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# Changing Educational Aspirations of Children Living in Poverty in Ethiopia

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Yisak Tafere





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# Abstract

Using both qualitative and quantitative data, this paper examines the changing educational and occupational aspirations and educational achievements of children living in poor communities in Ethiopia. The results suggest that children had high aspirations at an earlier age but that these changed later, with poverty rarely influencing their earlier aspirations but having a strong impact later on. Children with high educational achievement, mostly urban children and some rural girls, maintained their high ambitions. Education policy imposed constraints and provided varied opportunities for rural and urban children that affected their educational achievement and aspirations. Educational achievement was influenced by age of entry to school and continued attendance. Government development programmes and agricultural livelihoods attracted rural children's labour and thereby negatively affected their education and realisation of their ambitions. The longitudinal data suggest that some children have begun considering out-of-school transitions (e.g. girls' early marriage and full-time work for girls and boys) and, as a consequence, it seems that very few poor children will be able to realise their ambitions.

*Key words: Child poverty, Educational aspirations, Ethiopia, Occupational aspirations, Educational levels.*

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# The Author

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## About Young Lives

Young Lives is an innovative longitudinal study investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty. Young Lives is tracking 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam over 15 years through a quantitative survey and participatory qualitative research, linked to policy analysis. Young Lives seeks to:

- improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and to examine how policies affect children's well-being
- inform the development and implementation of future policies and practices that will reduce childhood poverty.

Young Lives is a collaborative partnership between research and government institutions in the 4 study countries, the University of Oxford, the Open University, other UK universities, and Save the Children UK.

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The views expressed here are those of the author(s). They are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by Young Lives, the University of Oxford, DFID or other funders

# 1. Introduction

Studying the educational and occupational ambitions of children at certain ages or comparing later achievements to initial aspirations are common practices in cross-sectional research. However, much of this research has focused on older adolescents and adults, with little known about the aspirations of younger children (Hill et al 2003). And in Africa, there is limited evidence (for example, Fleisch and Shindler 2009) of how children experience the interplay between aspirations and educational progression in the course of their lives. Such limitations prevent the understanding of why things happen and change the way they do, thus further restricting help for children in trying to attain their aspirations.

The purpose of this study, using longitudinal data from Ethiopian children now aged 14 collected by *Young Lives*,<sup>1</sup> is to investigate children's changing educational and occupational aspirations and educational achievements. It argues that poverty, education policy and where the children live (specifically, urban or rural location) have a major effect on their educational aspirations and achievements. The impact varies according to gender. As the children haven't yet reached the level where final educational outcomes can be measured, this paper focuses on the process by which their aspirations change. It investigates the interplay between educational progressions and ambitions across different ages for the same cohort of children.

The paper is organised in the following way. The next section briefly reviews some relevant literature. Section three provides background to the study, focusing mainly on educational policy, the economic status of households and descriptions of the communities included in the study. Methods are described in section four; results are presented in section five, and section six discusses the main findings. Finally, there are brief concluding remarks in which policy issues are highlighted.

## 2. Literature review

In this section I review some theoretical and empirical literature. I will begin by defining the terms 'aspirations' and 'educational achievements' and highlighting proposed determinants of educational and occupational aspirations. As research on educational and occupational aspirations among Ethiopian children is very limited, I will focus on relevant studies of primary education in the Ethiopian context.

Researchers have tried to define 'aspirations' by contrasting the term to 'expectations' (for example, MacBrayne 1987; Andres et al 2007, and Kao and Thompson 2003). Aspirations are defined as 'an individual's desire to obtain a status objective or goals such as a particular occupation or level of education. Expectations are the individual's estimation of the likelihood of attaining those goals, plans, ambitions or dreams' (MacBrayne 1987: 135).

In other words, aspirations are most often defined as an individual's desire to obtain goals such as a particular *occupation or level of education* [my emphasis] (Hansen and McIntire 1989: 39). Unlike educational aspirations, educational expectations are framed by individuals who see the likelihood of achieving education in terms of their abilities, past academic

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<sup>1</sup> *Young Lives* is a long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty by tracking the lives of 12,000 children over 15 years from Ethiopia, the state of Andhra Pradesh in India, Peru and Vietnam.

performance, ambitions and family situations (Anisef 1980, quoted in Andres et al 2007). While expectations can be positive or negative and have the possibility of being achieved, aspirations could remain as mere dreams with less likelihood of being attained.

However, aspirations can play a strong role in helping children to push for better achievements. Kao and Thompson (2003) in their study of the ethnic and socio-economic status of children in the USA have observed that educational aspirations are important predictors of eventual educational achievement. Another example comes from Young's study of 3,397 students drawn from 28 schools in Western Australia, where aspirations can influence students' learning, preparation for life choices and academic motivation and achievements (Young 1998).

Children living in different contexts have varied opportunities and constraints that suggest that aspirations do not guarantee achievements. Numerous studies, largely done in developed countries, have identified a multitude of factors that influence educational achievement levels. Family backgrounds (e.g. Marjoribanks 2005), peer influence (Alexander and Campbell 1964), gender (Odell 1989) and race and socio-economic status (MacBrayne 1987) affect both the educational aspirations and the achievements of young people. Family factors that have been identified as influencing the decision to enrol in higher education include the family as a resource provider, family members as role models, and family as a source of encouragement for higher education (Chenoweth and Galliher 2004).

Some empirical studies suggest that different social groups hold diverse aspirations and achievements. For example, Odell from his survey of 491 Grade 10–12 students in Ohio, USA, found that female students had higher aspirations than their male counterparts (Odell 1989). Similarly, young people with higher socio-economic status were more likely to aspire to and attain post-secondary education, as were those whose parents had higher achievements (MacBrayne 1987).

The other dimension in understanding children's aspirations is that these change over time. Findings from other longitudinal studies suggest that students change their initial expectations because of their family backgrounds. For example, Andres et al (2007), following up high school graduates for 10 years in British Columbia, found that students changed their educational expectations over time because of their parents' socio-economic status and their post-secondary achievements.

Higher educational expectations increase the likelihood of educational achievements. In other words, aspiring to a high educational level supports the achievement of certain educational goals. Educational achievement could be viewed in terms of one educational level following the other in the right order. For example, Mare (1980, 1981, quoted in Pallas 2003) conceptualised educational achievement as movement through an ordered sequence of educational transitions. In other words, educational achievement could be modelled as a set of ordered school continuations. Achievement of a certain level of schooling presupposes the completion of the level immediately preceding it.

However, this may reflect Western assumptions/contexts, which are likely to differ from other contexts such as Ethiopia where wider structures play influential roles, because educational aspirations and educational achievements are circumscribed by the prevailing social and political structures. Structures provide opportunities or impose constraints on achievements. Social backgrounds affect both educational and occupational transitions. They structure the choices that individuals make, and shape the conditions in which the individuals can exercise choice (Pallas 2003).

Some qualitative studies on Ethiopian children have reflected on what affects educational aspirations. A study by Abebe (2008) found that children are barred from achieving their life aspirations because of the constraints of needing to earn a livelihood placed on their daily lives. His study, conducted for seven months in 2005/6, involved 46 in-school and out-of-school children, aged between 11 and 17, from a locality in Southern Ethiopia. He argues that children's future aspirations are trapped between 'powerful demands to fulfil the expectations of everyday life on the one hand, and claims of modernisation, including schooling for "modern jobs", on the other' (2008: 21). Children's 'wish lists' of jobs included: artist/journalist/ singer<sup>2</sup>; teaching; accountancy; secretarial work; pilot; nurse, doctor, administration; politics; military service; pastor, hairdresser/barber; mechanic; minibus/truck driver, farming, animal husbandry, poultry, trade; running a commodity shop, cafeteria, restaurant, private car (taxi), flour mill, or renting bicycles; housewife (*ibid.*13).

A *Young Lives* study of the same communities on which this paper is based found that adults have clear expectations of what children should be doing between the ages of 11 and 13 (Tafere and Camfield 2009). Caregivers and other adults expected these children to be involved in schooling and work but feared they might be involved in some sort of relationship with the opposite sex. Besides doing domestic work, children of this age, especially those from rural areas, are expected to work to generate income. Hence combining work and education is a norm that is expected from a 'good child' (Tafere and Camfield 2009). Despite such community expectations, children still continue to aspire to the highest-possible educational levels. During a *well-being exercise*<sup>3</sup> conducted during the first phase of the qualitative research in 2007, both female and male children from the same communities suggested that attending school was an indicator of their well-being, and they anticipated joining university (Camfield and Tafere 2009). More urban children believed that education would help them to achieve upward social mobility and aspired to higher educational levels than the rural children.

Even after joining school, poor children may be forced to drop out in order to work. Different empirical studies give evidence of this. For example, from her children's diary research in urban Ethiopia, Poluha found that students in primary school engaged in paid work belonged to the poorest households in the community and were more vulnerable to school drop-out and repetition (Poluha 2004). A very recent development in children's involvement in work that affects their education came from another *Young Lives* study in Ethiopia. Woldehanna's study on the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP)<sup>4</sup> (Woldehanna 2009) and children's time use has brought a new insight into how public programmes are attracting child labour. He found that public work programmes increased the amount of time boys and girls spent on paid work. The programme has attracted children's labour, increasing children from PSNP household's participation in paid work by 0.13 hours per day as compared with children who did not participate in the programme. Though the increase seems small, it suggests that the program has started to affect children's time use.

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2 In the referred study, these three occupations were classified into one category.

3 Children sketched two pictures of a child of their age and sex. Then they indicated, through drawings, the child's attributes of living a 'good' and 'bad' life in two pictures drawn side by side. For example, a child living a good life might have a clean and big school compound with a good library and the child himself has books and other necessary school materials. On the other hand, the child who lives a bad life would not go to school at all or goes without the necessary school materials and attends a school with dirty compound. For more details, see *Young Lives Working Paper 41* by Camfield and Tafere.

4 A program aimed at reducing food deficit in households by providing cash or grain against some public work for the able, or for free for those who are not able to work due to disability/illness or old age.

The review above shows the existence of diverse studies of children's educational and occupational aspirations and the impediments to their achievements. However, most are based on cross-sectional data and were done predominantly in Western contexts, although there is some recent qualitative research in Ethiopia As I have described in earlier, there is little research on children's aspirations in an Ethiopian context. Some of the empirical studies reported earlier suggest the existence of high drop-out rates which means that children are less likely to make progress towards their ultimate educational goals. This paper explores what children's aspirations are and how they change over time during their educational routes using longitudinal data from Young Lives. I argue that wider structures strongly shape children's initial aspirations, force them to change, and affect educational achievements. I have focused on poverty, educational policy and environment as contexts affecting children's aspirations and school progression. As 'educational expectations are formed in relation to occupational expectations' (Andres et al 2007:136) both are discussed here as interrelated concepts.

### 3. Study context

This paper is on the educational/occupational aspirations and achievements of children living in poverty. Education policy, poverty and children's geographic locations are some of the prevailing structures that affect their aspirations and achievements. These are briefly discussed here as background to the study. I will start by reviewing primary education in Ethiopia because the children included in this study are predominantly attending school at that level.

In the last 15 years the Ethiopian government has tried to expand education. Relevant policies and programmes (such as Educational and Training Policy in 1994, Educational Sector Program in 1997/98, Educational Action Plan in 2005/6) were aimed at ensuring 'all school-age children get access to quality primary education with special emphasis to increase access to primary education in rural areas' (MOE 2005a). Government policy had attracted a large number of children to primary schools. The majority (85 per cent) of the new primary<sup>5</sup> schools were constructed in rural areas (MOE 2005a: 7–8). The gross enrolment rate<sup>6</sup> at primary school level in 1996 was 42.9 per cent (Admassie and Singh 2001) and had grown to 79.2 per cent by 2005 (MOE 2005a: 7–8).

The 2005/6 Educational Action Plan also advocated the expansion of pre-schools, and between 1997 and 2005 the number of pre-schools grew from 744 to 1,408. However, the gross enrolment rate at national level was as low as 2.3 per cent, suggesting that only a few children had access to pre-school education (MOE 2005a:7). This low enrolment rate was related to poor policy implementation. The Government left the expansion of kindergartens to the private sector which was not particularly successful in rural areas. Private investors focused only on urban areas, and rural children were left without any access to pre-schools.

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5 Primary school has two cycles: the first cycle covers Grades 1–4 and the second cycle covers Grades 5–8. In the first cycle, education is 'self-contained', where one teacher teaches all subjects, and there are no exams. Instead class attendance guarantees automatic promotion to the next grade. The entry age for primary school is 7.

6 The percentage of total enrolment in primary schools, irrespective of age, out of the corresponding primary school-age population, ages 7-14.

Even in urban areas, fees remained too high for poor people, and children from such families had very limited access.

Focusing primarily on increasing the enrolment rate, without due consideration to retention, has a negative impact on school progression. That is, high enrolment does not guarantee children's continued school attendance. A World Bank study has found that among the 60 per cent of children who join grade one, about 25 per cent drop out at first grade, and by Grade 5 about half of them have dropped out (World Bank 2005: 59-60). Poverty contributes substantially to high drop-out rates. For example, only 71 per cent of children from the poorest quintile of Ethiopian households are likely to join first grade, with a completion rate of 65 per cent in Grade 4 and 42 per cent in Grade 8 (*ibid.*). These figures suggest that as school enrolment increases, more children from poor families drop out before finishing. Children from poor families often lack the necessary things they need for schooling (e.g. they are unable to buy educational materials or to cover small school contributions such as fees for textbooks and expansion of classrooms); instead they are forced to engage in wage labour to generate income for survival of their household.

As a study of childhood poverty, *Young Lives* focuses on children living in poor communities and poor households. National data indicate that about 38 per cent of Ethiopian households live below the national poverty line (MoFED 2006), as opposed to about 69 per cent of the *Young Lives* sample households. More than 74 per cent of the households in the five communities explored in this study live below the poverty line<sup>7</sup>. The Ethiopian *Young Lives* team used a multi-stage, purposive sampling method to select 20 sentinel communities (Alemu et al 2003). Within the communities, a younger cohort of 2,000 children born in 2000/1 and an older cohort of 1,000 children born in 1994/5 were randomly selected. While all attempts were made to make equal gender representation, the ratio of rural to urban children was 3 to 2.<sup>8</sup>

This paper is based on the *Young Lives* Ethiopia survey results of 2002 and 2006 and on qualitative data gathered in 2007 and 2008 from the five communities. The two urban communities are in the capital city, Addis Ababa, and Hawassa, the capital of the Southern Nationalities, Nations and People's region, while the rural communities are in the Amhara, Oromia and Tigray regions. They are named as Atkilt-tera, Leku, Tach-meret, Leki and Semhal respectively.<sup>9</sup>

Atkilt-tera is a very poor neighbourhood where there are serious housing problems. People make their living by selling *injera*,<sup>10</sup> washing clothes and daily labour. Children are also involved in such activities. As it is near the capital's fruit and vegetable market, adults and children have some work opportunities such as retailing, working as porters and renting small stores. In the neighbourhood there are public and government primary schools and private pre-schools. Poor children have little access to the private schools and healthcare institutions in the locality.

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7 Households below the poverty line were considered those who were unable to consume a minimum of 2,200 kilocalories per day plus essential non-food items (Woldehanna et al 2008).

8 It seems, however, urban children are overrepresented in the whole *Young Lives* study because the rural to urban ratio of the whole population is about 6 to 1. About 86.7 per cent of children aged 10 to 14, live in rural areas (CSA 2008).

9 Actual names are replaced by pseudonyms to respect the anonymity of communities.

10 Pancake made mainly with *tef* (cereal found in the Ethiopian Highlands), basic staple food in the Ethiopian diet.

Leku, located at the centre of Hawassa city, was the first place of settlement. Residents are very poor, living on daily labour, street vending or other casual income-generating activities. There are private, community and government schools in the neighbourhood but children from poor families attend the government schools, which provide low-quality education.

The three rural communities have similar characteristics in terms of livelihood opportunities, with agriculture their main means. As the communities are very poor, the government runs Productive Safety Net Programs (PSNP) to ensure food security for poor families. In these communities, although the programmes prohibit children's involvement, there is evidence that older children participate in PSNP work. Other activities in the communities usually involve child work. In Tach-meret community, for example, private-sector haricot bean production and construction works have largely involved children as wage labourers. In Leki community a big irrigation project and production of flowers and vegetables for export in the neighbouring areas have attracted child labour. At Semhal small irrigation, stone crusher plants and construction works are widespread and children are hired for cash. The rural communities have government primary schools but no pre-schools. As parents need their children's labour for domestic work or income generation, schools provide education in shifts (morning or afternoon).<sup>11</sup>

## 4. Method

### 4.1 Data collection

As this study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, the number of participants varies depending on the methods used. In the survey, 250 children born in 1994/5 were drawn from the five communities, with 50 children from each community. For the qualitative in-depth investigations 30 case-children (equal numbers of boys and girls) were sub-sampled from the 250.

The surveys were carried out in two rounds, in 2002 and 2006, when the children were aged 8 and 12 respectively. In both rounds children were asked: *What do you want to be when you grow up?* During the second round, questions on educational aspirations were added, and children were asked: *What level of education would you like to complete?* Data on children's grade levels and schooling situations were collected.

The qualitative fieldwork was carried out in 2007 and 2008 when the children were aged 13 and 14 respectively. In 2007 *Life course – draw-and tell* was used to record children's happy and sad experiences and future hopes and worries. In 2008, *School timeline* was used to depict children's detailed individual school histories and school pathways, plus future educational aspirations and associated concerns. In both rounds of fieldwork these exercises were followed by in-depth interviews that involved discussing the children's future educational and occupational aspirations, the expected barriers to achieving them, their educational levels and the challenges they experienced. Discussions also addressed why some children changed or dropped their initial ambitions.

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11 In the last few years, the government's plan to introduce full-day schools in the country was challenged in rural areas. For example, in the *Young Lives* sites, we have data indicating that parents refused to send their children to school full day and so the school administrations were forced to give up their full-day schooling plan.

## 4.2 Data analysis

The survey data were organised using SPSS software. Descriptive tables were extracted on children's educational and occupational ambitions and grade levels. These reflected gender differences and variations in living areas. For the qualitative data, all individual interviews were entered into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software package used for managing, organising and coding the data. Data on future expectations of schooling and occupation as well as schooling progression were pulled out. Then the data were organised thematically to see the effect of community context, gender and personal experiences on aspirations and achievements. Tables are used to depict ambitions and educational levels. Some case studies are presented with the aim of illustrating aspirations, impediments to achievements and school pathways. These are also intended to reflect gender, rural/urban location and family background.

# 5. Results

The key findings of this study are presented in three sections. The first section addresses children's educational and occupational aspirations while the second section discusses their educational achievement. The final section investigates the barriers to achievement drawing on in-depth qualitative data, including illustrative case studies.

## 5.1 Educational and occupational aspirations

The results suggest that children's educational expectations were largely based on their occupational aspirations. They aspired to reach a certain level of education in order to ensure that they would qualify for their desired occupation when they grew up. Both educational and occupational aspirations are presented below.

Data on children's educational aspirations were collected only during the second round of the survey. They were asked: *What level of education would you like to complete?* 244 children responded, and results are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** *Aspired educational levels of children aged 12 (no= 241)*

	All		Urban (no=94)		Rural (no=147)	
	N	%	male %	female %	male %	female %
Grade 10	15	6.2	3.2	0.0	5.4	2.7
Grade 12	39	16.2	4.3	2.1	12.9	9.5
Vocational	12	5.0	1.1	1.1	6.1	0.7
University	174	72.2	34.0	54.2	29.3	32.7
Religious education	1	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.7	0.0

Source: Young Lives Ethiopia Survey, 2006

Some children aspired to the highest-possible achievement levels. A large number (72.2 per cent) of them hoped to finish university and a further 20 per cent wanted to at least finish secondary school. Gender and living areas provide greater contexts for disparities. Nearly 87 per cent of the girls sought to attend university education as compared to 63.3 per cent of the boys. On the other hand, there is a disparity in the responses of children from different locations. More than 88 per cent of urban children hoped to have a university education as

opposed to 61.9 per cent who lived in rural communities. Similar trends of difference by gender and location are evident among the qualitative research case-study children. Nine of the 12 children from the urban communities and eight of the 18 rural children wished to join university, of which nine were girls and eight boys.

Children were also asked about their ultimate educational aspirations in terms of expected occupations. They had varied responses. Children aspiring to professional and high-status occupations assumed they would attain the highest-possible educational levels. As shown in Table 2, they were asked when they were 8 and 12 years old and the results suggest some variations across age, gender and locations. Most children aspired to the occupations they perceived as best, and wanted to keep these aspirations even as they grow older. A third of all children had the ambition of becoming doctors and the figure rose to more than 42 per cent when they reached the age of 12.

As they grew older, children tended to change their initial aspirations. For example, as indicated in Table 2, when they were 8 years old the most popular job was teaching (about 42 per cent) but this figure dropped sharply after four years to less than 20 per cent. This would suggest that children had learnt what the more high-status occupations were. At an earlier age no child mentioned any prospective occupations such as engineer, scientist, lawyer, lecturer or civil servant. After four years, they dropped ambitions like becoming housewives or soldiers. For example, a large number of them (17 per cent) have realised that being a civil servant is an occupation that they could aspire to when they were 12, but never knew about when they were 8 years old. Understanding of what is best but also what is achievable comes through experience and age. The longitudinal data reveal that some children have dropped their initial aspirations perhaps because they have learnt that they could not be achieved.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 2:** *Occupational aspirations of children aged 8 and 12*

	8-year-old (no=247)				12-year-old (no=242)			
	All		Urban (no=98)	Rural (no=149)	All		Urban (no=98)	Rural (no=149)
	N	%	%	%	N	%	%	%
Doctor	77	31.2	53.0	16.7	105	43.9	56.4	35.8
Teacher	105	42.5	19.4	57.7	47	19.4	1.0	31.1
Driver	6	2.4	3.0	2.0	3	1.2	1.0	1.3
Pilot	1	0.4	1.0	–	4	1.6	3.2	0.7
Leader of country	3	1.2	1.0	1.3	1	0.4	1.0	–
Sportsman	3	1.2	3.0	–	4	1.6	4.2	–
Farmer	17	6.9	4.1	8.7	1	0.4	–	0.7
Trader	7	2.8	4.1	2.0	2	0.8	2.1	–
Policeman	11	4.4	6.1	3.3	–	–	–	–
Housewife	2	0.8	2.0	–	–	–	–	–
Nurse	2	0.8	–	1.3	11	4.5	3.2	5.4
Soldier	3	1.2	–	2.0	–	–	–	–
Artist	–	–	–	–	2	0.8	2.1	–

<sup>12</sup> For example, among the three children who had anticipated becoming leaders of the country, only one has maintained his initial aspiration.

**Table 2:** Occupational aspirations of children aged 8 and 12 continued

	8-year-old (no=247)				12-year-old (no=242)			
	All		Urban (no=98)	Rural (no=149)	All		Urban (no=98)	Rural (no=149)
	N	%	%	%	N	%	%	%
Civil servant	–	–	–	–	42	17.3	11.7	20.9
Engineer	–	–	–	–	11	4.5	8.5	2.0
Lawyer	–	–	–	–	3	7.1	1.0	1.3
Lecturer	–	–	–	–	1	0.4	1.0	–
Mechanic	–	–	–	–	2	0.8	2.1	–
Scientist	–	–	–	–	1	0.4	1.0	–
Traditional occupation	–	–	–	–	1	0.4	1.0	–
Religious leader	–	–	–	–	1	0.4	–	0.7
Unclear	10	4.0	–	–	–	–	–	0.7

Source: Young Lives Ethiopia Survey, 2002 & 2006

Gender variations were evident in the results of the surveys suggesting that some occupations are gender-stereotyped. While nursing was seen as being predominantly for girls, being a driver, a police officer or a soldier were viewed as being for boys. Across ages, the gender difference is strongly reflected. Girls aspired to higher-status occupations when they reached the age of 12. For example, the number of girls who sought to be teachers dropped from 67 to 23, whereas it increased from 43 to 63 for being doctors. This means more than half (51.2 per cent) wanted to be doctors.

Rural/urban location was found to be another reason for variations in children's aspirations. Urban children seemed to have been more aware of higher-status occupations than rural children and accordingly desired to achieve them. More than half the urban children had the ambition of becoming doctors as opposed to one-third of the rural ones. On the other hand, at the age of 8, more than half (56 per cent) of the rural children aspired to be teachers compared to only one in five urban children. This suggests that children aim for the best-possible occupations available in their community which is why for urban children, being a doctor (53 per cent), and for rural children, being a teacher (57.7 per cent), were the top choices.

Location seems to influence children's aspirations most at an early age. For example, though at the age of 8 some urban children had wanted to be farmers<sup>13</sup>, none of them maintained that desire when they reached the age of 12. None of the rural children mentioned any occupations like being a scientist, a lecturer or a mechanic, as opposed to urban children, who anticipated these as possible careers at the age of 12.

## 5.2 Educational levels

The Ethiopian *Young Lives* survey results indicate a large increase in school enrolment of children between the ages of 8 and 12. About 66 per cent of children aged 8 were enrolled in school, and this increased to about 94 per cent when they were 12 years old. While the gender difference was insignificant, location was a cause of huge disparities. Comparing the two rounds (at the ages of 8 and 12) the enrolment rate for rural children increased from 55

13 Farming is usually considered as a job for uneducated rural people. Children who want to push further in school do not wish to end up as farmers.

per cent to 92 per cent, whereas in urban areas it rose from 82 per cent to 97 per cent. Poverty seems an insignificant cause of variation in terms of enrolment. At the age of 12, about 91 per cent of children from the poorest households were in school as compared to 93 per cent from better-off households (Woldehanna et al 2008).

However, a high proportion of children who were enrolled in school were attending grades below the expected levels. At the age of 12, they could be expected to reach at least Grade 5 but 62 per cent were in Grade 4 or below (see Table 3). Nearly half of the girls were able to achieve the expected grade level as opposed to only a quarter of boys.

**Table 3:** *Grade level of children aged 12 (no=237)*

Grade level	All		Male	Female	Urban	Rural
	N	%	n=113 %	n=95 %	n=124 %	n=142 %
1	18	7.4	9.7	5.6	1.0	11.9
2	28	11.5	15.9	8.0	2.1	18.3
3	37	15.2	15.9	15.3	8.4	20.4
4	68	27.9	33.6	24.2	28.4	28.8
5	38	15.6	11.5	20.2	23.1	11.2
6	37	15.2	12.4	18.5	27.3	7.7
7	8	3.3	0.0	6.5	7.3	0.7
8	2	0.8	0.0	1.6	1.0	0.7
9	1	0.4	0.9	0.0	1.0	0.0

Source: Young Lives Ethiopia Survey, 2006

Location also seems to relate to level of grades achieved. While 60 per cent<sup>14</sup> of urban children achieved the expected level of schooling, only about 20 per cent of the rural children did. Half of the rural children were below Grade 4. In general, the average highest grade completed was 4, with rural children mostly in Grade 3 (average 3.4) and urban children in Grade 5 (average 4.9). Among the 30 children included in the qualitative study in 2008, only eight children had achieved the expected grade of 7 at the age of 14. A third of them were below Grade 5, of which all except one were rural children.

The reasons for lower grade level in relation to age are mainly late entry to school and subsequent drop-out. More than half (54.2 per cent) of the children reported that they had started full-time schooling by the age of 7. Although there was little gender variation, location was strongly associated with age of entry into school. While 82.1 per cent of urban children were able to join school by the age of 7, only a third of the rural children managed to do so. More than half of the urban children had entered schooling before the age of 7 as opposed to less than 10 per cent of the rural children. The qualitative data indicated that none of the rural children had been admitted into pre-schools while all the urban children had experienced some type of schooling before they joined formal primary school. While 10 of the 12 urban children started school at 7 or before, only two of the 18 rural children did. As noted earlier, this is mainly due to the non-availability of pre-schools in rural areas. But it goes beyond that, because rural children have reported that they were obliged to start work before schooling and that that delayed their first entry. For example, 10 of the 18 rural

<sup>14</sup> A considerable number of these children seem to have reached grade levels above those expected. This is mainly because some urban children started schooling before the age of 7 as there is no strict policy on the lower age of school enrolment.

children started school between the ages of 9 and 12 years. Although overall, gender variation was insignificant, more rural boys entered school later than girls. Male respondents reported that they had to be involved in agricultural activities that prohibited them from joining school early. On the other hand, though the figures show an increase in enrolment between Round 1 and Round 2, there is also significant drop-out rate. In Round 2, 60 per cent of children (see Table 3) were unable to reach the expected grade level, suggesting they have experienced certain drop-outs. Children not only had a variable age of first entry but were also experiencing diverse school pathways. The next section discusses this using in-depth qualitative evidence.

### 5.3 Aspirations, levels of achievements and barriers

As noted above, the survey results suggest that rural and urban children had different starting points mainly because of unequal access to pre-schools. Other reasons for some children dropping out were the distance of school from home, unfriendly schools (for example, teachers and older children beating newcomers, dirty toilets and school compounds, etc), work and school costs. Some children could enter school when they were able to travel the distance to the nearest school. Others reported that they declined to go to school because of harassment by teachers or older students. The qualitative data confirms many of the survey results. For example, children reported that they have been 'beaten', 'insulted', or 'bullied' by their teachers. When a boy was asked what he hates in school, he replied that it was the harassment by his teacher:

Our teacher told us to write down what she wrote on the blackboard. I wrote it nicely, but some students made mistakes. Then the teacher tore out the exercise books of those who did do well and continued to beat them. Finally, she ordered them to buy new exercise books and rewrite properly. (Defar, 14, Tach-Meret)

The qualitative data also provides some insight into why children have different school levels, why some keep their educational aspirations and others not, and the barriers to achievement. The research results are summarised in Table 4 and extracted examples from the case-study children are presented in Table 5. For the 30 case-study children sampled for the qualitative research, detailed data are presented in three ways: first, occupational aspirations at the ages of 8 and 12 from the surveys; secondly, educational aspirations at the ages of 12 and 14 using both survey and qualitative data; and thirdly, school levels and barriers to achievement at the age of 14 using qualitative data. The main purpose is to discuss how children's aspirations changed after they encountered barriers to their achievements.

As in the survey, the case-study children for the qualitative studies had varied aspirations in terms of occupations and schooling. The data indicate that children had high aspirations for future occupations between the ages of 8 and 12 but these declined by the age of 14.

**Table 4:** *Children's aspirations, educational levels, perceived barriers and changes*

Background			Occupational aspiration		Educational aspiration		Grade level, barriers, alterations of aspirations		
Pseudo name	Sex	Living area	8 years	12 years	12 years	14 years	Grade level	Reported barriers to schooling	Alteration of aspirations
Netsa	Female	Urban	Teacher	Civil servant	Secondary	University/Secondary	9	Worries poor family may not finance her university education if succeeds	Just to complete secondary and go to an Arab country to work and support family
Miki	Male	Urban	Pilot	Doctor	University	University	8	Poor school performance	If fails to be engineer, he wishes to be footballer
Genet	Female	Urban	Pilot	Engineer	University	University	8	Studying hard guarantees joining university	Maintained desire to join university if she studies hard and to become physician
Mulutwiwa	Female	Rural	Teacher	Doctor	University	University	7	Results began deteriorating following her start of daily labour	Worries she may drop out and engage in early marriage to have child
Bereket	Male	Urban	Footballer	Civil servant	University	University/mechanic	7	Work for cash affecting school performance	If does not join university, He wants own garage
Yordi	Female	Urban	Doctor	Civil servant	University	University	7	Death of father forced her to move from private to public school and affected her performance	She hopes through hard work and mother's support she will finish university, but also wants to be an athlete
Haftay	Female	Rural	Teacher	Civil servant	University	University	7	Orphan, helps old grandmother with daily labour and sometimes misses class	Maintained joining university
Fanus	Female	Rural	Doctor	Doctor	Secondary	Secondary	7	Has good family support	Dropped from becoming doctor to just finishing secondary
Sefinesh	Female	Rural	Doctor	Doctor	10 <sup>th</sup>	Grade 8/secondary	6	Sorcerer said grandfather (caregiver) will die after two years and she worries will have no support to pursue her education further	Dropped being doctor and only hoped to finish Grade 8, if possible Grade 12.
Yitbarek	Male	Urban	Driver	Civil servant	University	University	6	Heavy daily labour affecting education	Doubtful of joining university
Seifu	Male	Urban	Doctor	Engineer	University	Secondary	6	Dropped once and failed in Grade 5 because of poor performances	Dropped from joining university to just finishing secondary
Tagessu	Male	Urban	Doctor	Doctor	University	Secondary	6	School owner conflict led to missing one year of schooling	Dropped from joining university to finishing secondary
Biritu	Female	Rural	Teacher	Teacher	University	Secondary	6	Household chores and daily labour affecting school attendance and performance	Dropped joining university, instead opting for finishing secondary school
Dembel	Male	Urban	Doctor	Civil servant	University	Secondary	6	Father died and family hit by hunger, so he dropped out to assist daily labourer mother; plans to start daily labour himself	He dropped joining university, even doubts finishing secondary, and plans to start daily labour to support starving family
Sami	Male	Urban	Policeman	Trader	Secondary	University/footballer	5	Poor school performance	To be doctor or footballer
Fatima	Female	Urban	Doctor	Pilot	University	University	5	Long-term illness and helping mother wash clothes for cash; worries about possible rape in the community	Fears that she may fail exam and may not join university
Mihretu	Male	Rural	Teacher	Civil servant	4 <sup>th</sup>	University	5	Dropped because of school distance; work for cash	Hopes to join university
Haymanot	Female	Rural	Teacher	Doctor	University	10 <sup>th</sup>	5	Due to illness of mother and poverty she works for cash and worries she may not finish secondary	Dropped hope of finishing university, now uncertain about finishing secondary. She wants to marry earlier
Kassaye	Male	Rural	Teacher	Doctor	University	Secondary	5	Cannot afford to continue because of poverty	Wants to breed livestock and become rich
Habtamu	Male	Rural	Teacher	Civil servant	Secondary	Secondary	5	Repetition because of injury during work; working for cash	Hoped to finish secondary school

**Table 4:** *Children's aspirations, educational levels, perceived barriers and changes*

continued

Background			Occupational aspiration		Educational aspiration		Grade level, barriers, alterations of aspirations		
Pseudo name	Sex	Living area	8 years	12 years	12 years	14 years	Grade level	Reported barriers to schooling	Alteration of aspirations
Yanalem	Female	Rural	Teacher	Teacher	Secondary	Secondary	4	Late entry (at 9), daily labour and household chores are affecting her education and may fail in exams	Not sure whether she can finish secondary school
Mesih	Male	Rural	Farmer	Civil servant	University	Secondary	4	Interrupted for four years due to workload and illness. Now workload risks his education	Dropped going to university and aspires to finish secondary
Hassen	Male	Rural	Teacher	Doctor	University	University	3	Joined school at 10 due to work and illness; engaged in daily labour	Maintained aspirations despite low grade level
Tsega	Female	Urban	Housewife	Doctor	Secondary	Secondary	3	Repeatedly dropped because of hunger and not understanding the lesson. Poor mother unable to afford further schooling	Dropped aspirations to be doctor and aims at finishing secondary school. Early marriage a possibility
Beletech	Female	Rural	Doctor	Doctor	Secondary	Secondary	3	Being orphan, her caregivers overburdened her with heavy work (daily labour, household chores) and repeated classes	Dropped from becoming doctor to just finishing secondary
Defar	Male	Rural	Teacher	Teacher	n/a	Secondary/farmer	2	Due to heavy work (carrying stones for sale, agriculture) and associated illness (epilepsy), he joined school at 12 and fears he will not progress further	Had aspired to complete secondary and become teacher, but if not will be a farmer
Desta	Male	Rural	Teacher	Driver	10 <sup>th</sup>	Secondary	2	Continuously ill; engaged in heavy work (family and daily labour) which forced late start (at 11) and frequent drop-out of school	Uncertain of finishing school and becoming teacher/ prime minister, if not to be rich farmer
Ayu	Female	Rural	Teacher	Teacher	University	Secondary	2	Mother's and own long illness; heavy work (family and daily labour) forced frequent drop-out, but completed Grade 1 in six years; she repeated four times. Worries of possible abduction and early marriage	Dropped ambition of finishing university to being uncertain about secondary school, and finally to marry before finishing school
Gemechu	Male	Rural	Policeman	Teacher	Secondary	Just to start	1	Poor parents forced him to work; he joined Grade 1 but dropped and works as wage labourer	Hoped to be teacher but now wants to be rich farmer
Gebre	Male	Rural	Teacher	Priest	Religious education	Religious education	0	Works herding and farming; no formal schooling	Maintained to be priest

Children's changing aspirations seem to be associated with the grade level achieved. Those who achieved higher grade levels tended to maintain their higher educational ambitions as opposed to those who were at the lower grade levels. As presented in Table 5, at the age of 14, only eight children had achieved the expected grade level of 7 but all except one of these had maintained their desire to join university. Among them, more girls (five) and urban children (five) had better school achievements and higher aspirations.

**Table 5:** *Summary of changing educational aspirations of case-study children (no=30)*

Grade levels	N	Aspirations at 12		Aspirations at 14	
		University	Secondary & Below	University	Secondary & below
7 and above	8	6	2	7	1
5 & 6	12	8	4	4	8
0 – 4	10	3	7	1	9
Sex					
Female	15	9	6	6	9
Male	15	8	7	6	9
Location					
Urban	12	9	3	9	3
Rural	18	9	9	3	15

Source: Young Lives Ethiopia Survey 2006 and Qualitative Fieldwork 2008

In contrast, the other 22 children were below the expected grade level and about 19 of them had educational aspirations below university, with eight of them dropping their initial ambition of being doctors.

Interestingly, high initial ambitions suggest better schooling achievements. As indicated in the appendix, for instance, the 14 (9 urban and 5 rural) children who reached Grade 6 to 9 set up relatively high ambitions when they were 8. Among them, six wished to be doctors, four to be teachers, two pilots, and only the remaining expected to end up being a driver or footballer.

On the other hand, increase in age appears to reduce the magnitude of aspirations. The qualitative data suggest that at an earlier age children had higher aspirations but that later on these were reduced significantly. For example, five of the 17 children who had initially wished to go to university changed their aspirations, ending up by hoping just to finish secondary school. Of course, the changes were multidirectional. Children who were asked about their educational ambitions at the age of 12 had different responses when they were asked at the age of 14 in the qualitative interviews.<sup>15</sup> Eighteen children maintained their initial ambition and 10 lowered it, while only two increased it.

Such changes of aspiration increased significantly as children grew older, despite their initial high value for education and hope for achievements. The survey results from five communities indicated that about 98.8 per cent of the children aged 12 considered education important to their future life. They had such high ambitions that 70.1 per cent aspired to finish university, with 94.9 per cent hoping to achieve this. But qualitative data collected after two years suggested a different reality. As explained above, some had changed their ambitions and most were altering their initial expectations. Children experienced different schooling achievements because they lived in different contexts.

Diverse barriers to their school levels and associated alterations to their aspirations were reported in the qualitative study. Late entry to school and dropping out put children at different levels of schooling. As discussed earlier, late entry into school was much more common among rural children. Children who enter school late are highly likely to combine

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps children could express themselves better to a qualitative researcher with whom they had a good rapport than to survey enumerators.

both work and education, and when work affects educational attendance and performance, they easily drop out and work full time.

Data collected in 2008, using a school timeline, recorded that half (15) of the qualitative research sub-sampled children have dropped out of school once or more. Their repetition rate ranged from repetition (one year) to four repetitions. While children's locations were significant for drop-out rates, gender differences were not. Nine of the 15 in the sample were from rural areas as opposed to six urban children, but eight girls compared to seven boys experienced interruptions since they started school.

Children reported that paid work, illness, the inability to afford school materials, poor school performance, family shocks (illnesses, death and imprisonment), and migration had contributed to school interruptions. These are the same for children from all communities and boys as well as girls. But the work burden and poor school performances were more apparent among rural and urban children respectively. Almost all rural children and some of the urban children were engaged in some type of work to generate income for their families. For example, in Leki all children worked in irrigation, fishing (boys) and work associated with PSNP. In Tach-meret children were engaged in quarrying, PSNP and haricot bean picking, while in Semhal they were engaged in stone crusher plants, PSNP and irrigation. Some urban children were working as car washers, leading horse carts, supporting mothers who wash clothes and baking *injera* for cash. Work, which sometimes makes school attendance possible for poor children (by enabling them to earn cash for survival and to buy school materials), has come up as one of the main reasons for children's poorer school achievements and has also led to the lowering of aspirations. Some examples extracted from Table 4 are described below. An orphaned rural girl described her work both at home and in the irrigation fields thus:

I will finish school after eight years. I am overburdened by being involved in daily labour and household chores. I wanted to continue my education further and wished to be a doctor. But I expect to be actually a teacher. I will not achieve my goals because I have no time to study. (Beletech, 14, Leki)

She wants to finish school after eight years because at the age of 14 she was only in Grade 3 due to school interruptions. She dropped her aspirations of becoming a doctor reported in both rounds of the survey. Now she was 14 she only hoped that she would finish secondary school and be a teacher.

Changes of aspirations do not only mean changes in ambition towards certain school levels and types of jobs. They also mean jumping into other life transitions. Some children have reported that they would consider starting full-time work, for example as casual labourers, or waged labourers in private institutions and garages. For some girls, early marriage was an option that would come before finishing school. An example is Tsega; a poor urban girl with high earlier aspirations but who over time began to doubt whether she would even finish secondary school and started speculating about early marriage.

*Interviewer:* Now tell me what you think about the future?

*Tesga:* I want to finish my education and graduate. After I get a job I want to build a big house for my mother and take care of her. I also want to build a big house for myself and provide my child with everything that he needs.

*Interviewer:* What kind of job?

*Tesga:* To be either a doctor or a secretary.

*Interviewer:* At what age do you want to get married?

*Tesga:* I want to marry when I will be 15.

*Interviewer:* Is it before or after you finish your school?

*Tesga:* I won't finish school then.

*Interviewer:* Doesn't that [marriage] stop you from becoming a doctor or a secretary?

*Tesga:* I prefer to learn but if I cannot, I would rather work than waiting for this.

Initially, Tsega had wanted to complete university and become a doctor. But during her second qualitative interview a year later she reassessed her educational position and economic status and changed her aspirations. She joined school at 9 and her school performance has been weak because reportedly she 'doesn't understand the lesson because of hunger' as she usually goes to school without food. Her mother, a daily labourer, was not able to feed her family and Tsega feels she needs to help her mother by working for cash. Her Grade 3 schooling may well give way to another transition – early marriage in about a year or so.

Children not only assessed what they were experiencing now, but also speculated about the future. An uncertain future forces them to adjust their goals and consider other life ambitions. A girl from Leki community, where abductions<sup>16</sup> are common, feared that she would soon marry through abduction. She said,

I wanted to be a doctor and my family also shares this. But actually I may marry through abduction earlier and drop out of school. In the community there is risk of abduction and that is my worry. As a result my ambition might not happen. (Biritu, Leki)

Biritu, who works as a daily labourer, has tried to continue her education despite a low level of performance. But her Grade 6 school level is not a guarantee for her ambition of finishing university and becoming a doctor. In 2008, she reported that she would just try to finish secondary school but that the cultural context of early marriage through abduction would risk that. Abduction would bring huge bride wealth<sup>17</sup> to her family and is widely practised in the community. Not only did she give up the idea of going to university and becoming a doctor but also finishing secondary school itself was at risk. This suggests she may continue to modify her aspirations in the future.

Another girl from Tach-meret, Sefinesh attending Grade 6, feared she could soon drop out of school because a sorcerer had told the family that her 'grandfather will die within the next two years'. She felt she would be left without any support to continue her education and hoped only to reach Grade 8 which was when the sorcerer had predicted her grandfather would die. She set aside her earlier ambition of becoming a doctor.

Most urban children tend to associate their changes in aspiration with poor educational performance. Being poor means being in public schools where a relatively low quality of

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16 In the community, girls are sometimes abducted forcefully or voluntarily. A boy may abduct a girl whom he wishes to marry or the girl and her boyfriend may agree the abduction carries on. Involuntary abduction has recently dropped because the girls and their parents may report the abductor to the local authorities who impose huge punishments on the abductors. Nowadays, voluntary abduction is happening more because the girls' willingness stops the parents reporting to the authorities. Instead they settle for some compensation in the form of bride wealth.

17 If a girl is abducted, there is more likelihood that this will lead to marriage through the mediation of the elders. What is important is the provision of bride wealth for the girl's parents by the boy's parents in the form of money, cattle or other valuable assets.

education is evident, exacerbated by inability to afford educational materials, hunger and lack of support, all of which threaten poor children's achievements. For example, three children from the Leku community reported that their school achievements were significantly affected by hunger. They planned to start income-generating activities alongside their schooling.

In the context of poverty and an uncertain future, many children, as they get older, tend to acknowledge the advantages of either combining education with paid work or dropping out of school to experience other life transitions. Hence, educational levels reveal the interplay between achievements and aspirations. The qualitative data suggest that very few children were maintaining their aspirations; instead most were altering or dropping the ambitions they had had at an earlier age. At the time when the data were collected, however, none of them has fully given up hope, though some are on the verge of stopping schooling.

## 6. Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, I would like to discuss two issues: the link between aspirations and school experiences; and the structural impediments that militate against ambitions and school achievements. I will first examine the linkage between aspirations (both occupational and educational) and school pathways. Then, I'll investigate the structural impediments of poverty, policy contexts and location.

The findings have suggested that high occupational aspirations influence schooling ambitions. Those who desire a high-status job also wanted to achieve higher levels of education. Conversely, those who attained the correct grade level for their age maintained their high aspirations. Aspirations, however, were altered when children began to assess them in relation to their schooling achievements in the course of their educational pathways. For example, children with a lower educational level compared with their age tried also to lower their initial aspirations. Hence, aspirations and school achievements are inseparable components, which continue to interact in the process of children's educational pathways. This relates to other research results that suggest educational aspiration can be a predictor of educational achievements (Kao and Thompson 2003). In other words, higher aspirations are associated with high achievements, while lower achievements may result in a lowering of aspirations.

Moreover, the findings show that children had initially aspired to higher schooling and jobs. High aspirations showed that children had the desire to move out of poor family backgrounds. But when they were interviewed for a third time, few seemed confident that they would be able to achieve this. There are many reasons why they are unlikely to achieve their childhood aspirations. Poverty, policy contexts and location, however, emerged strongly. Initial aspirations suggest that children from poor families perceived few impediments to aspiring to the highest achievements. But poverty visibly impacted on their school achievements, directly influenced them to alter or drop their initial ambitions. So the conclusion is that poverty rarely impacts on the initial aspirations of children but rather forces alterations at a later stage. As discussed above, poor school performance causes the alteration of early ambitions and poor children who drop out because of poverty correspondingly reduce their aspirations. Though educational aspirations can be predictors of eventual educational achievements (Kao and Thompson 2003), poverty remains a strong impediment.

The policy context also has an impact on children's aspirations and achievements. We have seen earlier in the *Study Context* section that Ethiopian education policy provides different opportunities and constraints for children. For example, the lack of government pre-schools in the country meant that rural children and poor urban children have no access to pre-schools at all. The consequence is a delay in the start of schooling which affects both aspirations and progression considerably. Based on his analysis of the Ethiopian Rural Household Survey (ERHS) of 1994, Admassie asserted that schoolchildren were likely to drop out because of their delayed enrolment age (Admassie 2003: 176). The other impact was that late entry often hindered linear school progression. As there were no pre-schools, rural children started working before they started school and that had a subsequent effect on their education. Parents who had already benefited from their children's labour wanted them to continue combining education with work, with the likelihood of poor school attendance and eventual drop-out. As discussed above, lower school achievements meant revisiting aspirations and probably altering them. That would imply lower attainments. Timing of school entry and continuity of schooling are important indicators of whether or not children are on the right track to achieve their ambitions.

A closely related structure that sets different contexts for children was their location. Little exposure to available job options and higher education tended to limit rural children's ambitions. For example, at the age of 8 most aspired to be teachers as opposed to more urban children who sought to be doctors. More urban children aspired to finish university than did rural children.

Rural children also achieved lower grade levels. Though all lived in poverty, the rural settings offered more opportunities for children to do paid work at the expense of their education. Besides family work, they were required to work in development programs including the government-run PSNP. Though educational achievements are usually seen as an ordered sequence of educational transitions (Pallas 2003), poor children have to mix education with other transitions or experience movements in and out of school. They are missing classes which seems to lead to a lowering of ambitions and sometimes consideration of other options (e.g. girls' early marriage and full-time work). As they grow up, the gender difference will likely be reversed. For example, these data suggest that girls had both higher school grade levels and higher aspirations to join university than boys. But this does not guarantee this will remain the same amid the many other transitions risks girls will face. The consequence is, therefore, that children who have had to go through mixed transitions or with disordered sequences of schooling are at the same time forced to continually alter their aspirations<sup>18</sup>.

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18 Understanding this requires following their educational progression through longitudinal and integrated methods (survey and qualitative investigations).

## 7. Conclusion

This paper suggests that children were overly optimistic at an earlier age but that their ambitions decline as they grew up. Initial ambitions tend to transcend any structural constraints. Over time, however, aspirations declined. High aspirations were associated with better achievements, and high grade achievements helped maintain high ambitions.

Structures of poverty, policy and location (rural/urban) influence aspirations and achievements and were evidently impediments to children's achievements. As these are findings where children were in the process of experiencing school pathways, the interplay between aspirations and school achievements was very clear. But to see the final outcomes, we will need to wait until they fully leave school and we are able to assess their occupations.

Investigating such processes rather than outcomes would be appropriate not only to gain some knowledge but also to call for appropriate policy interventions. The suggestion is, therefore, that policy interventions, instead of becoming a cause of difference, as discussed in this paper, should instead help children realise their aspirations. Proper support would enable children to continue their education, which might ensure they maintain and achieve their initial high ambitions. A few suggested examples of the sorts of interventions which might provide better support are described below. Providing wider access to pre-schools in rural areas so that rural children start schooling at the appropriate age; and providing more government pre-schools in the urban areas, which are aimed to increase access for the more marginalised children, would also help to enable poor urban children to go to school like their peers. Quality of education needs to be improved so that children acquire better knowledge. Poor student-teacher relationships remain a barrier to school attendance and this needs to be explored in greater depth. There is also a need to address the drop-out of poor children because of illness or work for cash. For example, though there are many benefits to the PSNP programme, there also is evidence the scheme has increased children's work (Woldehana 2009), suggesting policy makers should look at how PSNP design could be improved to better support children in education. Though at this stage girls have higher aspirations and grade levels, they are more likely to face school interruptions associated with other fast-approaching transitions such as early marriage, early parenthood and other risks. All these need to be addressed.

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**Young Lives is an innovative long-term international research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty.**

The project seeks to:

- improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and to examine how policies affect children's well-being
- inform the development and implementation of future policies and practices that will reduce childhood poverty.

Young Lives is tracking the development of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam through quantitative and qualitative research over a 15-year period.

## Young Lives Partners

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

Ethiopian Development Research Institute,  
Ethiopia

Centre for Economic and Social Sciences,  
Andhra Pradesh, India

Save the Children – Bal Raksha Bharat, India

Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visvavidyalayam  
(Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India

Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo  
(Group for the Analysis of Development), Peru

Instituto de Investigación Nutricional  
(Institute for Nutritional Research), Peru

Centre for Analysis and Forecast,  
Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences,  
Vietnam

General Statistics Office, Vietnam

Save the Children, Vietnam

The Institute of Education, University of  
London, UK

Child and Youth Studies Group (CREET),  
The Open University, UK

Department of International Development,  
University of Oxford, UK

Save the Children UK  
(staff in the Policy Department in London  
and programme staff in Ethiopia).



**Young Lives**   
An International Study of Childhood Poverty

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