ruling group, maintains dominance through:

“the use of institutions to formalize power; the employment of a bureaucracy to make power seem abstract (and, therefore, not attached to any one individual); the inculcation of the populace in the ideals of the hegemonic group through education, advertising, publication, etc.; the mobilization of a police force as well as military personnel to subdue opposition.

(“Hegemony,” 2007, para 1)”

The contribution of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian political theorist, to the concept of hegemony is especially pertinent for the purposes of this paper.

“Since, to Gramsci, reality is perceived, and knowledge is acquired, through moral, cultural, and ideological “prisms” or “filters” by means of which society acquires form and meaning, hegemony necessarily implies the creation of a particular structure of knowledge and a particular system of values. The social group or class that is capable of forming its own particular knowledge and value systems, and of transforming them into general and universally applicable conceptions of the world, is the group that exercises intellectual and moral leadership.”

(Fontana, 1993, 148)

Gramsci pioneered the concept of a cultural hegemony where the ideologies and perspective of the dominant group have been taken up by the subordinate group. Even though the ideologies privilege the dominant group, the subordinate group has absorbed them. Through indoctrination by cultural

institutions like popular culture and the education system, the subordinate group becomes acquainted with and eventually incorporates into their own thinking the perspective of the dominant group. The subordinate class then does not work toward change even though change would be in its best interest. Instead they end up seeking middle class aspirations and status through consumption, as well as desiring to take part in the American Dream. These activities consume all the energy and thought of the subordinate groups distracting them from working toward their own needs and toward solving issues of social justice.

Evidence of institutional distractions to shore up power for a select few is rife in the United States. A prime example of a cultural institution that supports hegemony is the concept of the American Dream. Despite the fact that the American Dream espouses equality of opportunity, the same cultural institutions that have created and support the American Dream also undermine particular groups' efforts to advance socially and economically. The American Dream functions like a mask to cover discriminating activity in the false sheen of equity of opportunity.

### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Pedagogy**

Complete cultural hegemony paints a very bleak picture and offers little opportunity for emancipatory dreaming, which is why pedagogical theorists have come up with counter measures. Freire acknowledges Gramsci's concepts and creates strategies, like "prophetic thinking," in opposition to the placation of the subordinate groups from the cultural hegemony (1997). Freire is in fact one of the architects of Critical Pedagogy, a method of teaching that seeks to unveil structures of dominance and then through a critical awareness of reality work toward emancipation (1990). The purpose of Critical Pedagogy is direct resistance to Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony.

These pedagogical theorists see education as a prime site to develop resistance to domination. Ira Shor, another architect of Critical Pedagogy, stresses the need to move away from a type of schooling where knowledge is simply transferred. Instead he argues that it is the teacher's role to help "students develop their intellectual and emotional powers to examine their learning in school, their everyday experience, and the conditions in society" (1992, p. 12). In fact Shor says that it is essential to breed a habit of student questioning of society and even of knowledge itself. To not do so:

"tacitly endorses and supports the status quo. A curriculum that does not challenge the standard syllabus and conditions in society informs students that knowledge and the world are fixed and are fine the way they are, with no role for students to play in transforming them and no need for change" (1992, p. 12).

The nurturing of a critical questioning of the world is necessary in order to disrupt and eventually change the existing structures of dominance. Simply unveiling and questioning conditions of cultural hegemony will lead to pessimism and despair. It is a fairly bleak picture. Critical Pedagogy as a process of unveiling hegemonic forces is only the beginning. The next step, the most critical step, is developing in students their capacity to "see themselves as agents of change" (Tavin and Hausman, 2004, p. 3). Students need to be able to see that something can be done. This is not the way it has to be. The world can change. To understand themselves as agents of change is a huge leap for young people who are seeking to understand their role in the world. This is where dreaming comes in. Like Freire, I advocate creating an open space for dreaming in the lives of young people. Dreams can function to help young people conceive of themselves as participants in changing the direction of history.

### **The Role of Popular Culture in Dreaming**

It may seem obvious that young people dream to change the world. This study of youth dreaming may seem superfluous because it is common knowledge that young people want to change the world. However, the lens of Critical Theory reveals that what appears to be common knowledge may function to support the dominant perspective. Conservative social institutions that stymie dreaming for change do exist in several subtle and insidious ways. For the purposes of this short paper I will examine only one: popular culture.

Many people conceive of young people as world changers and rebels because popular culture often represents young people as such. Popular culture tells the story that young people want to upend the status quo and remake the world to better fit their values and desires. In order to make change, the current institutions need to be challenged and dismantled. So, one who wants to make change is also one who is a rebel of the current system. Another way to put this would be to use Freire's vocabulary of "announcing" change and "denouncing" the status quo. The youth as the rebel is a classic popular culture icon found in movies, music, and literature. But popular culture has co-opted the rebel form and has normalized it stripping the form of its power in youths' consciousness. Instead of rebelling for change, rebelling has become a pose signifying style rather than a vision of the future. From Che Guevara to James Dean, from the Revolutionary War to Star Wars, symbols of resistance have been transformed into figures of the institution. Being a product of the existing social order, popular culture has no incentive to disrupt its own position within the structures of dominance by introducing an archetypal character that seeks to unveil and resist existing social orders. As a result popular culture has taken the rebel form, which it would certainly see as a threat to its hegemony, and has transformed it into an impotent cultural fraud.

If being a rebel is actually supporting the status quo then that leaves little room for actual rebels. How do young people find social and cognitive space to construct ideological forms of resistance in the superabundant presence of popular culture? Young people need a space for dreaming that is unhindered by the implicit judgments of representatives of the institution. Dreams need time and space to ferment. Popular culture, with its incessant deluge, acts as a language for thinking. Popular culture influences and constructs forms through which we communicate and think. Put another way, popular culture has become real life. There is no separation. We flow within its confines. The only thoughts of resistance are of how I can control it to fit my needs. These acts of resistance, which seek to redirect people's consciousnesses about the forces of manipulation, inadvertently bolster the integrity of the system by performing within the confines of the system. Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony is at work here, where the dominant cultural group, in this case represented by popular culture, has co-opted the conceptual framework of the resistance group, the subordinate group, such that the resistance group is placated by misdirection and the assumed perspective of the hegemonic group.

The opposite of a dream for change would then be a dream to maintain the status quo. One possible instance of a dream that maintains is a dream to seek riches. In a study of rural youth, Ley, Nelson, and Beltyukova found that many young people aspire to being rich, but where and how these young people would seek these riches was very unclear (Ley et al, 1996, p. 140). Many young people are less concerned with what they dream of *doing* or *being* than they are of what they will *have*. A desire for greater and greater accumulation of wealth is a cultural value propagated by the social order to distract subordinate groups from recognizing and actively resisting the injustices and offenses of their subordinate status. The power of popular culture to shape the way people think, especially young people, dramatically affects how they envision the future.

Examining dreams can unveil the subjugating quality of cultural hegemony. On the other hand, dreams can also reveal a desire to make change despite the seemingly overwhelming forces determined to stymie those dreams.

### **Research Population**

The research population that I have chosen to work with is high school seniors at a public school in New York City that serves students who are new immigrants to the United States. As a result all of the students in this study are between the ages of 17 and 20. Also they are all learning English as a second language. The students have immigrated to New York City from all over the world. These recent immigrants are now part of non-dominant groups in the United States. Being new immigrants they generally have had only brief exposure to the schooling of American popular culture and the education system. As a result they may not be as affected by the normalizing forces of the social order in the US. In other words, they may be freer to consider future possibilities that would be contrary to the status quo. On the other hand, the draw of the American Dream on the consciousness of a new immigrant may constrict the possibility of dreams that seek change. Thus the question that drives this research: will their dreams, either deliberately or inadvertently, demonstrate a desire for a social order different from what exists? Will their dreams support or subvert?

Another reason I have chosen this population is that high school seniors are poised at the edge of a different way of being in the world. They are making decisions that will start to direct the flow of their lives. Up until this point, many decisions have been made for these young people. They have not been able to decide much about the direction of their education. Instead they fulfill requirements as set down in law of what they should learn and how. As high school seniors they now need to decide where

to take their lives next. They make these decisions while negotiating external factors like parental influence and social expectation. This is an exciting and important time for these young people that is full of dreams and also full of uncertainty.

## **Research Methods**

To better understand the dreams of these young people I interviewed them. Each interview was done one-on-one and lasted about seven to twelve minutes. I interviewed twenty-one students from February and March of 2008. The interview were voluntary and anonymous.

I tried to keep the questions I asked as consistent as possible for all the interviews I did. I would adjust questions and seek clarification when the particular interview situation called for it. The questions I asked were:

- What are you thinking about for the future? What are your dreams?
- Where did this dream come from? Why have you chosen this dream?
- Was there someone who inspired this dream? Was there a particular person who was important in the creation of this dream?
- Do your parents' dreams for you fit with your dreams for you?
- Have your dreams changed since you were younger?
- Do you think your dream will change again in the future?

I posed the questions and responded to their replies in as open and accepting a way as I could. I wanted to create a space where their dreams were valued for what they are. Often when dreams are told to someone that someone judges or responds in a way that makes the dreamer feel self-conscious about his or her dreams. It was my objective to be nonjudgmental and create a space where the students' dreams were valued and important.

At the end of the interview I would turn off the recording equipment and ask two more questions:

- Tell me about this experience of talking about your dreams?
- Can you give me any advice on how to improve the interview experience for future interviews?

I asked these last two questions to give a reflective quality and a finality to the end of the interview.

Also I wanted to examine how the experience of talking about their dreams in a private, nonjudgmental setting affected the students' process of dreaming. I asked them for interview advice to give them sense of being involved in the process, they did not just become objects to be studied, but instead became actively engaged in shaping the process. Also they had good advice which improved the quality of the process and the results.

## **Results**

Because the data is qualitative in nature, this analysis cannot possess the the kind of discreet scientific certainty that quantitative research often pursues. As a result I will postulate cautiously and tentatively on the significance of the data.

So far in this paper I have suggested that some dreams demonstrate a desire to change the world, while others show a desire to maintain the social order. At this point I would like to clarify that in the actual dreams of young people, two distinct categories do not emerge. In the dreaming content of these young people there are varying degrees of support and degrees of subversion of dominant values and institutions. Different aspects of a dream and of the dreamer perform within the dominant culture in different ways. As the dominant culture is both fluid and multifarious, the ways in which dreams and dreamers perform within the dominant culture are also fluid and multifarious. As a result some dreams may act into a proposed future in contradictory ways. I can neither conclusively say that a dream is supportive nor that it is subversive because it is likely to be both. The purpose of this paper and research project is to explore the general prevalence of this minority youth community to change the structures of American society. Because of the complex nature of aspirations and thus the complex nature of the gathered data, a conclusive conclusion is not be possible. These dreams are complicated and not one is as straightforward as it may seem.

Some of the student dreamers did not have any clarified dreams to share. I speculate that a greater number of students are not sure about their dreams than the few that I actually interviewed. My guess is that the primary reason I did not encounter many students who don't know their dreams is that these students would be significantly more reluctant to volunteer to be interviewed about their dreams.

When I asked one student how it felt to not know, to not have a directed sense of what you want for the future, she responded, "Misery, because you don't know which way you are going to go. You don't know where to go, in which direction when you get into college because you have to randomly take courses and then figure out whether you should stay in that major or not. So yeah, it's

hard.” When I asked whether or not she should know what she wanted, she said, “Yeah, I should know but I don’t know right now.” When I asked whether it was okay to not know, she said, “In some ways yes, but in other ways no. High school students should know what they want by now, right? But in other ways, some challenges could happen that might block them from doing what they want.” This uncertainty has caused an emotional crisis for this student. She is acknowledging and thus struggling with the pressure to know her plans for the future imposed on her at the stage of being a high school senior in the process of college applications.

Similarly, another student spoke about not wanting to make a decision now and find out later that the choice was not right. This indecision leaves the young person without a trajectory. This student speculated that maybe it is wise for young people to wait to decide in order to gather more information, experience, and maturity.

The students who seemed more reluctant to have firm dreams tended to think of dreams and the practice of dreaming in a different way than those students who shared with me more fantastical dreams. The reluctant dreamers tended to think of dreaming as setting down a firm decision on what to do in the future. While the fantastic dreamers tended to think of dreaming as a kind of imaginative play about the future. These fantastic dreamers seemed to make a clear delineation between dreams and plans. Most of the students I interviewed did not fall into these two extreme categories. Instead they used the idea of dreaming as a more malleable concept that floated between plans and fantasies dynamically shifting more toward one than the other depending on the context of the interview conversation.

Some students did state explicitly a desire to seek change in the world. This was a small percentage of students and they all also combined personal aspirations while at the same time

considering the needs of the world. (Later I will discuss the tendency to seek personal stability before external change is sought.) One student said:

“For my future I am thinking about first going to college and study there. Try to be a good student there and graduate. And then go maybe back to my country and work there and find a job, help the country, my native country Guinea. Go back there and help the country. Get a business and get money while helping the country. While at the same time working in the government with somebody that can make changes. I want to change the way stuff works there. Change the way corruption and the way stuff works there. Trying to adapt some American systems to at least come up above the water because we are under the water. Take some ideas from here and bring them there and use these ideas and see if they will work.”

This student combines personal success as well as pursuit of systemic change in his home country. This young person is not willing to adopt the perspectives and ideologies of the incumbent leadership in his country. He operates from a position of hope that things can be better. And like Freire he “denounces” the existing decrepit systems and “announces” hopeful possibilities.

Not all students were so explicit in their desires for change. Many students were more vague simply stating a desire to help those in need. For example, one student said:

“I just like have a lot of dreams. One is to help people who need it. When I go around in the streets I see homeless. It makes me feel bad and I can't stop like... I can keep my money so that I can give them some.... I feel bad. I mean I am a realist. I cry every time I hear something. It is like so difficult for me. I wish I could do something. It is hard.”

A desire to help indicates a desire to see the world be a different place and therefore even these indeterminate dreams of help are dreams that seek change. Help will invariably make change even if it is merely a subtle shift in the current system. A redistribution of resources for more equitable living, however slight, is a change worth applauding.

More than half of the students interviewed spoke exclusively about personal dreams of comfort and success. No one spoke of lavish riches. Instead many students spoke of dreams of modest success.

One student said:

“I haven't decided what I really want to be in the future, but my dream is to really be successful. I want to be a successful person and I want to live comfortably after I get my degree in something later. I think it is about technology. I want to study computer science. So I want to be successful and see if I can be happy like that.”

When I asked what he meant by success, he said:

“Success is that I can produce a lot of money so that I can live comfortably, that my job can produce enough income, that my family can live comfortably. Have my own house, have many cars, maybe have my own business or something. And don't have to worry about anything.”

Having one's own business was a fairly common dream among the student population that I interviewed. For many running and owning one's own business represents a level of agency and autonomy that is newly possible because they now live in the United States. For many of these students this kind of middle class American success is a major change from what they have known growing up both in their home countries and in New York. This is evidence that the values of the American Dream have been accepted by many of the students.

The majority of the students dreamed of some sort of success that would confer financial stability. Just over half spoke only of personal success, while the remaining included, to varying degrees, a vision of a future that better fit their needs and the needs of the people around them.

### **Analysis of Results**

Since this paper is looking for dreamers of change it becomes essential to ask why so many students did not explicitly express an aspiration to make change. These results are surprising because I have witnessed these same students acknowledge and discuss inequalities and issues of social justice, such as racism and lack of equal access to resources. They demonstrated in class through discussions and assignments that they were aware of and struggled daily with these and other issues. In many ways many of the students are currently engaged in working for change by being involved in community groups inside and outside the school. I initially thought that these students would express dreams to change social institutions in order to eradicate these issues of social justice. This question of why so few sought these kind of changes in the dreams they shared with me becomes essential to be addressed in this project. I will now speculate cautiously on a few possible reasons why I got the results I did.

### **Flawed Research**

Perhaps I received the responses I got because I posed my questions in a particular way that influenced the replies away from dreams of change. I tried to make the question, "What are you thinking about for the future?" as neutral as possible. I did not want to push the student responses toward dreams of change or toward personal dreams. Upon reflection how the question was posed seems to be asking for their own future and what they have planned. A more open ended question

could have influenced very different responses and therefore very different overall results. In a research project of this kind the results are only as strong as the methods (including the questions) used. That said, the students were honest and forthcoming with their thoughts of the future, and the responses are very useful in a variety of ways.

### **Stability vs. Instability**

Another possible factor in why students tended toward sharing personal dreams of comfort and stability over dreams of systemic change is a phenomenon involving environments of stability and instability that Dr. David Sloan Wilson and colleague Ingrid Storm noticed in their research on values in teenagers (Science and Technology, 2008). Wilson and Storm found that the relative stability of the teenager's environment impacted their values and behavior. Wilson and Storm postulated that "the liberal package of individualism and confrontation is the appropriate response to survival in a stable environment in which there is leisure for learning and reflection, and the consequences for a group's stability of such dissent are low"(Science and Technology, 2008, p. 98). For those young people with stable home environments where emotional and financial considerations are not tantamount on their minds because they are generally taken care of, it is viable to consider denouncing the status quo and proposing changes. Wilson and Storm suggest that because the instinct to just survive has been sated that there is "leisure" for considering how things could change and that the stable environment can absorb those desires for change without complete collapse. On the other hand Wilson and Storm assert that "the conservative package of collectivism and conformity, by contrast, works in an unstable environment where joint action, and thus obedience to their group, are at a premium" (p. 98). An unstable environment requires a kind of behavior and system of values that differs greatly from a stable environment. The need to just survive and to avoid complete collapse of the community requires a

different way of thinking that includes sticking together and foregoing dissent. In other words, don't rock the boat because it is likely to capsize.

During the interviews I noticed a fair amount of evidence that many of these young people live in unstable and unpredictable environments. Following Wilson and Storm's theory, these students are more likely to support the current system and seek stability before they can consider dreaming of change. For example, one student said, “[My father] is getting older so I have to work to support my family. So that way I cannot get to college. I have to work, you know, I have brothers and sisters, my mom and stuff, family, you know. I am the only one in here in America. My brothers are in Yemen, in my country.” This student is understandably privileging the welfare of his family which relies heavily on him for support over a dream of changing society.

Another student responded to my question of why she thinks her dream might not come into reality by saying:

“Because like my family is not very well. Like it costs too much... too much sisters and brothers. Only my dad works. So that's ... I think that when I graduate high school maybe I will work for one or two years and then go to college. Maybe after one or two years I might.... Maybe my dad want to open a restaurant. Maybe I will just help him in the restaurant. Maybe...”

This student is struggling with the uncertainty of her family's financial stability and how it may compromise her dream of going to college. The need to just survive may be overpowering all other dreams even dreams to change the system so that it would be easier for family's like this student's to access the opportunities to achieve better stability.

## **Parental Influence**

Another possible factor influencing the nature of the students' dreams is parental influence. Some students revealed that their parents were open and would accept whatever path the student chose for him or herself. A great number of the students I interviewed revealed that their parents had a very definite opinion on what their son or daughter should be pursuing. Parents and their opinions play a very powerful role in the lives (and therefore the dream lives) of young people. One student told me about his parents' dream for him is that he get into the medical field. "That is their dream. Because I am interested in it, that's kind of one of my dreams also. We don't have any problems discussing what I want to do in college. I am going to do what I want but at the same time I am going to do what they want me to do also. But I am not going to do what they want me to do because they want me to do it, but I am just going to do it because that is the way that I like to be." This student is recognizing the powerful influence parents have on their sons' and daughters' dreams and plans. At the same time that he is recognizing that influence he acknowledges his personal agency in the decision. He is lucky that he can exercise that agency without parental conflict. A different student spoke of how his parents would not help pay for college if he chose a particular career path. Practical hindrances like this can dramatically redirect a young persons plans.

When one's practical life plans are in harmony with one's dreams it is a beautiful, joyous thing. On the other hand, when one's plans and dreams are at conflict (as in the case of the student whose parents will only pay for him to pursue a medical degree, but he wants to pursue writing) it can be a great struggle. That struggle is located at the core of one's being because it addresses one of life's core questions: What is my role and purpose in the world? Further research on this topic of parental

influence would greatly benefit parents and teachers as they help guide young people in dreaming about their futures.

### **American Dream and Success**

Another possible influence on students and their dreams is the very powerful and pervasive concept of the American Dream. Because the American Dream tells these young people that the United States is a land of opportunity where anyone if he or she works hard enough can advance socially and financially, there is a presupposition that personal advancement is the ultimate goal. Values that include considering the needs of everyone and shifting the systems of government and social institutions to meet those needs are edged out by language that leaves no room for them. The language of the American Dream is reflected in the responses of the students like with one student described his desire to achieve the American Dream: “For me it [the American Dream] is going to school, learn something important in life and then have a job, work, have a family and live normal.” A desire for physical and financial comfort and even excess is a cultural value transmitted by the American Dream and the social order that distracts subordinate groups from recognizing and actively resisting the injustices and offenses of their subordinate status. The influence of the American Dream on these young people and their dreams may be a factor in the reason I received the dream results that I did.

### **The strength of cultural hegemony**

The last speculative reason that many students shared only dreams of personal success and stability is that seeking to disrupt and change the social order is not an easy undertaking. It is neither glamorous nor comfortable. In addition, large social institutions seem immovable and permanent.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony is an important lens to examine why it seems that many young people are resigned to live and act in the world the way it is instead of seeking to shift the way the world works. The hegemony works to maintain itself and its structures of privilege and status by seeming inevitable and "just the way things are." The enticing possibility of social advancement or maintaining family status outweighs the possibility of reinventing the system. Many students spoke obliquely about status, but one brought it up directly in relation to parental pressure:

"Bangladesh is a third class country. It is really poor. They actually don't have enough money to get Internet or computer. Almost all the people in my background are doctors or engineers so they never expected me to... My dad wanted me to be a doctor. My mom wanted me to be an engineer because they want to keep their family status like that."

The strength of hegemonic forces is just one of many factors that have influenced the dreaming life of these high school students.

## **Conclusion**

The essential question that has driven this research project is how the dreams of new immigrant high school seniors subvert or support the dominant structures of power existent in the United States. At the end of the research I have found that the answer is not straight forward. The dreams demonstrate that these young people are dreaming and acting into the world in a wide variety of ways often simultaneously. It is not possible to determine decisively what young people will do with their lives by examining their dreams. This is not a fool proof method of predicting the future. Instead dreams can illuminate some of the forces that are influencing the trajectories of young people. Also the dreams

have shown a complex array of forces and factors that barrage the students and influence the creation of their dreams and therefore their plans. The practice of dreaming itself is a way for young people to reflect on their needs and wants and how to balance those needs with the needs of the world and what kind of role they will take on in the world. Because many students are interested at this moment in their lives in seeking financial stability and social success does not mean that later they will not shift trajectories and seek to disrupt the status quo. Numerous experiences await these young people that will influence how they think about the world and their role in it.

More dreaming, both facilitated in schools as well as encouraged at home with families, will help young people clarify their trajectories and unlock hidden possibilities. The students found the one-on-one interview style to be beneficial for them to reflect on their own dreams. An important part of that reflection was having a particular kind of audience. The students knew that their dreams were being heard by me as well as they would be heard by anyone who went to the website. One student said, "It made me think more about it. Thinking out loud makes you think better." Their dreams became public but not in such a way as to make them solid, immovable. Instead their dreams got to taste the fresh air of the world outside the dreamers' heads. The dreams got some space to move around, to breath. In this way the students had a safe way to test out how it felt to expose these dreams, and therefore how it might feel to live these dreams.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

As educators, especially art educators, it is imperative that we consider dreaming and its implications as we guide young people in establishing their goals. Here are several suggestions to utilize the power of dreams.

#### **Open space for dreaming**

Creating an open space for dreaming means allowing the students to share dreams without critique or judgment. Dreams, in order to grow and develop, need to be nurtured. One way to do that is to demonstrate that they are valued without condition. Open means both creating a nonjudgmental environment for sharing dreams and it means demonstrating that dreams, no matter how fantastic or mundane, have value.

### **Regular practice**

Another important aspect of dreaming is that it does not come naturally to all people. Dreaming requires practice. It is something one gets better at over time. The reflective practice of examining one's dreams and why you dream them helps the dreamer reveal to himself what he wants to do and be in the world. Also the habit of dreaming familiarizes the dreamer with extravagant possibilities that incrementally seem more and more possible as the dreamer gets more and more accustomed to the dream.

Every interview I did was a blossoming of possibility. These are some of the most intimate, hopeful, and frustrated thoughts these young people have. One student said, "When you share your ideas it actually gives you more confidence that it could happen." Talking about your dreams may make you "think about it more than just dreaming. You might make it a reality."

### **Open for change**

Educators can foster a way of thinking that positions the world as open for change. One of the main obstacles to dreams of change and change itself is the perception that the world is immutable.

### **Try it out or meet people who do it.**

Educators can also devise creative ways for students to try out their dreams. From internships to guest speakers there are numerous small and big ways that educators can introduce and familiarize their students with the reality of their dreams. When I asked one student what would convince him that his idea for the future was the right direction for him, he responded, "Maybe if I had a close friend or a close family member who is in the same field or who is the same thing and I see .... and I picture myself in that position and I think that I would really want to be in this person's shoes or I would really want to do what this person is doing for a while. Maybe that would convince me." It requires a creative educator to guide young people to dreams when institutional standards and values often limit the breadth of possibility available to students.

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