Youth perspectives of achievement: Is money everything?

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This article draws from a qualitative research project completed at Victoria High School (pseudonym) in Cape Town in 2012 which explored 13 learners' perspectives of achievement and its influence on their lives and thinking. The piece problematises and analyses taken-for-granted connections between money, achievement, youth aspirations and views of employment (Opsahl & Dunnette, 1966). The article builds on McClelland's (1967: 10) view that "money isn't everything," that money is a motivator for some, yet often inconsequential for others, and that its meaning mostly lies "in the eye of the beholder". In light of this view, the articles discusses the perspectives of four learners at Victoria High to illustrate how they approached achievement, aspiration and materiality according to the different social standings and worlds that they inhabited. It was found that the expressed views of achievement by learners went beyond stereotypical and measurable attitudes and connected in quite complex ways with how they imagined their futures. The learners approached the notion of achievement in developmental, cumulative, and progressive ways. An interpretive qualitative paradigm using the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Arjun Appadurai was employed to highlight how the youth's various capitals and aspirations respectively influenced their notions of achievement.

Keywords: Achievement, Aspiration, Money, Youth, Social class, Materiality

Introduction

Most literature highlights achievement as a construct that drives the education system. Achievement is tied to either exceling at school or doing well financially. Achievement and success are thus often correlated. The article contends that achievement is constructed in particular ways in the neoliberal environment. A study carried out with 13 learners at Victoria High School (pseudonym) in Cape

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Town in 2010 and 2011 revealed that not all learners concede to the perspectives of achievement espoused in schools. Some learners thought of achievement in qualitative ways contrary to the instrumental way flagged in the literature. The learners' viewpoints of achievement challenged the positions that assume that achievement at school is mainly a quantitative measure characterised in accordance with what learners achieve or do not achieve academically in their formal schooling. Their views highlight that achievement is often understood as more than money and student academic results.

The article proposes that the concept "achievement" is a far more complex phenomenon than that captured by formal schooling performance. It suggests that notions of achievement are located in what learners aspire to, and accomplish in their lives. That which learners regard as achievable is complexly defined by their individual yearnings and the particular social worlds that they inhabit.

The article points to a paradoxical relationship between achievement and aspiration. It illustrates how, on the one hand, individual aspiration serves to guide learners about what they seek to achieve and provides inspiration to many learners to push themselves and to exert the necessary effort to succeed and achieve. Conversely, the incapacity to achieve or succeed at something or the realisation that the resources or finances needed to pursue them is lacking, often leads some learners to re-assess and re-align their choices, goals and expectations.

To better understand how the youth differently think about achievement the article employs the theories of Appadurai and Bourdieu. Appadurai's notion of the "capacity to aspire" is particularly helpful in suggesting that people already "achieve" something through imagining, since by dreaming they are able to conjure up different worlds and the kinds of capabilities needed to exist in those worlds. As the youth "engage with" their imagined worlds they develop some capacities to engage with their real worlds. Thus, the article points to the need for a more complex understanding of learner aspiration, one that accounts for elements of dreaming, imagination, and fabrication. Bourdieu's theories of capital, habitus and field further assist to understand how humans as "interchangeable particles" connect daily, and how they think about their lives.

This article hopes to add value to debates on achievement, observing that persistent consideration of achievement as a one-size-fits-all concept (academic) obstructs important channels of learning about what the youth regard as significant in their different lives. Before delving into the youth's notions of achievement, the next section provides a synopsis of the motivation of the study.

Motivation

The idea to engage with the youth's notions of achievement was stimulated by a radio broadcast in late 2009 discussing the release of the matriculation results in

South Africa. Reflecting on the debate, the broadcaster characterised the moment as "a time when academic achievers would rejoice as they set their minds on prospective university careers" while, for non-achievers, "it was going to be the genesis of a life of would-be suffering, where they would swim in poverty". What was particularly striking about the remark was that it presumed that non-academic achievers did not fundamentally think about achievement and its meaning. The deeper underlying questions that were not being asked were whether all students shared the same understanding of what was referred to as achievement and whether a varied understanding of the term possibly influenced the ways in which learners individually "performed" or engaged with their schooling lives. Thus, research to establish the learners' views was set up.

The next sections turns to the method used to elicit the learners' views of achievement.

Method of data gathering

Initially, permission to undertake the project was sought from Victoria High School and the Western Cape Education Department. This enabled the researcher to apply for institutional ethical clearance. The researcher received an ethical clearance certificate approving the commencement of the research fieldwork. The researcher liaised with two teachers at the school to help her identify students willing to participate in the project. To protect the students' confidentiality and privacy the researcher met with them individually and explained what the study was about and gave them consent and introductory letters to take to their parents. Students who returned their signed consent forms were then admitted as participants to the study. Each student was also asked to sign an individual assent form. Thirteen students: eight girls and five boys aged between 15 and 17 were then interviewed about their notions of achievement and aspirations. They were asked many questions about their home lives, the major influences on their thinking, their role models, how they travelled to school, and their experiences at school relating to achieving, and what they thought about expectations of achievement within the school environment. All interviews were roughly one-hour sessions. Two interviews were conducted with each student.

To triangulate the student interviews five staff members of the school were interviewed on how they constructed ideas of achievement into the school's daily undertakings, what they generally expected from a variety of students in the school, and how they worked with often conflicting and inconsistent interpretations of student achievement.

The interviews were taped and then transcribed. The transcriptions were coded to determine the key emerging characteristics, as a way of "discovering the whole rather than the sum of parts" (Scott & Morrison, 2006: 33). The key themes were then expanded and analysed in relation to the paper's focus on achievement and

aspiration. Pseudonyms were allocated to each participant to ensure confidentiality, privacy and anonymity of both the subjects and the relevant school. For this article, the views of four learners, namely Numazulu, Patina, Peter and Abdullah, were mainly utilised. These views are included in later sections.

The next sections outline how the theories of Bourdieu and Appadurai assisted in the exploration and analysis of what can be learnt from learners' observations of their different life worlds, and what they thought they could become in the future. As Moore (2008: 108) suggests, it is in the dissimilar attitudes, dispositions, and value systems of learners in relation to their individual capitals from which varied perceptions of achievement, as well as different familiarities on how to "navigate" their social spaces, are generated.

The theoretical spine

Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital offer a theoretical framework and way of thinking about the relationship between economic and cultural issues in the lives of learners, as well as about the ways they think about achievement. Bourdieu's theory of habitus further illustrates how internalised social structures and dispositions are unconsciously developed from an early age and are given particular form in the lives of individuals by being reproduced through their everyday experiences, (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Bourdieu, 2004). Learners develop different attitudes, dispositions, and value systems based on their various upbringings and social interactions, and the social networks that they can call upon. This often shapes what is possible for them in their lives. It also produces diverse understandings of concepts like achievement as well as unequal familiarities of how to navigate the different social spaces in which they are experienced (Moore, 2008: 108).

Similarly, Appadurai (2004) explores how social context structures learner engagement with schooling, by focusing in more detail on the individual's "capacity to aspire". He emphasises the need to see learners as all having particular and different desires for their futures; desires that are not restricted by social, cultural, economic, or intellectual capitals. Appadurai (1996: 45) asserts that people have certain agencies, choices, and capacities associated with their imaginations and their capacity to aspire that they utilise in creative ways to rethink their pathways through life. He claims that individuals in the contemporary world seem able to move forward in life in the most dreary of situations only because they can continuously dream about better lives (notwithstanding these dreams rarely materialising for impoverished communities). Appadurai (2004: 69) points out that the capacity to aspire is shaped both by social, cultural, and economic experiences and the availability of navigational information in their everyday life, as well as by what learners' desire and want in their future lives. He suggests that treating aspiration as a cultural category (where learners focus on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture and refutation) rather than an individual attribute is an important device with which to view and engage the kinds of differences in everyday life and understanding that inform what learners achieve.

By focusing on what learners imagine and dream about for themselves, often beyond their capability and social reality, Appadurai's (2004) work implies that, as learners' aspirations differ, so do their notions and experiences of achievement. "It is only in imagining beyond a tangible, experienced and engaged reality that individuals demonstrate a 'capacity to aspire;' these aspirations are never simply individual but rather are always formed in the thickness of everyday life" (Appadurai, 2004).

These two theoretical frameworks assisted the paper not only in making sense of what learners said about achievement, but in better understanding how the learners individually positioned achievement during the interviews and in making sense of how they understood their own lives. Learners described achievement as measurable (school results, economic status) and immeasurable (knowledge, taste, power), and tangible (occupations, material possessions) and intangible (beliefs, attitudes, expectations).

Equipped with the discussion on the analytical tools used to analyse the learners' responses, the following section first looks at the literature that provides definition of achievement, highlights what the learners at the school say about achievement and then problematise the notion of achievement and its utility for the students in the current world.

How achievement has been mainly understood

It is important to highlight that, while this paper locates itself within the current achievement debates, very few studies consider the views of achievement. Most current studies (Wilder, 2014; Goldhaber, Walch & Gabele, 2014; Hampden-Thompson, 2013) make comparisons of academic achievement at grade, school, national and international level. The research accessed literature of the 1990s which provided perceptions of achievement, which could be regarded as quite out-dated. However, the purpose of looking at the literature is mainly to highlight key debates that serve as a background from which to view current youth notions of achievement.

As observed from most of this older literature, achievement is considered to be mainly academic. In this regard, Johnson (1992: 99) defines achievement as:

> *... the traditional indices of the degree to which a student has encountered success in school. This may include school grade, grade point average, rank in class, scores on standardized achievement and aptitude tests and other scaled indicators used within the school setting to document and report level of academic progression.*

For Johnson, achievement is exclusively attributable to academic performance. Such a view of achievement is expanded by Gardner (1993) who asserts that achievement is also about attaining excellence in all academic disciplines, both in class and in extracurricular activities. Achievement is perceived to embrace all forms of activities in which individuals excel, including sportsmanship, behaviour, confidence, communication, skills, punctuality, assertiveness, and creativity and novelty. Both

Johnson (1992) and Gardner (1993) depict achievement as academic and externally determined using benchmarks where individuals are considered to be achieving when they conform and measure up to a set of pre-determined standards.

However, Samdal, Wold and Bronis (1999: 296) challenge this approach and assert that achievement needs to be benchmarked according to individual ability. They argue that because all learners cannot attain top marks or grades, "achievement needs to be defined as when learners perform optimally according to their own capability". They thus argue that understandings of achievement need to take into consideration the particular capabilities of individual learners. The key problem with this approach, however, is that it continues to use external evaluation criteria to measure achievement, namely that achievement is about the extent of effort exerted. It does not accommodate individual perspectives of achievement nor does it concede, as Singhal and Misra (1994) do, that it is invariably society that crafts notions of achievement for its people.

In that respect, this article challenges approaches that present achievement in education strictly in relation to success and wealth; asserting that many learners have quite different views of the utility-value of achieving. It observes that current debates and comparisons on academic achievement generally neglect to recognize achievement as individual choice, and that different learners have different views and approaches towards achievement. It contends that while for many learners monetary success is regarded as important for survival, the pursuit of monetary gain is not as overwhelming as is often suggested. The article suggests that learners often adopt a much broader outlook towards achievement that speaks more closely to their personal talents and aspirations that are also tied to their views on happiness and the pursuit of a more serene lifestyle.

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How youth view and experience achievement

The youth's different perspectives of achievement reflected their "actual possibilities of their lives as they see live and embody them" (Willis, 2005: 461). This paper suggests that, instead of viewing learners as "passive and manipulated young consumers" (Willis, 2005: 462), they should be seen deriving meaningful importance and identity from the "plethora of electronic signals and cultural commodities"

available to them in their everyday lives, as these help them make meaning of what they seek to achieve.

Achievement as material wealth

Numazulu thought of achievement as material acquisition. She noted that: For me achievement is about getting things done that lead to me being popular and influential. Achievement is when I become rich and manage to lead an easy life. Numazulu's understanding of achievement is crucially informed by her social background. She pointed out that, in a large part of her life, she had lacked parental love and guidance due to her mother and father never marrying and her being left to live with her unemployed grandmother at a very young age. She struggled with the fact that she rarely saw her father who lived close by and was married to another woman. Her mother lived in another township and worked as a supervisor at Pick n Pay supermarket. She did not earn enough to offer her some of the things that other adolescents take for granted. Accordingly, Numazulu did not have access to familial attention, both in terms of love and stability, and support with doing her homework and learning about life. Moreover, Numazulu did not have a desk to work at, as well as the other kinds of cultural capital such as books and access to the internet to help with her studies in the absence of her parents and familial support. In a number of ways Numazulu lacked key forms of capitals that could assist her in reaching her goals. She had little access to the various capitals that could "put her ahead of the game". She recalled for instance that I don't read at home. If I read, I only read an interesting book.

The inadequate time with her immediate family implicitly impelled Numazulu to frame her notion of achievement in relation to a very bright future with a big house and a mini cooper and lots of money. She pointed out: Do you watch Generations? Because if you did, you'd know about Karabo, she's a businesswoman who has money, her own car, and is famous. Like her, everyone will know me. I like the way she is and I will be like her – in charge, very rich and successful. I see her as my role model, but first I have to go to UCT, get a scholarship and study business and marketing management for three or four years. Then I will follow in her footsteps and become very rich and successful.

Numazulu's background, aspirations and understanding of achievement highlight how many learners often aspire to become particular kinds of successful professionals and entrepreneurs to avoid the kinds of lives that their parents had to endure. Bourdieu refers to this as a form of embodied cultural capital where the learners and their parents developed dispositions and made meaning in given contexts which shaped the attitudes, preferences, perceptions, and values that they attached to their school and work decisions.

Numazulu further indicated that she was living in the age when people are not particular about how but what. It is what you have that counts and not how you obtain

it. The societal lenses that Numazulu used to determine achievement is incongruent with that of Singhal and Misra (1994: 240) who regarded achievement as:

> *… a function of more or less ephemeral social expectations that are embodied in what we call norms and argue that, in a very real sense, a social group often tells a person what to strive for as well as how to attain this end. In such a view achievement is understood as a social expectation and obligation, and social norms make up an important variable in how achievement takes shape.*

Conversely, the society that influences Numazulu's perception of achievement is what Kasser (2003: ix-x) states:

> If we hold our eyes open we will see that the world is filled with opulence, luxury and material excess. Most of the world's population is growing up in winner-takes-all economies where the main goal of the individual is to get whatever they can for themselves, to each according to his or her own greed. Within this economic landscape selfishness and materialism are no longer seen as moral problems but as cardinal goals of life. Vast numbers of us have been seduced into believing that having more wealth and material possessions is essential good life. We have swallowed the idea that to be well, one has to be well-off first. And many of us consciously and unconsciously, have learnt to evaluate our own being and accomplishment not by looking inward at our spirit or integrity, but by looking outward at what we have and what we can buy.

It is manifested that not only did Numazulu's lack of capitals shape her habitus and her engagement with her schoolwork, but also wrought her aspirations and the kind of life she imagined. She freely spoke about her need to get as much money as she could to make life easy, without having a clear idea of what she needed to do or have to achieve this.

Ankomah (2003: 2) denotes the above as:

> *… people tending to resort to materialistic values and desires when their needs for security, safety, and sustenance are not fully satisfied … where people experience situations that threaten their security and they then adopt materialistic values as coping mechanisms.*

Hence, the strong urge to accumulate material assets and wealth is not uncommon amongst learners who come from poor socio-economic environments, notes Kasser (2003: x), notwithstanding it creating a particular, limiting and often inaccessible life-world imaginary for them.

This immense craving for material accumulation could be because only certain types of work are often open to contemporary youth when they enter the labour market, thus contemporary youth tend to become preoccupied with accumulation.

Another possibility might not be the lack of work in the contemporary world that bother youth, but rather the type of work and available wages that they are not willing to accept. It appears generally to be the pervading trend in Cape Town when one reads magazines and watch television programmes – they all seem to say the same: achievement is measured by what you own, not by what you know or do.

Conversely, the next paragraph depicts another learner with a different perspective of achievement.

Popularity and recognition as achievement

Peter pointed out that:

> *Achievement makes you different from others in the ways you dress, talk, what you eat, places you visit and where you stay. I think also achievement is getting a good title, when people talk about you and like to be associated with you.*

Peter's aspirations and notions of achievement highlighted his overwhelming notion of recognition and popularity. His notions are not intrinsically driven because he is concerned about his outside image and approval – more about what people think and say about him – than what he is able to set up for himself.

When prodded to elucidate how he hoped to accomplish this, Peter noted:

> *It can be through a strike, starting a church or something that draws the attention of people. To become great these days you don't need to have fancy qualifications. But you do need to identify what people want. My uncle started his church – he is great. You know he is respected and he is doing well.*

Realising that his path to pursue educational qualification is unfeasible Peter identified individuals who had failed academically but were daring in life to pursue other avenues to earn a living. To Peter earning a title is achievement. Furthermore, Peter's understanding of achievement in connection to the style of dress and frequenting places of interests point to the youth's permeating view of "being cool". The youth are not concerned about a sustainable future – they are satisfied with ephemeral "pleasures" to evade derision and exclusion.

Fascinatingly, the youth's notions of achievement are not inert. Peter later noted:

> *I think achievement is when one successfully overcomes one's challenges; just because people have different challenges, socially, economically, academically and so on. I think achievement means different things to different people and happens at different times for each person.*

Peter does not only think of achievement as enhancing individuals to possess benefits and status that precipitate superior forms of livelihood or knowledge, but also as overcoming the difficulties. His concept of achievement is very individualistic. It depends on how successful an individual overcomes the odds. He seems to be aware of the peer pressure that ensnares the youth.

Bourdieu's theory of habitus further illustrates how internalised social structures and dispositions are unconsciously developed from an early age and given particular form in the lives of individuals by being reproduced through their everyday experiences (Bourdieu, 2004). Various upbringings and social interactions entail that learners develop different attitudes, dispositions, and value systems which depend on the various social networks that individual learners can call upon and also what is possible for them in their lives. This produces diverse understandings of achievement, as well as unequal familiarities on how to navigate social spaces (Moore, 2008: 108).

In endeavouring to unravel Peter's aspirations and understanding of achievement, it emerged that he received no support from any sibling or parent and struggled with his schooling. He explained:

> *I don't really look into the future. I take life as it comes, either bad or good. With my family background it is almost impossible to achieve anything. Nobody cares and nobody helps me. What can one do?*

The next paragraph highlights another learner with a different perspective of achievement.

Individual capabilities as achievement

Patina had an individualistic notion of achievement. She regarded individual dexterity in any field as achievement.

> *She noted that achievement needs to be defined as when learners perform optimally according to their own capability.*

For her achievement needs to be benchmarked according to individual ability because all learners cannot attain top marks.

Patina criticised today's society for putting too much pressure into achieving. She noted: Most of the time, it's not what people can achieve or want to achieve, but what they are meant to achieve. This puts a negative spin on achieving and causes learners not to achieve and to be very negative about who they are. In today's society we set standards for people who are unable to meet those standards and then they get lost along the line. We need to change our mind on what achievement is all about. To me achievement is not determined by the amount of money you have, or the type of car you drive, or how well you do at school. To me, that is not achievement. Achievement rather is doing something that you enjoy, that brings you happiness, and that makes you proud. Achieving is when you feel joy in your heart, like when you're helping others.

Patina challenged and ridiculed the external benchmarking of achievement which she regards as ineffective for it fails to capture various individuals' needs, capabilities and interest. She is divergent to the other youth and does not take a materialistic view of achievement; rather she introduces intangible aspects of achievement which are not addressed in achievement debates.

Elucidating her individualistic notion of achievement, Patina explained:

> *I know of a boy that was in my class at primary school that did very badly in class but he could work on a car and could do things with a car that none of us could. He could put pieces of a car together without any fuss. For me, he achieved because he could do what other people could not.*

Patina did not regard schooling as the sole gateway to achievement. She had her own understanding of achievement – realising an individual's talent and effectively utilising it for personal growth and survival. She also explicitly pointed out that achievement is personal and should not be necessarily determined by the school. She noted that the school could not recognise and develop the boy's talent and potential achievements.

Furthermore, she emphasised the additive and cumulative aspects of achievement, pointing out that treating achievement as both a goal and a means to a goal captures the interconnectedness of skill mastery, competition, social recognition, group identity, personal ambition, individual interest, and learner subjectivity that learners often struggled with in school.

Patina's significant capacity to aspire was based on her family background, her schooling experience, and the kinds of educational and learning experiences that she had thus far been exposed to. Both her parents were successful professionals, affording her the cultural, social and economic capitals that neatly fitted with her high academic grades. Patina thus did not only own strong capitals at school level, but also had easy access to different familial capitals. She was operating at the highest academic levels in the school and was easily one of the best academic learners. Her access to the various capitals enabled her to have a more developed aptitude to imagine a different future life.

Appadurai (2004: 69) notes that learners from more affluent, powerful, or knowledgeable groups often have more experience reading "navigational maps" and are in a position to "share this knowledge with one another more routinely". Patina further highlighted how her belief in focusing on strengths and developing skills had made her progress and regards her schooling differently. She explained that goals and achievements were the fundamental bricks for the building of my aspirations and that, through achieving, she had discovered the techniques needed to accomplish things and to attain her aspirational goals. Achieving was thus her "map" and her vehicle to get where she needed to be.

The following sections further demonstrate how access to certain levels of capitals influence the way the learner aspired and thought about achievement in relation to his habitus.

Contentment and innovation as achievement

> *Abdullah thought of achievement as doing the best to your individual ability but must be something that brings you joy so that when you look at the thing you never regret getting there. I also think achievement is something that*

> *must be shared. It must be something that you are confident and proud of,*
> *and that others are also proud of. Most importantly, achievement is making a*
> *contribution to the world.*

Interestingly, Abdullah takes both a realistic and unrealistic conceptualisation of achievement. Initially, he is aware that people have different capabilities; thus he seems to bring to light that achievement should not be standardised and measured using grades or certificates. Achievement should remain a relative term. Furthermore, he introduces the aspect of happiness – feeling it pointless or meaningless to be recognised as an achiever if one does not experience happiness, contentment, pride and confidence. He feels achievement should come from within and not outside. What is important is the "self". The joy flowing from within will then drive the individual. To Abdullah achievement is incomplete when it is not shared. To him invention or knowledge creation is achievement.

Abdullah later indicated that:

> *When I study I will come up with better drugs that cure asthma. Actually, my*
> *brother and I have asthma and the inhalers they give us do not really help*
> *people. Yes I will do this because I'm determined to. I have always told myself*
> *that I have to and I foresee myself doing it, actually I know I will do it. In life*
> *there is always a beginning. I will make history as being the first to find the cure*
> *for asthma.*

Abdullah's optimistic bravado and enthusiasm is described by Abrams (2010: 158) as "unexpected self-belief". She notes in her study of learners in working class schools in the UK that "what was surprising about some people I met was not that they failed but that some of them didn't: it seemed the key for the learners to not failing was their enormous self-belief," noting that the learners had this "in spades" and that it is this that carried them through their everyday challenges. Abdullah's aspirations "provided him insight into what he thought and felt about himself, his school and the roles he was meant to fulfil within the school community" (Ley, Nelson & Beltyukova, 1996: 134). In this regard, Appadurai suggests that it is through the capacity to aspire that individual learners are able to bring their prospective imaginings, inspired and fuelled by feelings of hope and self-assurance, into the present.

To a larger extent, Abdullah's background informed his aspirations and notions of achievement. Both his parents and his sister are teachers, and both his brothers are engineers. He performed well in his academic studies and had access to the capitals, which suggested that he would attain his aspirational goals. Because all his family members also did very well in their own social lives, they were able to easily assist him and encourage him to work hard.

Conclusion

This article underlined achievement as a multi-layered concept that is neither linear nor one-dimensional. It showed that for many learners the concept of

achievement had direct pertinence to their individual lives, and the ways in which they thought about themselves and their lives in emerging global and local spaces - such as wanting to be happy, having an interesting career, and being passionate about what they took on. Achievement thus was closely tied to personal and often intangible aspirations. The article further challenged the view that youth notions of achievement in the current environment are mostly materialistic and consumeristic, and instead illustrated how some learners had a fairly good understanding of the kinds of challenges and dilemmas that confronted them in the modern era, and the kinds of decisions that they needed to make to best overcome this.

What the article mainly highlighted was that many learners called upon both tangible and intangible views of achievement- depending on their individual and contextual arrangements- to inform 'their aspirations' and the ways they thought about their lives and what they sought to accomplish. For them 'money was not everything' but rather one part of a wider arrangement of negotiations that they needed to navigate to achieve their personal goals and aspirations.

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