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Research note

School to Work Transition among Vulnerable Youth in Kenya: Focusing on Students' and Parents' Aspirations

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Abstract

With the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, particularly target 4.4 on skills for decent employment, education policies in many countries have shifted towards employability and further education. However, research suggests that students, even in employment-oriented fields, are not solely motivated by immediate job prospects but also by aspirations linked to self-identity and self-worth. This study examines how secondary school students in low-income areas of Kenya plan their transition from school to work and the role of parental involvement in shaping these pathways. Fieldwork was conducted for two weeks in June 2022 at two schools: a low-fee private secondary school in the slum area of Nairobi County and a public secondary day school in a pastoralist community in Kajiado County. A total of 70 students from Form Three and Form Four were purposefully selected for a questionnaire survey, followed by semi-structured interviews with eight parents and guardians randomly selected from the respondents. The survey revealed that students in both schools have high aspirations, with career choices shaped by personal interests and a desire to help others. Despite financial constraints, students emphasized self-effort, education, and mutual support as key to achieving their goals. Interviews with parents in the slum area showed a strong commitment to education, often prioritizing schooling over immediate employment, though their aspirations sometimes conflicted with students' ambitions. In the pastoral area, children, despite perceived vulnerability, received support from extended family. Parents are less vocal about their children's future and have made strategic investments, particularly for daughters, to secure their well-being.

Keywords: Youth aspiration, School to work transition, Kenya

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1. Introduction

With the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on education, especially target 4.4 concerning skills for decent employment, education policies in many countries started to focus more on further education and employability after decades of striving for access to primary education. At the same time, researchers found that even students taking employment-oriented majors such as technical and vocational education and training are not necessarily mainly interested in immediate employability, income, or production. Instead, their aspirations incline towards the consideration of what it means to be a human being by focusing on self-identity and self-worth (Powell 2012). In many countries, such aspirations do not solely depend on the students but also involve parents (Vancea & Utzet 2018; Ferreira, Santos, Fonseca & Haase 2007). The objective of this study is to understand how secondary school students plan for their transition from school to work in low-income areas in Kenya and how their parents are involved.

The push from the universalization of primary education, coupled with the commitment of local governments to the new goals of the SDGs, brings new disparities at the secondary level (Ogawa 2022). In Kenya, the effort to expand secondary education started earlier in 2008 with Free Secondary Education (FSE), where the government allocated a capitation grant to alleviate parents' burden on education. Recent studies found that this kind of effort effectively brought children to school (Duflo, Dupas & Kremer 2021). At the same time, other researchers pointed out that when the same policy is applied to an already hierarchized public school system without distinction, the results might widen disparity (Brudevold-Newman 2021), which in turn could be exacerbated by the recent implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). Such disparity is often experienced most acutely by vulnerable populations. This study, therefore, focuses on two seemingly different settings – slum areas and rural areas – both characterized by poverty as a shared context.

2. Literature review

Appadurai (2004) suggests that people, regardless of their wealth, have different choices and desires shaped by societal norms. The freedom to exercise these choices is called the "capacity to aspire", the ability to which is not equally accessible to all. Due to their greater opportunities to do experimentation, the more privileged individuals have more chances to explore their possibilities in a realistic way. In contrast, poorer individuals have limited chances to develop the capacity to navigate through those choices (Appadurai 2004). While each individual can exercise this freedom to aspire, it is often constrained by structural realities (Powell & McGrath 2019; McGrath, Ramsarup, Zeelen, Wedekind, Allais, Lotz-Sisitka, Monk, Openjuru & Russon 2020). This perspective would provide insight into how structural conditions influence students' aspirations and their pathways from school to work in low-income areas of Kenya.

Aspirations are not only poor people's unfulfilled dreams but life projects that are reassessed and adjusted repeatedly (McGrath et al. 2020). There are choices that individuals have to make based on these aspirations and a consideration of their circumstances. In the context of Kenya, young people without secondary education are more likely to get employed because they have more time to look for a job compared to their counterparts who complete secondary school. On the other hand, with time, completing secondary education is found to reduce low-skill self-employment and increase formal employment likelihood (Ozier 2018). Such choices are part of students' concerns, and parents must have their role in the process as seen in other areas (Gokmenoglu, Komleksiz & Grossman 2022). In Kenya, the implementation of FSE, along with the recent CBC, may present a unique educational context. Building on these perspectives, this study examines how secondary school students in low-income areas of Kenya navigate their transition to work, considering the interplay between structural constraints, evolving aspirations, and parental involvement.

3. Methodology

3.1. Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted for two weeks in June 2022 at two schools, A and B, purposefully selected to capture reality in vulnerable areas. School A is a low-fee private secondary school in the slum area of Nairobi County. They have school buildings from donations and have a total of 66 students who are themselves from the slum area.

School B, on the other hand, is a public secondary day school in a pastoralist community in Kajiado County. School B was born from community initiatives to give quality education to marginalized students from the local pastoralist community. They have a total of 239 students.

3.2. Questionnaire survey

Questionnaire surveys were conducted with a total of 70 students from form three and form four, from both schools, randomly selected, ensuring the same number of male and female students.

Table 1. Survey participants

School	Class	Female	Male	Total
School A	Form 3	7	6	13
	Form 4	3	3	6
School B	Form 4	25	26	51
Total		35	35	70

Source: created by the authors based on survey data

The survey questions were mostly qualitative to avoid constraining the students' answers. The questions include students' basic information, school life, education history, their plans for the future, and their dreams. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry 2019). Students' answers for the questions above were first coded, and then, themes were derived from those codes. The themes are reported in the tables

below, and the codes are explained in the details.

3.3. Semi-structured interviews

Among these respondents, eight were selected to conduct semi-structured interviews with their parents and guardians, assuring the balance in students' gender and school of origin. Such balance was not possible for the interviewed parents as we could only interview parents and guardians who were at home at the time of the fieldwork, which resulted in the majority being mothers. At the same time, this also means that they are the ones who spend most of their time caring for their children.

The data was analyzed following three axes. First, the background of the household was analyzed, including origins, finances, and especially their relation to education. Then, students' plans and their roles to achieve such a plan are investigated, followed by parents' aspirations and actions towards those plans.

Table 2. Details of students selected for parent interview

Name [*1]	Gender	Age [*2]	Ethnicity	School	Class	Father [*3]	Mother [*3]
W	Female	18	Maasai	School B	Form 4	Farmer	Business [*4]
X	Male	21	Maasai	School B	Form 4	Business	Business [※]
Y	Male	22	Kikuyu	School B	Form 4	Casual labor	Saloonist [※]
Z	Female	20	Maasai	School B	Form 4	Unknown	Property owner [※]
S	Male	20	Luo	School A	Form 4	Farmer	Preacher [※]
T	Male	18	Kisii	School A	Form 4	Farmer	Farmer [*5]
U	Female	17	Luo	School A	Form 3	Shopkeeper	Farmer [*6]
V	Female	17	Luo	School A	Form 3	No father	Casual labor [※]

Notes: [*1] pseudonyms, [*2] age in June 2022, [*3] Parents' jobs (for most, guardians were interviewed), [*4] Her aunt was interviewed, [*5] His sister was interviewed, [*6] Her grandfather was interviewed, [※] The parents who were interviewed
Source: created by the authors based on interview data

4. Results

4.1. Questionnaire survey results

4.1.1. Students' aspirations

The survey revealed that, in general, students from both schools have relatively high aspirations. "Engineering", "Business and entrepreneurship", "Army and security", "Teachers", and "Sports" are overwhelmingly male preferences. Among them, the three male students who aspire to become teachers are from school A in the slum area. The reasons they gave were, "Because it is easily achievable", "I usually feel good when teaching my fellow students," and "Because I like when I see teachers in class". For the female student from school B, the reason was "Because I want to help others to be important people in future".

On the other hand, answers received from mostly female students include "Arts", "Doctors", "Nurses", "Tourism and hospitality", and "Media and communication". Most of the reasons they give include the desire to help others "Because I want to help people [who] were suffering in the world to become like me", "So that I can help other", "I want to help people in the society", "Because it encourages me not to judge people according to their class …", or utilizing their abilities or preferences, "Because like it and I love it so much", "Because it becomes my talent and I love it", "… I am always so passionate about them since I was a kid …".

Table 3 shows the details of the analysis. It is worth mentioning that comparison by school did not show significant differences in the children's aspirations.

Table 3. Students' aspirations by gender

Aspirations	Female	Male	Total
Engineering	2	**9**	11
Business and entrepreneurship	0	**6**	6
Army and security	0	**4**	4

Aspirations	Female	Male	Total
Teacher	1	3	4
Sports	0	2	2
Arts	6	2	8
Doctors	5	1	6
Nurses	5	0	5
Tourism and hospitality	4	0	4
Media and communication	2	0	2
Judges and lawyers	4	3	7
Office worker	1	2	3
Housewife	1	0	1
Complicated	0	1	1
No response	4	2	6
Total	35	35	70

Source: Created by the authors based on survey data

4.1.2. The factors that students attribute to the achievement of their plans

This subsection reports on the challenges students face in achieving their goals, followed by what could contribute to their success. Students' biggest challenges included "financial factors", "lack of materials", "attitudes and behaviors", and "influence from other people".

Although it is financially difficult to go to secondary school due to school fees, half of "financial factors" and "lack of materials" refers to the funds that they would need in order to start a business. Among the financial factors, all the answers about "Financial limitations" were received from students of School B.

It is interesting to see that "attitudes and behaviors" are among the highest in their challenges. This is somehow related to the other theme, "influence of people". Clarification from the students showed that this is especially true in the pastoral area where poor households live among rich households, the children of whom have a tendency to live a lavish lifestyle. Not being

influenced by such friends was one of the challenges the students had. Moreover, others mentioned drug abuse among young people.

Table 4. Challenges students believe affect their ability to achieve their goals

Challenges	Female	Male	Total
Financial limitations	9	4	13
School fees	7	5	12
Attitude and behavior	7	2	9
Influence of people	3	5	8
Materials	1	5	6
Social background	1	0	1
Poor grades	1	2	3
Efforts	0	1	1
The system	0	3	3
Time	0	3	3
Do not know	1	0	1
Nothing	1	0	1
Total	31	30	61

Source: Created by the authors based on survey data

When students were asked about the factors that would contribute to their success, most of them highlighted the importance of the efforts they must provide in order to succeed. After "self" comes help from others, then education and good grades, and materials (Table 5). "Efforts" include committing to study and acquire some skills, focusing on studies, working hard at school, and being smart with decisions.

It is interesting to see that even the students from the slum area avoid talking about what one would think are concrete and realistic options, given their possibilities. A question comparing what they wanted to do and what they would likely do given their situation did not yield much difference. They

would rather focus on making efforts to get good grades and have good attitudes and behavior as well as helping one another to achieve their goals.

Table 5. Factors students believe help them achieve their goals

Factors	Female	Male	Total
Efforts	17	17	34
Help from others	4	5	9
Character	2	6	8
Education	7	0	7
Good grades	2	4	6
Help for materials	0	1	1
Total	32	33	65

Source: created by the authors based on survey data

4.2. Interview results
4.2.1. Parents in the slum area

(1) Background of the households from the slum area

Table 6 shows the financial situation of the participant households from the slum areas. Most of their houses were one room with several beds where parents and children live together. However, more than half of the students were missing class due to non-payment of school fees at the time of the fieldwork, which means that the selected participants (among those who were present at the time) are still among the wealthiest households in their classes.

The participants lived with their mothers (2), a grandfather, and a sister. They pay rent between 2000 KSh and 3500 KSh (USD 15 to USD 26), while school fees are 5,500 KSh per term for form three and 6,000 KSh per term for form four (about 1800 KSh per month [USD 15]). Most of them seem to earn less than what they need.

While the mother of student U (73 years old) was without income, the

grandfather (63 years old), on the other hand, has the highest income (7000 KSh per month [USD 52]) among the participants. However, even he barely covers his grandchildren's education, which also shows that the other participants would struggle more. For instance, student S's household has a monthly deficit of 4,000 Ksh when only accounting for rent and school fees.

Table 6. Students' households' financial situation in the slum area

	Student	**S**	**T**	**U**	**V**
Guardian / parents	Relationship	Mother	Sister	Grandfather	Mother
	Job	Preacher	Casual labor	Night watchman	Casual labor
Monthly expenses	Rent	2,000	3,000	2,800	3,500
	School fees	2,000	2,000	1,800	2,000
Monthly Income	Income	None	6,000	7,000	6,000
	Other		(Parents) N/A		
	Balance	(4,000)	1,000	2,400	500

Notes: The currency is KSh (Kenyan Shilling)
Source: Created by the authors based on interview data

(2) Parents' aspirations for their children in the slum area

The interview showed the eagerness of the parents to try to give education to their children despite the precarity of life in the slum area. Relatives who have roots in town take care of their children (e.g., U's grandfather and T's sister). Some parents decide the best strategies to manage their children's education. Student S's mother, for example, decided to send him to school as he had the best chance to succeed given his grades. "I decide who goes to school depending on the budget […] the highest grade" (Student S's mother).

Other parents talk to their children to be good learners, "we talk much about his future [...] I tell him to work hard and always follow instructions" (Student S's mother), while some rely on church to educate and give training to their children. "We do not talk much about her future […] she goes to

church for training and counseling" (Student T's grandfather). "[…] I get help from church for my university fees" (Student T's sister).

In general, parents have high expectations for their children, and it seemed unthinkable for them to consider a more realistic alternative to what they have planned. Parents work hard for their children's entrance to the first year of secondary school, during which they try their luck for bursaries or eventual "well-wishers". This leads to them not considering employment before higher education.

Parents' aspirations do not always align with the students' plans. For Student S's mother, for example, the plan is simple: work hard to get good grades at school, then go to university. Otherwise, get bad grades and become a mechanic. Student S, in contrast, wants "[…] to be the best artist in the world and […] would like to do [his] best for training every day to achieve [his] dream like others." Student U's grandfather wants her to study computers, while she wants to become a news anchor. For Student T's sister, he needs to go to the university and get a decent job. Student T, on the other hand, wants to become a teacher "because [he] like[s] interacting with students and socialize with them". Student V wants to become a doctor, but her mother does not have an opinion on the matter.

4.2.2. Parents in the pastoral area

(1) Background of the households from the pastoral area

In the pastoral area, against expectations, the seemingly poor children are taken care of by relatives or guardians. For the participants in this study, such relatives are women (grandmother, mother [2], and aunt). They all have income or assets such as cattle, land, or houses to support the children, except one mother who migrated to the area 15 years before. Although the children are considered vulnerable by the status of their parents, they get a lot of help from other family members. Table 7 shows their situations.

Table 7. Households' financial situation in the pastoral area

	Student	W	X	Y	Z
Guardian / parents	Relationship	Aunt	Grandmother	Mother	Mother
	Job	Housewife	Business woman	Hair dresser	Property owner
Monthly expenses	Rent	0	0	0	0
	School fees	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000
Monthly income	Income	10,000	N/A	N/A	34,000
	Other	(Mother) 2000	17 cows, 20 sheep, 10 acres of land		50 acres of land
	NB	Parents contribute	Mother contributes	Migrant	Brother's education
	Balance	10,000	N/A	N/A	32,000

Source: created by the authors based on interview data

(2) Parents' aspirations for their children in the pastoral area

Parents in the pastoral area were not very vocal about their children's futures. Student X's grandmother is focusing on the effort they have made to help her grandson and his failure to achieve well. They want him to have a good education, while he thinks of becoming a businessman. At the time of the interview with the parents, he was away, taking care of the cattle "as he always does".

Student W and Z's parents did not say much about their children, but as most girls in the pastoral area do not inherit land or cattle, they seem to especially have more detailed and well-thought-out plans for them. Student Z's mother, for instance, was already building a house for her so that she could have a place to live later while pursuing her education.

As a migrant, Student Y's mother has a different approach with her children. She wants him to become a construction engineer in the future. To do so, he must avoid bad acquaintances and rich people's "debauchery". She does not like the idea of him failing and "ending up working in a

supermarket". She wants him to become a construction engineer. On the other hand, Student Y wants to go abroad to become a rally pilot.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a complex dynamic in low-income areas, where students' high aspirations are shaped by financial constraints and social influences, yet a strong sense of self-effort, education, and mutual support remains at the core of their ambitions. Parents, whether in the slum or pastoral areas, demonstrate a deep commitment to their children's education despite their limited resources. In the slum area, parents often prioritize education over immediate employment, although their aspirations for their children do not always align with the latter's own career goals, creating a tension between parental expectations and personal ambitions. In the pastoral area, while economic stability derived from land and livestock provides some security, parents also make strategic investments for their children's future, particularly for daughters, while aspirations often differ from the children's personal ambitions, mirroring the situation in the slum area. Moreover, mothers, being the ones who take care of the children on a daily basis, likely have a significant influence on shaping the students' priorities and aspirations, as seen in the survey results, but also in the way children are cared for, as seen in the interviews.

These findings highlight the limitations placed on individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, reinforcing the idea that their aspirations and opportunities are constrained by their socio-economic circumstances. None of the students or their guardians framed education as a pathway to acquiring skills for decent work or self-employment, but rather as a means to further education and formal employment, which at times could be rather difficult to achieve. While the introduction of the CBC in secondary schools presents a potential shift towards competency development and practical application of knowledge, it remains uncertain whether this will significantly alter aspirations or offer students more autonomy in their career choices.

Future research should explore whether the CBC provides students with greater "freedom to aspire", especially in terms of alternative career paths such as self-employment, and whether these changes can offer new opportunities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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