

# Education Aspirations and Barriers to Achievement for Young People in Ethiopia

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# Summary

This paper reports on the educational aspirations and the challenges facing children living in poor communities in Ethiopia. Using Young Lives survey and qualitative longitudinal data, the paper finds that children hold high educational aspirations and make much effort to achieve their ambitions. Children in higher grades at school maintained their high aspirations.

Children have demonstrated their agency in their capacity to aspire high and work hard to attain their ambitions. The results also suggest that poverty has an impact on potential achievements. Despite making every effort to attain their aspirations, some children have failed to do so, or have modified their stated desires.

The findings contest at least two widely held assumptions. First, that poor people have low levels of aspiration and do not make any effort because they believe in 'fate' rather than hard work, and therefore policies should aim to 'raise' their aspirations. Second, poor children, mainly in Africa, have 'unrealistic' aspirations, thus, they should be 'reoriented'. The paper argues that interventions should not be on the 'raising' or 'reorientation' of aspirations, but on helping young people to achieve what they have aspired to. The 'raising' of aspirations is less relevant for young people motivated by the fast expansion of schooling in their country and spurred on by poverty, who do not lack aspirations. 'Reorientation' hinders children's capacity for aspirations and achievements, and is thus detrimental to the national effort for poverty reduction, which could be enhanced by people with high levels of education. Addressing the structural impediments to achievement would be more helpful because achievements inspire the generation to come.

Key words: children, educational aspirations, educational achievements, poverty, Ethiopia.

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## About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in 4 countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) over 15 years. [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)

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# 1. Introduction

This paper reviews the educational aspirations of children living in poor communities in Ethiopia and the challenges they face when trying to achieve in school. Using both survey and qualitative data from the Young Lives longitudinal study in Ethiopia, it tries to establish young people's educational aspirations and investigates differential levels of achievement in school over the years.

It is well documented that education plays a major role in development (ECA 2011). In developing countries, education is accepted as a means to reduce poverty, and a major share of national budgets has been earmarked for formal education programmes. In Africa, investing in human capital through education and skill development for young people remains of paramount importance. Governments here envisage a good return on educational investment, and hope that education will contribute to poverty reduction and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (ECA 2011). Human capital acquired through schooling is considered a key factor for moving out of poverty because it can augment the skills and productivity of poor people. Young people from poor families can also achieve social mobility mainly through education (St Clair and Benjamin 2011). Education pursued to higher levels is likely to lead to better occupations and consequently make a better contribution to development.

Aspirations motivate people to work harder and achieve more (Sherwood 1989). As people cannot usually achieve what they have not aspired to, aspirations are important inputs for achievements and eventual better outcomes. Aspirations are an individual's desire to obtain a status objective or goal such as a particular occupation or level of education (Kao and Thompson 2003; Hansen and McIntire 1989; MacBrayne 1987).

Aspirations are developed and achieved in certain contexts and they are influenced by circumstances. For instance, educational aspirations and attainment could be influenced by family background (e.g. Andres et al. 2007; Marjoribanks 2005), peers (Alexander and Campbell 1964), gender (Odell 1989), socioeconomic status (MacBrayne 1987), urban/rural location (Haller and Virkler 1993; Akande 1987) and neighbourhood (Stewart et al. 2007). The literature shows that, as compared to their counterparts, children of educated parents, those with a better economic status, those who live in urban areas, and boys hold higher aspirations and achieve better.

Whether aspirations are prevalent among poor people and whether they make any effort to achieve them are ongoing debates. One view is that poor people may lack the capability to aspire and 'to contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty' (Appadurai 2004: 59). They have a limited vision of the future. The assumption that poor people have lower aspirations leads to another argument: poor people achieve less because they invest little in their future. They give up because they face a big 'aspiration gap', which is 'the difference between the standard of living that's aspired to and the standard of living that one already has' (Ray 2002: 3). Similarly, some empirical studies seem to suggest that a proportion of poor people remain 'fatalistic'. For example, based on his study among poor people in Egypt, Ibrahim (2011) argues that poor people are shy of aspiring and unable to attain a better life. Bernard et al. (2011) have also reported fatalistic beliefs and low aspirations among a substantial group of rural households in Ethiopia. For them, 'fatalism' is the same as 'not making the necessary investments to better one's well-being' (Bernard et al. 2011: 3). They argue that fatalism lowers the demand for long-term loans for productive purposes because

poor people believe such investments are either 'infeasible or would not lead to significant changes' (ibid.: 3).

Such views have been ascribed to many groups 'disadvantaged' in terms of economic status, location (rural) and gender (female). The authors making these arguments generally hold the notion that people from 'disadvantaged groups' have lower aspirations and thus limited achievements (St Clair and Benjamin 2011). The suggestion is that governments need to engage in 'raising' the aspirations of such sections of the population. For educators who believe that education plays a major role in helping people move out of poverty, raising the educational aspirations of students remains a priority (Wrench et al. 2012; Quaglia and Cobb 1996), since this would enhance their levels of achievement. Schools could make this possible by encouraging children to work hard to perform well and avoid falling below their own level of aspiration (ibid.).

Others argue that young people hold unrealistically high aspirations and need to be 'reoriented' so that their aspirations reflect the availability of jobs that fit them. The paradox is, however, that while developing countries need people with more education, there are few job opportunities for graduates. In Africa, where meeting the educational and the occupational aspirations of young people is a challenge, one of the solutions suggested is 'reorienting' their aspirations so that they reflect the situation they are in, the skills needed and the jobs available (Wellings 1982). This implies lowering of aspirations.

The findings of this study challenge these arguments. This paper shows that children from poor families in certain communities in Ethiopia hold high educational aspirations and that they make every effort to achieve. It argues that children do not have any aspiration deficits, but they have very limited capacity to achieve because they are growing up in poverty.

## 2. Study context

A considerable number of Ethiopians remain illiterate. The 2011 Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) data show that 52 per cent of females and 38 per cent of males aged 6 and above have never attended school. Illiteracy is much higher among the rural population (at 58 per cent of females and 44 per cent of males) than among the urban population (28 per cent of females and 15 per cent of males) (CSA 2012). Though this shows some improvement as compared with the 2005 EDHS, when overall 67 per cent of females and 52 per cent of males had never attended school (CSA 2006), the fact remains that the majority of Ethiopians have little or no education.

The rise in literacy is mainly an outcome of the expansion of formal education in the country over the last two decades. For much of that time, Ethiopia's education policy has focused mainly on primary education, aiming at meeting the second MDG, 'Achieve universal primary education'. The policy states that the vision of the education sector is 'to see all school-age children get access to quality primary education by the year 2015 and realise the creation of trained and skilled human power at all levels who will be driving forces in the promotion of democracy and development in the country' (MOE 2005).

Education is considered one of the main ways to move the country out of a long history of poverty caused mainly by the vulnerability of the agricultural sector to drought and the prevalence of a high illiteracy rate. The expansion of formal education, particularly in rural areas, followed the Government's plan to implement rural development policies and



strategies. This was to ensure sustainable development for the rural population, which constitutes 85 per cent of the country's total population. An integral part of the rural transformation strategy involves increasing access to primary education for all school-age children and thereby producing 'educated farmers and other workers who utilise new agricultural technologies'. Thus, due attention is given to reforming the structure of the education system to make education and training responsive to the country's development strategy (MOE 2005: 6).

Some remarkable achievements have already been registered in attracting school-age children to formal education.<sup>1</sup> For example, the net attendance ratio (NAR) for primary school reached 65 per cent in 2011 (CSA 2012), showing a significant increase from 2005, when it was 42.2 per cent (CSA 2006). However, there is a disparity between households of different economic status: the 2011 NAR increases from 52 per cent in the lowest wealth quintile to 84 per cent in the highest wealth quintile. As they grow older, fewer young people seem to be able to go to school. For example, the NAR for secondary school (ages 15–18) was only 14 per cent, with a very big gap between rural schoolchildren (6.2 per cent) and their urban counterparts (39.1 per cent), as well as between the lowest and highest wealth quintiles (2.7 per cent and 36.9 per cent, respectively) (CSA 2012).

There are some reasons for such a low level of school attendance. The first is associated with Government's focus just on primary school. Probably constrained by the objective of meeting the second MDG and preparing young people to be 'educated farmers' (MOE 2005: 6), education policy has resulted in peripheral handling of both pre- and post-primary schooling. Nationally, only 35–39 per cent of children aged 7 were attending school in 2011. Though the figures show a slight increase on those of 2000 (15 per cent) and 2005 (21 per cent), they suggest that the majority of 7-year-olds did not go to school. This indicates that children begin school later than the official starting age, which affects the NAR of both primary and secondary schools.

The other reason is that some children do not go to school regularly or interrupt their schooling because of work. Interpreting Article 32 of UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which calls on countries to establish a minimum age of admission to employment and appropriately regulate the working hours of children, the EDHS of 2011 tried to determine the prevalence of child labour in Ethiopia. Child labour was defined by the survey as including children who, in the seven preceding days, who had worked for someone who was not a member of the household, with or without pay, or engaged in any other family work for 28 hours or more. Overall, on these criteria, 27 per cent of children aged 5–14 in Ethiopia were involved in child labour (17 per cent of children aged 5–11 or did household and 55 per cent of children aged 12–14). Less than 1 per cent of children aged 5–11 and 2 per cent of children aged 12–14 were engaged in paid work; 3 per cent and 6 per cent, respectively, were engaged in unpaid work for someone who was not a member of their household; and 14 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively, worked for a family business. For all children aged 5–14, the percentage engaged in labour was higher among males (31 per cent) than females (24 per cent). The proportion of children engaged in labour was substantially higher among rural children (30 per cent) than urban children (13 per cent) (CSA 2012).

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1 In Ethiopia, children start formal schooling at the age of 7. Primary school takes eight years (with the first cycle covering Grades 1–4 and second cycle, Grades 5–8) and then there are four years of secondary school. There is national exam at Grade 10 and those who fail can join technical and vocational education and training but those who pass continue formal schooling for another two years. Those who pass the national exam at Grade 12 can pursue university education for three to seven years.

Another barrier to educational achievement for girls is early marriage. The 2011 EDHS reports that among women aged 25–49, 63 per cent were married by the age of 18, and 77 per cent by the age of 20 (CSA 2012). The median age at first marriage among women aged 25–49 was 16.5 years, a slight increase from the 16.1 years reported in the 2005 EDHS. The proportion of women married by the age of 15 has declined over time; from 39 per cent among women currently aged 45–49 to 8 per cent of young women currently aged 15–19. The figure shows some changes perhaps because of interventions by international agencies, the Government and schools (see Boyden et al. 2012). Nevertheless, early marriage continues to be one of the hurdles for girls who aspire to advance in their schooling.

In general, the expansion of formal schooling has resulted in an increase in the number of children attending school. However, the Government's limited objectives coupled with problems such as poverty, work and early marriage remain as hurdles to achievement. This is one of the focuses of this paper.

### 3. Data source and methods

The data used to produce this paper are drawn from the Young Lives cohort study in Ethiopia. Young Lives, as a study of childhood poverty, draws its sample purposively from poorer households. While an average of 38 per cent of households in Ethiopia lived below the poverty line,<sup>2</sup> the figure for Young Lives study households was 72 per cent in 2006, which declined to 67 per cent in 2009. There were differences with respect to location, where 71 per cent of rural and 64 per cent of urban households were 'poor' (lived below the poverty line) (Woldehanna et al. 2011). A considerable number (about 43 per cent) of the Young Lives rural households relied on the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP)<sup>3</sup> to ensure their food security (Tafere and Woldehanna 2012).

The paper draws on survey results of cohort children born in 1994 ( $N=980$ ) sampled from the 20 Young Lives sites (eight urban and 12 rural) as well as qualitative data from 30 children from five of these sites (two urban and three rural). The 20 study sites were selected from five regions – Amhara, Oromia, SNNP (Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region), Tigray and Addis Ababa – where the majority (95 per cent) of Ethiopian children live. For the qualitative study, one site was selected from each region. One of the two urban qualitative sites is situated in the capital city (Bertukan, a suburb in Addis Ababa)<sup>4</sup> and the other in the capital of SNNP region (Leku). These are very poor neighbourhoods, where people with different ethnic, religious and economic backgrounds live side by side. The three rural sites are from the regions of Amhara, Oromia and Tigray. Tach-Meret, in Amhara, is a community very close to town and where children can access all levels of schooling, from primary school to technical and vocational training. Leki, in Oromia, has only one primary school and children are much engaged in paid work in private irrigation vegetable-growing fields. Zeytuni, in Tigray, is a relatively remote community affected by protracted drought and

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2 The poverty line is calculated based on daily consumption of 2,200 kilocalories per adult plus a basket of basic goods and essential non-food items. The Ethiopian Government uses this method to measure household poverty in the country.

3 The Productive Safety Net Programme is run by the Government to transfer cash or grain to food-insecure households upon delivery of labour in public work.

4 All names of study sites and children are pseudonyms.

food shortages. It has a primary school but children are also attracted by paid work in private stone-crushing plants in the community.

The survey data were collected in three rounds, in 2002, 2006 and 2009, and the qualitative information was gathered in 2007, 2008 and 2011. Data were gathered mainly from children but some supplementary information was also obtained from caregivers, particularly on their economic status and their aspirations for their children's education. During Round 2 and Round 3 of the quantitative survey, children were asked: *If you could study for as long as you liked, what level of formal education would you like to complete? Given your current situation, do you expect you will reach that level of education? What grade level have you completed?* Additional data on dropping out of school, work and parental aspiration were also examined.

Data from all three rounds of qualitative fieldwork were used in the analysis. Children were asked about their educational aspirations, possible changes of ambition over the years, schooling (what grade they were in, whether they had repeated one or more years, and whether they had dropped out, either temporarily or permanently), and other life routes that affected their schooling (e.g. paid or family work, early marriage). The core questions were: (1) *What school level would you like to achieve? If altered from the previous one, why?* (2) *What are the opportunities for possible success and what are the constraints for possible failure?* The qualitative data were gathered mainly using individual interviews but education timelines were also generated to establish the educational pathways of children since their first entry to formal school. As in the survey, caregivers were also asked about their aspirations for their children's education and achievements.

In the analysis, the survey data are used to establish the wider context, as well as trends in the aspirations and achievements of the main sample of children. Variations across urban/rural location, gender and family economic status are presented in tables and descriptive statistics. The ethnographic data, generated from the qualitative sub-sample and their parents, offer narrative accounts for qualitative analysis. The data shed light on how children and their parents form aspirations, their opportunities for educational achievement and the challenges they face in pursuing them, and the ways in which their aspirations change.

## 4. Results

This section presents the main findings of the study. It focuses on the formation of educational aspirations, on educational achievement and on the relationship between the two.

### 4.1 Forming educational aspirations

At the ages of 12 and 15, children were asked: *If you could study as long you would like, what level of formal education would you like to complete?* Their responses are presented in Table 1. Based on the school structure in Ethiopia, they are categorised into four levels: *primary school* (Grades 1–8), *secondary school* (Grades 9–11), *Grade 12 complete* (the end of secondary schooling), *vocational training* (post-secondary training in some vocational skills for those who fail the national exams at the end of Grade 10 or Grade 12) and finally *university education* (the highest level of schooling that those who successfully passed the national school-leaving exam in Grade 12 can join). Depending on the discipline, university education may require from three to seven years of education.

**Table 1.** *Children's responses to the question: 'If you could study as long you would like, what level of formal education would you like to complete?' (%)*

Educational level aspired to	Aspiration at age 12 (N=925)				Aspiration at age 15 (N=967)			
	Urban (N=382)	Rural (N=543)	Male (N=469)	Female (N=456)	Urban (N=390)	Rural (N=577)	Male (N=492)	Female (N=475)
Some primary	1.1	1.80	2.3	0.6	1.6	6.1	4.5	3.9
Some secondary	2.6	7.9	5.1	6.4	1.8	7.4	4.5	5.9
Grade 12 complete	11.5	22.7	15.4	20.8	5.1	18.2	8.9	17.1
Vocational training	4.2	4.8	3.6	5.5	3.3	4.2	4.1	3.6
University	80.6	62.8	73.6	66.7	88.2	64.1	78.0	69.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The figures show that a big proportion of the children aspired to the highest level of schooling. At the age of 12, just under 71 per cent of them desired a university education. There is a noticeable disparity between children living in urban and rural areas, with 4 in 5 and 3 in 5 of them looking for a university education, respectively. The gender disparity is relatively small with about 7 in 10 boys and 6 in 10 girls wanting to have the highest level of education, respectively.

The fast-growing number of schools, mainly in rural areas, has attracted a huge number of children to school. The Ethiopian Education Policy formulated in 1994, when the study children were born, advocated extensive coverage of primary school education in the country. For example, the enrolment rate of the Young Lives sample children grew from 66 per cent when they were aged 8 (in 2002), to 97 per cent when they were 12 (in 2006) and then dropped to 90 per cent when they were 15 (in 2009). The majority of the parents, who lived in poverty, were very responsive to the Government's endeavour and they did not hesitate to send their children to school. Both parents and children had faith in education and education seems to have been seen as a 'magic bullet' that could change their lives. During the 2006 Young Lives survey, 98 per cent of the children agreed that 'education' was 'the most important' thing for their future life. Thus, children who rushed in large numbers to school were further inspired to envisage a higher level of education that would help them achieve a better life.

The data (Table 1) also show that children's aspirations changed over time. At the age of 15, children's aspirations for a university education have shown a slight increase (3.6 per cent). Generally, the urban/rural and gender differences are maintained. While some lowered their aspirations, others raised them. As they grew older, some children weighed up their circumstances and made some changes to their initial aspirations. Many children from the qualitative study have said that only attaining a better education would help them move out of poverty. For example, Mihret, a boy from Zeytuni, raised his aspiration from remaining a farmer like his father or becoming a teacher. He realised that there was not much chance of a better occupation with a lower level of education. He had the following conversation with the Young Lives researcher in 2011:

Researcher: What was your aspiration when we asked you last time?

Mihret: I said, 'I want to become a teacher' when you asked me whether I like to be a teacher or a farmer.

Researcher: OK, what about now, what do you want to be?

Mihret: I want to be a doctor. I have changed my mind ... My plan is to focus on my education.

Researcher: Why?

Mihret: Because I can see the opportunities without being educated are very limited. Life is better when you are educated.

Researcher: What do you mean when you say the opportunities are limited?

Mihret: For instance, the distributable farmland is finished. That means there will be nothing to be given to us [young people].

Researcher: What do your parents want you to do?

Mihret: They want me to complete my education.

Mihret believes farming is no longer a reliable source of livelihood because farmland is not available for young people like him. In Ethiopia, farmland is state-owned and households only have the right to use it although they can transfer it to their children. In the northern part of the country, including where Mihret lives, land had been distributed for decades but nowadays there is not enough land for redistribution. Young people, even after setting up their own households, cannot get land from the state. They can only obtain land from their parents, who might give them a share of their smallholding. The 2009 survey results show that the rural Young Lives households, who had an average of nearly seven family members, had on average a holding of just 1.4 hectares of farmland.

An insecure life in farming pushes young people to envisage staying on in education. Another boy, Kassaye, from Tach-Meret said in 2011:

“My family depends on agriculture. The harvest is sometimes good; another time poor ... My father works day and night because he is a farmer. He loses much energy and may die soon. ... But I want to finish my education and sit in an office with a monthly salary .... I will live longer than my father ... “

The main life option beyond farming is schooling, which children believe will lead to other occupations. Looking for a better life and social mobility seems to be inspiring children to pursue education to higher levels. Some have gradually realised that it is through better schooling that they are more likely to get a good job, although there is an increasing amount of competition for these jobs.

Moreover, children’s educational aspirations are largely shared within the family. When parents see the new schools in their communities, which were not available in their childhood, they become inspired to support their children in making use of the new opportunities available to them. Very few rural parents want their children to inherit their farming life with its attendant poverty. For example, in the Round 3 survey, when they were asked about the type of occupation they wanted for their children, only 0.52 per cent of the parents wanted their children to be ‘farmers’ like them. Almost all of them wanted them to be professionals (e.g. doctors, engineers, teachers, etc.), requiring a high level of education. In the same survey, parents were asked: *What level of education would you like your child to reach?* The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Caregivers' responses to the question 'What level of education would you like your child to reach?' (%), 2009*

<b>Educational level aspired to</b>	<b>All (N=958)</b>	<b>Non-poor (N= 315)</b>	<b>Poor (N=643)</b>	<b>Urban (N=386)</b>	<b>Rural (N=572)</b>	<b>Boys (N=486)</b>	<b>Girls (N=472)</b>
Some primary	1.7	0.6	2.4	0.3	2.7	1.8	1.6
Some secondary	4.5	2.2	5.6	1.8	6.3	4.7	4.2
Grade 12 complete	12.4	10.5	13.2	3.9	18.0	9.3	15.6
Vocational training	3.1	1.9	3.7	3.4	3.0	2.7	3.6
University	78.3	84.8	75.1	90.6	70.0	81.5	75.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Overall, nearly 4 in 5 parents desired their children to reach the highest level of education they could, which is a university education. Less than 2 per cent wanted their children to just have some primary education and the rest hoped that their children would progress beyond that level. However, there are some differences if the data are analysed according to family economic status, urban/rural location and gender of children. While poverty and gender seem to have limited influence, location remains as a considerable marker for a difference. There is a difference of less than 10 per cent between the poor and non-poor caregivers who aspired to a university education for their children, while the difference between caregivers' aspirations for boys and girls is less than 6 per cent. This suggests that both poor and non-poor parents desire their children (both boys and girls) to reach a high level of schooling. Nevertheless, the urban/rural divide seems noteworthy, with about 9 in 10 urban parents and 7 in 10 rural parents hoping for university education for their children.

Here, the data show that education aspirations are rooted in the family. There is very little difference between what children and parents aspire to. In 2009, while 73.8 per cent of children (Table 1) wanted to reach university, 78.3 per cent of their parents (Table 2) held the same views. This also suggests a growing faith in education.

Parents seem to see the future of their children, also of course their own, in education. They blame a lack of educational opportunity for their present poverty and want to change that. Parents, though illiterate in the majority, want their children to compensate for what they missed. The parents of the study children had a very limited education. During the Round 3 survey (N=970), nearly half of them (48.1 per cent; 25.4 per cent urban, 63.4 per cent rural) were illiterate, 15.6 per cent of them had some religious or informal education, 28.8 per cent had attended primary school and only 7.5 per cent had some secondary education. This reflects the national average where about half (52.1 per cent; 28.3 per cent urban, 58.1 per cent rural) of all Ethiopians aged 6 and above were illiterate in 2011 (CSA 2012).

During the qualitative fieldwork, all parents expressed their belief in education and said they wanted their children to progress as far as they could. For example, in 2011, the mother of Fanus (then aged 17) from Zeytuni said, "[B]eginning from her early childhood, I wanted my daughter to finish a university education and get a good job so that she pays back what I have invested in her. ... She is the best of all my children." Sefinesh's grandmother, from Tach-Meret, said of her granddaughter in 2011, "[S]he wants to complete her education, to have a job and to support us. She thinks that she wants to compensate her parents ... She feels a great responsibility to help her parents". Kassaye's father, from Tach-Meret, agrees with his son's view (presented above) by confirming:

“I want my son to complete his education and get employed in a government office. This is my wish and his wish, too. After he finishes school and gets a good job, I want him to help me and his siblings.”

In family structures where all values and resources are largely collective, aspirations are also shared. Here, the views of parents and children hardly differ and they share aspirations because the outcomes are for the common good. Both parents and children who put their hope in education would necessarily do whatever it takes to achieve their dreams. Their efforts to achieve and the challenges they faced are discussed in the next section.

## 4.2 Barriers to schooling

Children aspire to higher levels of education with the expectation of achieving them. When the children were asked at the age of 12 if they believed that they could achieve their aspirations, 95 per cent said yes. Among those who aspired to reach university level, 95.5 per cent said they expected to achieve this (95.9 per cent of urban children, 94.5 per cent of rural children; 94.2 per cent of boys and 96.9 per cent of girls). Three years later, most of them maintained that belief. At the age of 15, among the same young people, 90 per cent were sure that they could reach the level they aspired to. And even among those who aspired to university education, 89.5 per cent expected to accomplish their ambition, with little difference according to location (88.3 per cent of urban young people and 91.2 per cent of rural ones) or gender (90 per cent of boys and 91.1 per cent of girls). The data show that young people maintained high expectations of their own achievement though with some decline over the years. This may suggest that there is growing scrutiny of the likelihood of achieving the aspiration in some difficult circumstances. As they grow older, children tend to differentiate between aspirations, the ‘desire to obtain a status object or goal such as a particular ... level of education’, and ‘expectations’ which are ‘the likelihood of attaining those goals’ (MacBrayne 1987: 135).

As they do with aspirations, parents share their children’s view of achievements. For example, in 2009, parents ( $N=924$ ) were asked: *Do you expect your child to reach that level of education?* Almost all (97.3 per cent) expected achievement of their children. Among those who aspired to a university education for their children, 98.2 per cent believed they would attain it.

Children strongly believed that education paid off. At the age of 15, nearly all (93.3 per cent) of the young people expressed their confidence by agreeing with the statement *If I study hard at school, I will be rewarded with a better job in the future*. Although these families, living in constrained contexts find it hard to support their children to achieve, they do not refrain from exerting every effort. The qualitative data provide a diversity of evidence on how both parents and children tried hard to succeed in education. One of them, Yordi’s mother, from Leku, who earns a living for her family by baking *injera* (flatbread made out of *teff*, a staple food in Ethiopia) and selling it to restaurants, states: “I want my daughter to finish a university education. I will assist her to achieve it as far as I am alive. She will succeed because she has self-esteem [*ras-metemamen*].” Yordi had to move from a private school to a government school after the death of her father. In 2007, Yordi reported that this had had an immediate impact on her schooling and she found it difficult to adapt to the poor quality of education in her public school. However, she worked hard and in 2011, she reported that she had joined secondary school with very good results. She tells her story as follows:

“Although my father is dead, my mother has done her best to let me continue my education. I would have been much happier if I had continued my education in the

private school. What I learned from the private school has helped me a lot. I was better in English when I moved from the private to the public school. Now, I have forgotten much of it because the standard here is not the same as the private. I imagine that I would have been performing better if I had continued my education in the private school. But other subjects like mathematics and physics are very good here in the public school. The school is weak in English and Amharic languages. ... I am studying day and night to join the university ... I want to be an engineer and work in the Nile Renaissance Dam.”<sup>5</sup>

(Yordi, 17, Grade 9).

In her spare time Yordi helps her mother to bake *injera* for sale but both make sure that it does not affect her schooling. In the last four years, she was ranked in the top three in her class and she is confident that she will be able to go to university.

Biritu’s family provides another example of the strong determination of families to support their children’s education. Biritu, besides attending school in Leki, had been helping her mother with household chores and since she was 14, she had been earning money to supplement the family’s income and help pay for her schooling. She used to attend school for half a day and work on irrigation schemes during the rest of the day.<sup>6</sup> Though there is a primary school in the community, the quality of education is very low. All the way through Biritu’s life, her mother has maintained that she wants her daughter to complete her education. She does not want her daughter to get married and work in subsistence farming like most of her family. In 2008, when Biritu was 14, her mother said: “I want my daughter to complete her education, find a job, and support us. I don’t want her to quit education and get married. I will help her until she finishes her school.” In 2011, both Biritu and her mother reported that they had decided that Biritu should get a better education in town, at a high cost to the family. Her mother said:

“My daughter said the education in our community is poor and we decided to move her to town. We rented a house for her there and fulfil what she needs. Her brother who also lives there looks after her [protecting her from abduction which is a common practice in the area].<sup>7</sup> We want her to focus on her education and get time for study. ... In the future, she will have a better life. She will have a good job and probably help us in the future. After finishing her education, she can marry or decide for herself.”

Biritu is happy in town because she has time to study and there is a better quality of education available. She had reached Grade 8 and hoped to progress well.

Mesih’s caregiver, from Zeytuni, also has high aspirations for him:

“[M]y son will reach the highest level of education ... He will be, if possible, a leader of the country, if not, in a better position and with a lot of responsibilities ... There will be nothing that draws him back as long as I am alive.”

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5 The biggest hydroelectric dam construction at the origin of the Blue Nile projected to cost US\$4.3 billion was launched by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2010. It bears a big hope for many Ethiopians.

6 In Ethiopia many schools operate in shifts so that children can work for part of the day.

7 A boy who wants to marry a girl can abduct her with the help of his friends and take her to his family’s house. Then, his parents send elders to the girl’s family to inform them that their son has abducted her and to ask for marriage settlements. The boy’s family gives some bride wealth (e.g. cash, livestock, clothing, jewellery) to the girl’s family according to the norm and the marriage gets formalised.



Despite painstaking efforts by both children and their families, not all children made smooth progress through school. At the age of 15, schoolchildren are generally expected to finish primary school (Grades 1–8). However, the completion rate for the Young Lives children was just 18 per cent. It was worse for children from poor families (15 per cent as compared to 24 per cent for the non-poor) and for the rural children (10 per cent as compared with 29 per cent for urban children) but with limited gender difference (17 per cent for girls and 19 per cent for boys). Only six of the 30 young people in the qualitative sub-sample (two urban and four rural girls) had completed primary school by the age of 15.

One major reason for the low completion rate by the age of 15 is late entry to formal school. The change in the enrolment rate of Young Lives children from 66 per cent at the age of 8 to 97 per cent at the age of 12 suggests that about a third of them joined school after the age of 8. At the age of 12, about 82 per cent of urban children reported having started formal school at the age of 7 as opposed to only a third of the rural children. Most of the urban children had access to preschools, but many rural children did not. The qualitative data reflect the same reality. While all the urban children in the sub-sample had begun school by the age of 7, none of the rural children had. For example, ten of the 18 rural children started school between the ages of 10 and 12.<sup>8</sup>

Another hurdle to school progression was drop-out. Between 2006 and 2009, 8 per cent of the Young Lives sample dropped out of school. The economic status of the family seems to influence school interruptions, with the drop-out rate for children from poor families being 9 per cent and for those from non-poor families, 6 per cent. Location also affects the incidence of drop-out, with 12 per cent of the rural children having to drop out of school as opposed 4 per cent of urban children.

Among the qualitative sub-sample, six children were out of school during the 2011 fieldwork. Two rural girls had got married (their stories are presented at the end of this section), another urban girl had failed the exam at the end of Grade 10, and three rural boys resorted to full-time paid work because their parents could not afford to keep them in school. Most of the schoolchildren had quitted at least once during their school years. For example, 18 of them had experienced interruptions in their schooling between one and four times since they started school.

During the Round 3 survey, in 2009, children reported the reasons they had dropped out, which included doing domestic or agricultural work for family (22 per cent), paid work (18.5 per cent), illness/injury (7 per cent), family illness (5 per cent), high fees<sup>9</sup> or cost of school materials and uniform/shoes (10 per cent). Similarly, in the 2011 qualitative research, it was found that many children were working either by dropping out of school or combining work with their education. About nine of them were engaged in income-generating activities such as washing cars, picking haricot beans, working in irrigation schemes, guarding or casual work.

Some children face multiple hurdles in their schooling. They try one life route after the other; some succeed, while others do not. One example provides a good illustration of this. Beletech, from Leki, is a double orphan who lived with aging relatives. She started school at

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8 Children are allowed (and encouraged) to start school from the age of 7 but many start later. School grades do not depend on age but on the standard attained, so older children still have to join Grade 1. Children can re-join school, in the same grade at which they left, if they have to drop out through illness, injury, poverty, work or for any other reason.

9 In private schools regular fees are paid to the school, but in government schools they are one-off contributions, usually for classroom expansion and other school-related activities.

the age of 9, but interrupted it for one year when she was in Grade 1, due to illness. Since a young age, she had been overburdened because her aging and ailing caregivers did little work. She did all the household chores, herded the animals and since the age of 12 had been involved in paid work in the irrigation schemes. Beletech attended school for half the day and used the other half for work. Sometimes, she did paid work at the weekends and sometimes on weekdays, missing classes when she had to. Her educational performance was deteriorating. She progressed through Grades 1–4 (the first cycle of primary school) because there are no exams in those grades.

Since 2007, she had reported she wanted to finish secondary school and become a teacher. She still hoped so. However, she told us that “the work burden I have is affecting my schooling” as the paid work was very laborious and it added more work to what she did at home. She saved some money and borrowed another 200 birr (US\$10.80) from a friend and opened a small kiosk, where she sold sugar cane, chewing gum, sweets and the like. She wanted to save money and move to town to start a business. But she had at least three concerns. Firstly, she might not be able to continue at her school because she had not paid a 100-birr school contribution for the construction of fences; she had been sent home twice and warned for failing to pay the contribution. Second, her caregivers wanted to buy an ox for farming with her savings, which might hinder her business plan. She did not want to invest in rural business assets because the goats she had bought earlier with her savings from paid work had died quickly. Her third concern was abduction. She said, “I may be forced to marry through abduction soon.” Abduction is common in her community.

All the common barriers to school achievement are already being experienced by this girl. In addition to her poverty, she is an orphan with no immediate family or social protection support (even to cover her school contribution fees), overloaded with domestic and paid work, engaged in business and schooling at the same time, and living with a risk of abduction. She entered school late, dropped out more than once and she is only in Grade 5 at the age of 17. Amid all these challenges, Beletech said, at the end of her interview in 2011, “[T]he most important thing in my life is my education because it is the only way to fulfil my dreams.”

Children from poor families do not have access to good-quality education and are unlikely to make much progress. The only child from the qualitative sub-sample who took the Grade 10 final exam failed it and was left with few options. She attributed her failure to poor-quality education and poverty. Fatuma, who lives with her mother in a single-room house in the Bertukan, had done her best to attend school regularly. She finished Grade 10 at the age of 16 but could not make it to university. She says:

“I attended public school where the quality of education is very poor. I did not have a tutor. From our school very few pass the exam, but from the private school in our neighbourhood almost all get good results and seven of them scored ‘A’ in all subjects. ... Since childhood I have wanted to finish university education and become a medical doctor ... Now, I am just planning to get training in sewing machine ...”

(Fatuma, age 17, 2011)

Her father is dead and her mother earns a living by washing clothes for cash. Fatuma, sometimes used to get aid from a local NGO. Nevertheless, the support was not sufficient to invest in better education. Her educational progression finished in Grade 10 and her childhood aspirations ended. This shows two sides of poor children’s school realities: trying their best to get something out of school but at the same time unable to overcome huge structural impediments.

As they grow up, some young people begin to envisage alternatives to school or become preoccupied by other life transitions. They may embark on other routes through life that are likely to reduce their educational aspirations. I present three cases to illustrate the key alternative pathways young people have taken over the years. The case studies concern three young people from poor families who, at the age of 12, stated their aspiration to finish university education but had later given up this idea. One relates to a boy who developed skills for and an interest in a manual occupation and the other two concern rural girls who gave up their hopes of continuing at school because of early marriage.

Bereket, from Bertukan, is a double orphan who lives with his maternal grandmother and his two elder brothers. His grandmother earns their living by washing clothes and baking *injera* for cash. Bereket, since the age of 10, had been washing cars for pay in nearby communities. His elder brother worked in a garage and Bereket wanted to follow his brother. His grandmother, however, wanted Bereket to focus on his schooling, finish university and become a pilot or go abroad for a better life. At the age of 13, he stated:

“[M]y grandmother wants me to be a pilot. However, I do not agree because criminals may bomb the plane and expose me to a problem. .... I want to be an engineer ... I do not know how good it is but it pleases me.”

The next year he said he still wanted to finish university but he was thinking of pursuing his own business in a garage. At the age of 17, he had changed his ambition. He had this exchange with the survey researcher:

Researcher: Three years ago you were interviewed about what you would do in three years. Are you trying to become what you dreamed of at that time?

Bereket: Now, I have changed my mind. I used to think and hope that education will change my life.

Now I am only hoping that having a business will change me. I used to rely on education before but now I prefer to work.

Researcher: What kind of things do you want?

Bereket: I want to be involved in selling cars; I meet people while doing my job and they tell me how to do it. Therefore, I don't think selling cars will be difficult for me. All of my friends wish to do the same job.

Researcher: When you were a child and when it was your first time to go to school, what were your expectations about education and why is it changed?

Bereket: At that time, I didn't know what the outside environment looked like. I didn't know anything except my education. My family was responsible for me and my focus was on education but now when I grow up and start working outside, I have begun to look for alternatives and my attitude is becoming different.

Researcher: What does your family wish you to be?

Bereket: My grandmother wants me to be successful in my education but I want to engage myself in a business. I do not accept her interest.

These data suggest two important issues. First, children who have been exposed to different activities or learnt different skills for their survival or to subsidise their schooling can develop it into a life option. When they see school ambitions on the verge of failing, they may pursue other options. Therefore, for poor children work does seem both a means of fulfilling basic

needs as well as learning skills that help them prepare themselves for their future occupation. The second lesson from this case study is that some children, as they grow older, may pursue life options other than those their parents would see as best for them. In 2011, Bereket's grandmother reported that she had a strong conflict with her grandson because he did not want to focus on his education. In the end, the child's interest seems to be prevailing over that of his family and this exhibits his agency. Other young people from the qualitative sub-sample have dropped out and have already started full-time work, while others do some business activities on top of their schooling. They continue their schooling as far as they can but they have back-up plans.

The other two examples relate to the early marriage of girls, who now have virtually no chance of continuing in school or reaching university. Ayu, from Leki, and Haymanot, from Zeytuni, have almost the same story. They are both from poorer families living in rural areas. At the age of 12, they both indicated that they wanted a university education. They had done paid work from an early age to subsidise their families' incomes and had had difficult educational pathways. At the age of 16, both got married. Ayu married through abduction, and Haymanot through a formal wedding (for details of the types of marriage in the two communities, see Boyden et al. 2012). Their educational aspirations have ended with their marriages and they have started on other life routes, similar to those of their mothers. However, both said they were "happy" with their marriage because it "relieved" them of laborious paid work. Ayu moved to town to live with a fisher husband and Haymanot continued living in her community with her husband, who was a government employee running a farming business in addition to his job.

Ayu, had done paid work in the irrigation schemes from the age of 12, had had to interrupt her schooling repeatedly. When she got married, she had only completed Grade 2. After marriage, when she was interviewed, she said, "[W]hen I was in school I wanted to finish university and become a doctor."

Haymanot, whose father had run away and whose ailing mother was not able to provide for the family, also had a challenging life trajectory. At the age of 14, she told us:

"I started my education at the age of 7. I was a good student. In Grade 4, I was ranked second in my class. I came here to help my ailing mother after three years stay in town with my aunt. As my mother is too poor and ill, I had to work in safety net program [the PSNP] to generate some income. Consequently, I quit my school at Grade 5. Some teachers tried to provide me with educational materials but I could not afford food and clothing. Currently, I am very sad because I cannot go to school and my mother is also ill. My aim is to finish school and get a good job so that I help my family. I want to marry after finishing school when I will be 20 years old or older. Girls can marry at the age of 13 in the community and my friend has just married."

When she was 17, Haymanot said:

"I have not continued my education after quitting in Grade 5. As the income from safety net [the PSNP] was insufficient, I had to do paid work in a private [stone] crusher plant in our community earning some money. However, the work was difficult and once I had a hand injury. I married this year and am happy because the marriage was arranged by family and I stopped working in the crusher. Now I am a housewife ... Initially, I wanted to finish school and get a good job. I still want to go to school but it all depends on my husband. He and my family want a child soon. .... I do not think I will go to school again. I think you will find me next time with my child at home."

At the same time, her mother told us:

“I had no choice but to let her quit school. The reason was me. I was sick. She had to drop out and we were able to pass the bad days. She helped us to survive. If she hadn’t worked, what could have we eaten, how could she go to school without having food, without dressing, wearing shoes, and having a pen? ... I regret that she dropped out of school because she was a clever student. I would like her to have a university degree like the children of my sister who have graduated and have good jobs. I was wishing her to be like them. Now she is married and her husband will not allow her to go to school again. I wish her to have a comfortable life having two to three cows, seeing her hair oiled with butter, drinking milk, carrying her child and coming to visit me.”

(Haymanot’s mother, 2011)

When girls have tried very hard to attend school but found that they could not and achieve their dreams, there is another option available to them – early marriage. Girls’ early marriage is discouraged by law but tolerated in the community. When parents have ‘strong reason’ and girls ‘agree’ to it, there are ways out of legal sanctions. For example, the 2011 EDHS indicates that the average age of marriage for women aged 25–49 was 16.5 years, well below the legal age of 18 (CSA 2012). After trying the other options available to her (schooling and paid work), Haymanot resorted to marriage. She had never expected to do so at this age. She said, “I am happy to have married because if I am not going to school I can avoid the heavy work.” For these two economically deprived girls, competing pathways meant that early marriage took the place of schooling.

The case studies presented above illustrate how poverty and its consequences cause some children to end up on different pathways, despite their continued high aspirations. The mutual influences of aspirations and schooling levels are discussed in the next section.

#### 4.4 Aspirations and educational levels

Aspirations are not just formed at some point and maintained continuously. They are ‘far from static and will change considerably through an individual’s life’ (St Clair and Benjamin 2011: 506). The results in this paper show that aspirations change over time and they are also influenced by what educational levels children reach. Using the Round 3 survey data, a relationship between educational aspiration and grade level attained at the age of 15 was established. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** *Educational levels aspired to by young people aged 15, by grade completed (%)*

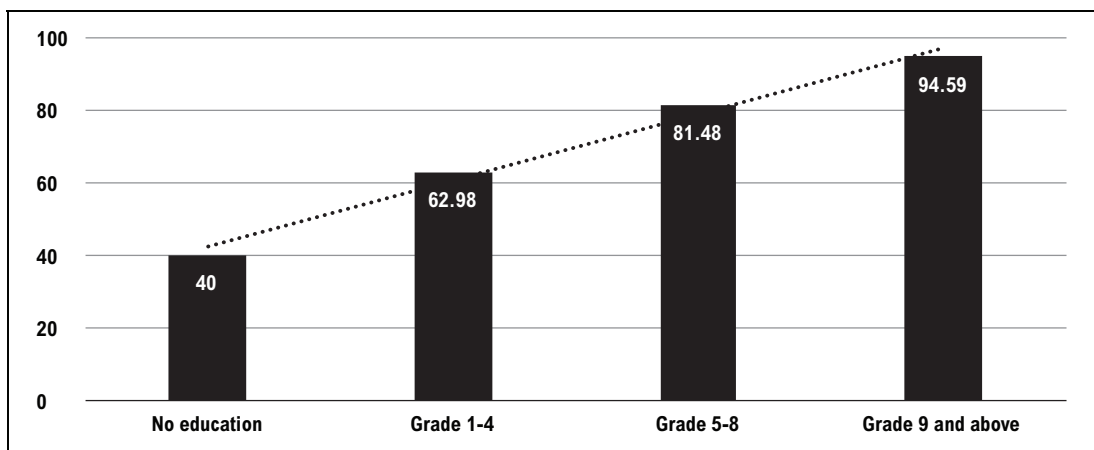
Educational level aspired to	Grade completed				Total
	No education	1–4	5–8	9 and above	
Primary	10.0	3.36	1.14	0.0	1.73
Secondary	40.0	28.85	13.61	5.41	17.23
Vocational	10.0	4.81	3.77	0.0	3.93
University	40.0	62.98	81.48	94.59	77.11
Total (N)	10	208	610	37	865
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100

Pearson  $\chi^2(15) = 65.1988$  Pr = 0.000; likelihood-ratio  $\chi^2(15) = 49.8817$ ; Cramér’s V = 0.1585; gamma = 0.4583 ASE = .061; Kendall’s tau-b = 0.2101 ASE = 0.034

The figures under the table (p-value) indicate that grade level and aspirations are not independent of each other. This implies that there is a statistically significant association between grade level and aspiration.

Aspirations and achievement are linked. As the grade levels increase, the aspirations of students also become higher, and vice versa. Figure 1 shows this relationship more clearly by presenting the percentages of young people aspiring to a university education disaggregated by grade completed.

**Figure 1.** *Aspiration to university education of young people aged 15, by grade completed (%)*



Students' aspirations for education became higher as they progressed through school. Nearly all children who had finished the expected grade level for their age, maintained the aspiration to a university education. Conversely, the lower the grade level children were at, the less likely they were to aspire to go to university.

Children who were progressing through the grades without needing to repeat a year had high aspirations. For instance, Mulu from Tach-Meret had high aspirations. A paternal orphan, she attended school for half the day and picked haricot beans for the rest of the day to earn money to subsidise her schooling and other consumption. In 2011, she said, "I have passed to Grade 9 with good results and I am sure I will finish university and become a doctor. My success depends on my personal efforts. I will not marry before I finish my education."

Inspired by their grade progression, some have embraced aspirations higher than those they held when they were younger. For example, Haftey a double orphan from Zeytuni, reported that she developed the desire for a high level of education after she had started achieving good marks. She had the following conversation with the qualitative survey researcher in 2011:

Researcher: What level of education do you want to reach?

Haftey: To finish a university education.

Researcher: OK, when you started school, what level of education did you aspire to complete?

Haftey: I didn't have any idea that time; I just was going to school without knowing its benefit.

Researcher: What do you want to become in the future?

Haftey: I want to be a doctor when I complete my education.

Researcher: What motivates you to complete your school?

Haftey: I believe that if I concentrate on my education, I will have better status when I grow up. I can have what I want to have in my life.

Researcher: What kinds of obstacles do you anticipate in achieving your aspiration?

Haftey: I don't expect any obstacle.

**Haftey was attending a school in town with the help of a grandmother and her relatives. She was in Grade 9. She was motivated by her performance and was confident that she would complete a university education and become a doctor. Her grandmother shared this belief, and stated:**

“Initially, I sent her to school to spend her time with her friends. When she reached Grade 4, I began to hope. As many children in our community fail in Grade 8, I feared she would fail as well. When she passed, I began to believe that she could reach a university, which I had never thought of. ... As far I am alive, I will do whatever it takes to make sure she finishes her university education.”

(Haftey's grandmother, Zeytuni, 2011)

The grandmother was encouraged by the good progress of her grandchild and started to share her aspiration. She has offered financial help in order to help Haftey stay in town and achieve her ambitions.

Some girls who have made good progress in school have been prevented from marrying early by their parents. The opposite is true for those who face early marriage because they have made little progress in school and have had to give up their earlier aspirations (see cases of Ayu and Haymanot). Being in lower grades suggests that young people of this age have faced barriers to achieving the level of education they aspired to. Some may return to school and perhaps achieve their aspirations, but those who come of age need to pursue other pathways. The fact that they were unable to succeed when they are at the right age and in a good school means that there is no guarantee that they do it at a later age. It is also most unlikely that those who choose other life options, such as early marriage, employment or business activities, will find it possible to return to education and succeed.

## 5. Discussion

Based on the results of this study, I discuss three issues: educational aspirations, school achievement and the challenges children face with regard to it, and finally, the association between aspirations and achievements. These are discussed in relation to the existing relevant literature.

The data on educational aspirations presented in this paper challenge at least two widely held assumptions: first, poor people have low levels of aspiration and secondly children's aspirations are negatively influenced by the low status of their families. Some researchers argue that poor people aspire low because they have a muted view of the future (Appadurai 2004) and are discouraged by a big gap between where they are and where they can reach (Ray 2002). They are afraid of aspiring higher (Ibrahim 2011). However, the data used in this study indicate that poor people have high aspirations. Despite living in poverty, the majority of the Young Lives children held educational aspirations for university degrees. Even the number of those aspiring high increased as the children grew older.

Both the survey data and the qualitative data have shown that, with the fast expansion of formal schooling in Ethiopia in the last two decades, both parents and children have developed a faith in education. Formal schooling has become an emerging resource for children from poor families and many parents and children hold the highest possible educational aspirations. A recent study based on Young Lives qualitative data indicated that "education" was seen by young people as a sign that a young person "lives well" and as making the child's future (Camfield 2011). For poor people, schooling is considered both a way out of poverty and a route for achieving social mobility. Similar studies in Ethiopia and other Young Lives study countries indicate that both parents and children aspired to higher levels of education for children; for example Crivello (2011) on Peru, and Dercon and Singh (2011) on Ethiopia, although the latter find a slight parental bias towards boys. After all, aspirations are future-oriented (Sherwood 1989) and nothing bars either parents or children from aspiring so high. Thus, the poor do have the 'capacity to aspire'.

The other broadly held view is that children's aspirations are negatively influenced by their parents' backgrounds (e.g. Marjoribanks 2005; MacBrayne 1987). In fact, disparities among households have been noticed mainly in relation to urban/rural location or gender (Haller and Virkler 1993; Akande 1987; Odell 1989). Overall, however, the data presented in this paper show that children of the illiterate and poor hold high aspirations. Even the parents shared the high aspirations. For example, the rural parents did not want their children to be farmers like them. They wanted their children to have a different livelihood.

The evidence presented here suggests that children's aspirations are less likely to be influenced by the poor economic situation of their parents. Young people living in poverty want their lives to change and to do this, they need to aspire because they can only achieve what they have aspired to. Aspirations are more influenced by perceived 'opportunities' (St Clair and Benjamin 2011) than current situations. Children's aspirations were more motivated and influenced by the fast expansion of schooling than by the poor situation of their parents. For poor people, aspirations are also motivators to change their current state of life, rather than remaining immersed in it.

On the other hand, evidence shows that aspirations motivate achievements (Sherwood 1989). High ambitions inspire better accomplishments, whereas low ambitions lead to lower



attainment. The poor like the other 'disadvantaged groups' in a society, are generally assumed to be low aspirants and low achievers (St Clair and Benjamin 2011). It is sometimes argued that this is mainly because poor people exert little effort for improvement. Based on their study of rural households in Ethiopia, Bernard et al. (2011) have argued that households fail to invest in their future because they do not believe that life can change with hard work. They conclude that the poor rather believe in 'fate'.

However, the evidence in this paper shows that both parents and children had a strong belief in the possibility of achievement. They had a strong conviction that what they aspired to was achievable. For example, schoolchildren believed that if they worked hard in school, they would get good jobs to improve their life. It was not only a 'belief in achievement', but the poor also worked hard to achieve what they hoped for. The longitudinal qualitative data have shown that, despite living in poverty, poor families and their children were trying their best to bring success to children's education over the years. Poor parents had to sell *injera*, wash clothes for cash, trade in the street, or do casual work to ensure their children got educated. Children themselves, beginning from the age of 12, had to do paid work in irrigation schemes or quarries, or picking haricot beans, guarding, washing cars, etc. to earn money that helped them progress in their schooling. Some are on track and are pushing for the ultimate attainment of their aspirations. A similar study from Peru shows that some poor children migrated to urban areas to get better education and move out of poverty (Crivello 2011). Thus, unlike those who claim the poor are 'fatalistic', Young Lives data suggest that both parents and children have been rather pragmatic.

The claim that poor people are fatalistic leads some people to blame the poor for their present state of life (Clair and Benjamin 2012). This obscures the existence of structural impediments behind families' circumstances. Despite every effort, some children and their families have found it difficult to achieve their aspirations. It is not their unwillingness to invest but their inability to overcome the hurdles they face with the scarce resources they have. Children's aspirations are trapped between 'powerful demands to fulfil the expectations of everyday life on the one hand, and ... schooling for "modern jobs"' (Abebe 2008). The evidence from the present study shows that the majority of schoolchildren lag behind expected grade levels and some have already dropped out of school permanently. This is more prevalent among the poor than the non-poor. Some children who could not get enough food, clothing and school materials find it hard to succeed in their school. In the ten years of school time documented by the qualitative data through the educational timeline, poor children tried to re-join schooling between two to six times after dropping out. In the context of family poverty and inadequate social protection systems, children had to try repeatedly. But when they failed, they had to just give up. As they come of age, some children had to choose other life options (e.g. early marriage or full-time employment).

The data presented in this paper suggest that children do not have any deficit of aspiration or effort. Those who fail to progress in their education do not do so just because they are 'fatalistic' but because their efforts are impeded by poverty. They have demonstrated their agency by exhibiting their capacity to aspire and working hard to achieve what they aspired to.

Another view holds that young people fail to achieve their aspirations because in the first place they had 'unrealistic' aspirations. In the developing world, including in Africa, it is argued that young people aspire too high to achieve in the context of poverty. Children could be motivated by fast-growing formal education to make 'inappropriate aspirations' (Wellings 1982).

This seems partially true. The data used in this paper show that both parents and children were increasingly encouraged by the Government's initiative of providing all schoolchildren with access to formal education in their localities. When they entered school, their interests developed to reach the highest level for both reasons of escaping poverty and achieving social mobility. While the Government had the objective of producing 'educated farmers' just by providing free primary education, children were not barred from aspiring to schooling beyond this threshold.

The question here is: what does 'realistic aspiration' mean? If it is to mean, aspirations are 'achievable within a certain context' then it assumes all aspirations are 'not potentially achievable'. This is true if children are living in 'disadvantaged contexts', like those living in poverty in Ethiopia.

Here, I see two points of contention. First, establishing what I would call 'contextualised aspirations' puts limits on children who are already 'disadvantaged' by poverty. Aspirations are goals one sets to achieve certain levels of life, for example in education (Kao and Thompson 2003; Hansen and McIntire 1989; MacBrayne 1987). Redefining 'aspirations-in-context' would deviate from the very definition of the concept. Regardless of its outcome, an aspiration is an ambition that any child, whether she/he lives in developed or developing world, can hold. In establishing children's aspirations, questions are asked without considering any limits. In this study, for example, they were asked: *If you could study as long as you would like, what level of formal education would like to complete?* The questions explore the potential capacity to aspire. To develop their aspirations children are not constrained by the educational policy or by the available job opportunities.

The other problem with the view of so called 'unrealistic aspirations' is that it restricts the potential for achievement. Both the survey and the qualitative data used in this study have also shown that there is a very strong association between 'aspirations' and 'achievements.' For example students who achieved the highest level of education expected by the age of 15 (Grade 9 and above) seemed to maintain the intention to join the university. This suggests that enhancing achievements would encourage high aspirations and vice versa. Those who claim that poor children hold 'inflated aspirations', argue young people should be 'reoriented' to be 'realistic.' They are, implicitly, limiting children's potential for achievement because aspirations are generally believed to be motivators (Sherwood 1989) for achievements. In developing countries, like Ethiopia, where everybody including the state, parents and children put their faith in education and invest their scarce resources in its success, the solution is not limiting aspirations but promoting them for consequential achievements. High educational achievements generate more returns to families and better contributions to poverty reduction.

In conclusion, such high educational aspirations are deeply rooted in children's beliefs. Throughout the longitudinal studies involving both survey data and qualitative fieldwork, they consistently held such aspirations. Moreover, their aspirations are shared by their families, particularly by their parents. And both children and their parents are doing their best to achieve them despite the multiple challenges they face and widespread lack of resources. Aspirations maintained for a longer period of time and children endeavouring to achieve suggest that the aspirations are serious and lasting beliefs rather than superficial and momentary expressions. Thus, they need to be seriously considered in both theoretical and policy debates.

## 6. Policy implications

The two views presented in Section 5 have debatable policy implications. First, those who believe that poor people aspire low prescribe 'raising of aspiration' as a policy. For some researchers in the field, the main duty of educators should be 'raising the aspirations of children' because aspirations inspire achievements (Quaglia and Cobb 1996). Social mobility can be achieved only through education (St Clair and Benjamin 2011). Such engagement could have a positive outcome. However, this could only be relevant in certain contexts where the structures for potential achievements are available. In developing countries like Ethiopia, this may not be an option, primarily because the data in this study show the majority of children have already developed high aspirations. The concern is rather the structural hurdles for achievements. A policy intervention may need, therefore, to address the barriers. The problem may be not what people want, but what they are allowed to achieve (St Clair and Benjamin 2011). Achievements by themselves would inspire future generations and raise their aspirations.

The second policy issue, very relevant to developing world, relates to those who call for changing the claimed 'unrealistic aspirations' into 'realistic' ones. They advocate what they call 'reorientation'. Wellings (1982) and others have argued that young people need to be 'reoriented' so that young people's aspirations reflect African reality. They claim that Africa, generally needs more people with low levels of education and skills than what the youth is aspiring for, to match its less developed economy and it cannot afford to hire highly skilled professionals. For example, in Ethiopia the Government prioritises education that would prepare young people to be 'educated farmers' (MOE 2005). While it is true that the available job markets cannot meet the demand for a fast-growing number of graduates, we need also to notice the danger of limiting the capacity to aspire, which consequently lowers achievements. It would lead to young people being unprepared for the competitive world and confine young aspirants who want to achieve the highest level of knowledge that could help their nations move forward. In the trade-off between reorienting and facing the challenges of having highly educated people, I suggest the Government needs to move faster to respond to the aspiration of young people than limiting their ambitions. After all, the future is what the children are aspiring to, and therefore adults and governments need to be responsive to their hopes.

In Ethiopia, though expansion of schooling is encouraging children to aspire higher and try to achieve better, helping children reach the level they want is at stake. Such high aspirations that young people hold is a valuable asset that needs to be capitalised for the transformation of the nation. Returns from education can contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty if students reach high levels.

The policy of producing 'educated farmers' needs to be revisited and higher levels need to be sought. Otherwise, there could be long-term negative effects even on the aspirations and efforts of young people. In a country where there are limited resources, such as farmland and other job opportunities, the expectation of professional jobs is so high. The Government is trapped between motivating young people to learn on the one hand, and its inability to respond to their demands, on the other. These longitudinal data provide timely information showing the necessity of intervening in the process before the negative outcomes emerge when children leave school.

In fact, this paper does not argue for education as the only means of poverty reduction. In the context of poverty and early stages of formal education in Ethiopia, other life options should not be discouraged. Some children in this study have had some success in other life routes (for example, Bereket beginning to set up his own business) other than schooling and these aspirations also need to be encouraged and supported.

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# Education Aspirations and Barriers to Achievement for Young People in Ethiopia

This paper reports on the educational aspirations and the challenges facing children living in poor communities in Ethiopia. Using Young Lives survey and qualitative longitudinal data, the paper finds that children hold high educational aspirations and make much effort to achieve their ambitions. Children in higher grades at school maintained their high aspirations.

Children have demonstrated their agency in their capacity to aspire high and work hard to attain their ambitions. The results also suggest that poverty has an impact on potential achievements. Despite making every effort to attain their aspirations, some children have failed to do so, or have modified their stated desires.

The findings contest at least two widely held assumptions. First, that poor people have low levels of aspiration and do not make any effort because they believe in 'fate' rather than hard work, and therefore policies should aim to 'raise' their aspirations. Second, poor children, mainly in Africa, have 'unrealistic' aspirations, thus, they should be 'reoriented'. The paper argues that interventions should not be on the 'raising' or 'reorientation' of aspirations, but on helping young people to achieve what they have aspired to. The 'raising' of aspirations is less relevant for young people motivated by the fast expansion of schooling in their country and spurred on by poverty, who do not lack aspirations. 'Reorientation' hinders children's capacity for aspirations and achievements, and is thus detrimental to the national effort for poverty reduction, which could be enhanced by people with high levels of education. Addressing the structural impediments to achievement would be more helpful because achievements inspire the generation to come.

## About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children in 4 countries over 15 years. It is led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the 4 study countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children.

## Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Professor Jo Boyden.

- *Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Ethiopia*
- *Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting plc*
- *Save the Children (Ethiopia programme)*
- *Centre for Economic and Social Sciences, Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Save the Children India*
- *Sri Padmavathi Mahila Viswavidyalayam (Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE), Peru*
- *Instituto de Investigación Nutricional, Peru*
- *Centre for Analysis and Forecasting, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam*
- *General Statistics Office, Vietnam*
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