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'Going to school to become good people': Examining aspirations to respectability and goodness among schoolchildren in urban Ethiopia

Introduction

Primary education continues to be promoted as fundamental to national and international progress and to the prosperity and well-being of individuals and households (see for example Save the Children, 2012; UNESCO, 2012). However, in contrast to the significant body of research that has sought to explain why some children *don't* go to school, far less research has explored why individual children in the majority world *do* go to school. Children's school attendance has typically been understood as the result either of adults' decision-making, or of children's own, rational assessments of the benefits to be accrued from education. The analysis in this paper seeks to surpass these limited understandings, demonstrating the usefulness of a critical realist ontology in understanding what leads children to go to school. To this end, it draws on findings from research exploring primary school pupils in Hawassa and Ethiopia's explanations of their school attendance, focusing particularly on children's assertion that they went to school in order to become 'good' and moral people.

The paper first reviews currently accepted models of educational decision-making. It then introduces the ideas of critical realism, and the ways in which this approach aids a more comprehensive understanding of what leads children to go to school. Following this, findings from the research in Hawassa are discussed. These findings demonstrate that children's motivations for going to school were not entirely 'rational' or utilitarian, but that neither were children simply following the normative script of what it meant to be a 'good' child in Hawassa. Drawing on a critical realist understanding of human agency, the analysis explains children's future aspirations and motivations for going to school as dependent upon both their 'ultimate' human concerns (Archer, 2000) and external 'generative mechanisms' that operated in the material realities of their lives, in their interpersonal relationships with others, and in broader social relations and structures (Bhaskar, 1978, 2008).

Why do children go to school? Theories of compulsion, normativity and rationality

One explanation for children's school attendance is that children go to school because they are compelled to do so. Participation in basic education has begun to be made compulsory in many countries in the South, including in Ethiopia, where eight years of primary education is now the legal standard (MOE, 2010). However, as evident in the

fact that universal enrolment remains an unattained target in the country (UNESCO, 2014), this law is rarely enforced. Moreover, education has, as in the global North in the nineteenth century, only been made legally compulsory in Ethiopia *after* most children have begun attending school (UNESCO, 2014; MOE, 2010; *cf.* Katz, 1976: 400). Indeed, by 2010, the year that primary education was made compulsory, more than four in five children of school age were enrolled in education, and more than three in five were reported as actually attending (UNESCO, 2014). Why then, *do* children go to school? Who makes the decision, and what leads them to choose education?

Katz argued that in nineteenth century North America 'public education received popular assent at least partly because it did not differ from the dominant ideology of democratic capitalism' (Katz, 1976: 401). In Ethiopia, the widespread uptake of mass education might likewise be explained by the fact that schools reflect and support newly dominant ideologies, including meritocracy, capitalism and neoliberalism, as well as changing notions of what is meant by a good childhood. Childhood theorists have detailed how, towards the end of the nineteenth century, childhood and education became synonymous in the Western imagination, and education came to be understood as a 'normal' part of childhood (Nieuwenhuys, 1996; Prout, 2005). Indeed, Prout (2005: 35) argues that it was precisely the removal of children from paid work and into schools that brought 'modern childhood' into existence. Throughout the

twentieth and into the twenty first century, the idea of education as the appropriate realm for childhood has been propagated throughout the world as a part of the 'modernising' development agenda, which insists that children should be in school and not at 'work' (Boyden, 1997; Prout, 2005). As these values become widespread in majority world societies, it becomes increasingly plausible that children go to school because this is the normative script for what it means to be a good child and to have a good childhood. However, this constructionist model of educational participation neglects children and adults' active negotiation of these normative expectations, and is challenged by the fact that some children do not follow the scripts of what is 'good' for children within their societies (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2013). In Ethiopia, as well as in countries in the North where the school has long been accepted as the 'appropriate' realm for childhood, a significant number of children do not go to school regularly or even at all (Reid, 1999; UNESCO, 2014). This deviation from the accepted script for a 'good' childhood is a clear illustration of the fact that, as human beings, children's behaviour cannot be accounted for by reference only to cultural norms.

A contrasting model of educational participation often relied upon in mainstream development discourse is that adults decide whether the children for whom they are responsible should go to school based on a rational evaluation of the relative benefits of sending them to school or to work. This cost-benefit assessment is predominantly

envisioned in economic terms, with adults in the household expected to weigh up the earnings that young members would contribute if they worked full-time against the higher earnings that they expect to result from children's education in the future (Admassie, 2003; Basu and Van, 1998; Burke and Beegle, 2004; Patrinos, 2002).

The assumption that it is adults who determine whether children go to school reflects a prevailing imagining of childhood as a universal, biologically determined life-stage, characterised by physical, cognitive and emotional immaturity, and a particular need for protection and provision. Such conceptions have been contested in recent decades by the 'new' sociology of childhood, which has presented children as legitimate social actors capable of decision-making and participation in many areas of life (Boyden, 1997; James *et al*., 1998; Prout, 2005; Wyness, 2000). Childhood researchers have sought to illuminate the ways in which children around the world enact agency in deciding if, where and when to go to school; whether this constitutes a consensual decision made in collaboration with like-minded adults, the result of negotiation in which children have had to argue the case for their education, or a decision made in complete rejection or absence of adult advice or direction (Bourdillon *et al*., 2010; Hashim, 2005; Iversen, 2002). In this context, children's 'agency' has primarily been emphasised in terms of their ability to weigh up the relative merits of work and schooling, as per the assumptions of economic rationality discussed above. Research

has depicted children assessing the potential of formal education to enable them to secure an adequate or superior livelihood in the future, before making a reasoned and tactical decision about whether to start or remain in education, or to pursue other life strategies (see for example Hashim, 2005; Iversen, 2002).

The 'new' sociology of childhood has importantly highlighted children's agency, and rightfully addresses the limitations of orthodox accounts of education that assume that young people attend school simply because they are sent by adults. However, there are limits to these economic accounts of children's school attendance. First, for the majority of people around the world, mass education has not fulfilled its promises of prosperity. Individuals, households and nations that have invested in education have not been rewarded with the employment and riches that they might have been led to anticipate, as is evident in the persistence of poverty and unemployment in Ethiopia despite huge increases in the numbers of children going to school (CSA, 2012, 2015). This observable 'failure' of education to provide economic benefits refutes the idea that school attendance is the outcome of rational, cost-benefit analysis, as if this was the case the 'failure' of education would lead to decreases rather increases in participation (*cf.* Katz, 1976: 399). Second, the assumption of 'modernity's [rational] man' or *homo economicus* (Archer, 2000: 5) overlooks the moral or social reasons that lead children to want to go to school. Third, it neglects the impact of external factors

including cultural norms, material circumstances and political and institutional structures upon children and adult's aspiration formation and decision-making.

Critical realism and school attendance

The ontology of critical realism can address some of the gaps and inadequacies in the above understandings of what leads children to go to school. First, it offers conceptual tools with which to understand individual children as human beings with their own properties and powers, who act because they care about things (Sayer, 2011). Human beings are moral, social beings, who act in part on the basis of instrumental rationality but also commit themselves to 'ultimate' concerns that lead them to choose certain paths of action (Archer, 2000; Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2013: 358). In this paper, the concept of 'ultimate concerns' is used to consider the moral and social reasons that were leading children to commit themselves going to school, to achieving certain forms of childhood and adulthood and to becoming 'good' people.

A critical realist understanding of human agency also enables examination of the external structures that encourage children to commit to certain aspirations and courses of action. Agency can indeed be understood as one fundamental aspect of being human. However, people – both children and adults – are not entirely free agents, but rather have a capacity for agency that is interdependent on external

constraints and enablements, which Bhaskar (1978) has termed 'generative mechanisms'. Among the generative mechanisms shaping human understandings and behaviours are individuals' beliefs, concerns and ideas of the good. However, human beings do not exist only in this plane of inner being and subjective agency. Instead, Bhaskar (2008) has asserted that human agency exists and is maintained within four planes of social being. As well as people's ultimate concerns, the generative mechanisms that shape their aspirations and behaviours occur within their material relations with nature and the physical realities of their lives, their interpersonal subjective relationships with individuals and groups, and wider social relations and inherited structures (Alderson, 2013; Bhaskar, 2008; see *Figure 1*).

[insert figure 1 here]

This paper analyses children's motivations and courses of action with regard to their school attendance in the context of their capability and vulnerability as human beings, with respect to their interpersonal and intergenerational relations with others, and in the light of the social, economic and political structures shaping their lives. The analysis seeks to identify the ways in which external generative mechanisms interacted with children in Hawassa's 'ultimate' concerns in order to lead them to aspire towards

certain forms of goodness, and to identify participation in primary education as the route to achieving these aspirations.

Methods

The findings discussed in this paper are drawn from research conducted in the Ethiopian city of Hawassa in the academic year 2012/13 (Ethiopian calendar 2005). Hawassa (Awasa, Awassa) lies around 270 kilometers south of the capital city of Addis Ababa, on the road to the Southern lowlands of Ethiopia. It is the capital city of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region of Ethiopia [SNNPR], and is the city where devolved decision-making about the planning and delivering of education across the SNNPR takes place. Although the SNNPR is the most rural region of Ethiopia, Hawassa is the sixth largest city in Ethiopia, and according to the latest census over half of the 258,808 people living in the 'Hawassa city administration zone' were living in the city itself, rather than in rural areas (OCC, 2007). The majority of employment in Hawassa is industrial, professional, or service-oriented, in comparison to the rest of the SNNPR, where agricultural livelihoods dominate (CSA, 2015). The focus of the research was on this urban context, although some participants were living in the rural *kebeles* or 'villages' surrounding the city.

The research entailed focus groups, individual interviews and child conferences with children aged six to 16 attending primary schools in Hawassa. Participants were sampled through their schools, due to time and language constraints. This meant that the research was not able to access the opinions and experiences of children who were not attending or who had never attended school. The focus of the research was the understandings, motivations and experiences of children who were attending school.

Two government and two private schools on different sides of the city were selected so as to access children from different backgrounds experiencing a range of educational provision. Schoolchildren in Ethiopia study a national curriculum leading to national examinations, and primary education consists of two four-year cycles. Two grades were selected from each school, so that one grade from the first cycle and one from the second was selected from each school, and all eight grades were accounted for. The headteacher at the relevant school denied access to grade one pupils on the basis that it was too early in their school careers for this disruption to their routine, and so participants were selected from grades two to eight. Participants were selected randomly using class registers, and the initial sample of 70 grew to 75, after four children declined participation, eight self-selected by accompanying friends to focus group sessions, and one was put forward to participate by a headteacher. The final sample was 53 per cent female, 47 per cent male.

Focus groups entailed discussions, child-led tours, poster-making, diaries and child-to-child interviews, and explored participants' understandings of the reasons that children did and did not go to school, their perceptions of children who did and did not go to school, and the outcomes that they expected and wanted to arise from their education. In addition to these group activities, 67 of the children were interviewed individually. These interviews gave more attention to individual experiences and aspirations, and offered children a chance to express their experiences and opinions away from the group situation. Towards the end of the fieldwork, participants from different schools came together at two 'child conferences', where they responded to initial analysis of focus group findings. These conferences involved group discussions and debates, poster-making and dramatisations.

Institutional ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Warwick. A significant literature has developed addressing the ethical implications of conducting qualitative research with children (Christensen and Prout, 2002; Nieuwenhuys, 2008; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). The 'participatory' research tools described above were employed in attempt to address generational imbalances of power (Clark and Moss, 2011; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Punch, 2002). However, different children felt comfortable participating in different activities, and it was the flexibility of methods that made the research most accessible to participants. Children were invited to

decide if and how they wanted to partake in the research, and some did choose to abstain from certain activities or to terminate their participation altogether. Informed consent was ongoing and reflexive.

The majority of participants wished for their participation in the research to be recognised, and to be acknowledged in dissemination. Accordingly, the first names of children quoted in this paper are used where they wished this to be the case. In the context of focus groups and child conferences, anonymity and confidentiality were significantly limited, as other children and adult interpreters were witnesses to participants' contributions. Moreover, the location of research activities within the physical boundaries of schools means that children may have been particularly aware of hegemonic norms and values, and aware of potential social sanctions if they were to make socially undesirable comments or admissions (Spyrou, 2011). Participants will have self-censored during the research, and may not have shared all of their feelings about their schooling, the role of education in their lives and their hopes and expectations for the future. On the other hand, the data produced in such collective settings provide interesting insights into what were seen as appropriate or respectable aspirations for children in this context.

As well as these formal research activities with children, the analysis in this paper draws on observational data, interviews with school staff, and wider structural and policy analysis in order to analyse the external mechanisms that were 'generating' children in Hawassa's behaviours and understandings, leading them to aspire to certain outcomes and to want to go to school (Bhaskar, 1978).

Going to school to become good people: Findings and discussion

A key finding from this research in Hawassa was children's assertion that they went to school in order to become 'good' people. Participants declared that '[education] makes you a good person [and gives you] a good childhood base' and that children went to school in order 'to be[come] the best man or girl'.

For the young participants in this research, being a good child meant being well-behaved and disciplined. Being a good person also entailed being able to share important knowledge with and help the people around them, to set an 'example' to others, and to provide materially and financially for one's family and local community. This collective orientation went further in that many young participants also wanted to go to school so that they would be able to 'help', 'develop', 'support' and 'change' their country. As well as contributing to the economic development of the country, children placed much importance on being able to use their knowledge to 'lead'

Ethiopia and 'solve' the country's problems, including the problems of poor health and poor politics. Notably, boys tended to focus on setting an example to others and 'leading' their families and communities, whilst girls talked more often about sharing information and 'helping' others. Participants of both genders spoke about being able to provide materially for their families and communities as a result of their educated employment, however, and both boys and girls aspired to being politicians and public figures. There was little difference between the aspirations and motivations for going to school expressed by government and private school pupils.

A further motivation encouraging children in Hawassa to go to school was the desire to be able to gain certain forms of employment that were associated with goodness and respectability. Many of the participants in this research asserted that becoming a doctor, engineeror lawyer would mean that they were respected by members of their local community and by people around the world, and that this would bring honour to themselves, their family and their country. Going to school was also seen as indicator of goodness and morality in itself. In focus groups, children described imagined children who went to school as clever, hygienic, caring and happy, and as having lots of friends. In contrast, imagined children who did not go to school were depicted as dirty, lazy, lacking in manners, disrespectful and likely to become dependent on drugs and alcohol.

The following analysis considers how children's narratives about going to school in order to become 'good' people were shaped by generative mechanisms in all four of Bhaskar's (2008) four planes of being (see *figure 1*).

Intersubjectivity

The children who participated in this research wanted their schooling to help them to become good people because this morality was fundamentally important to them. At the child conferences, participants spoke of wanting their education to help them to be 'good' so that they could be 'self-confident' and 'happy'. Children were very concerned that they, their friends and their schoolmates were morally decent, and their understanding was that going to school was helping them to become people that they could be proud of being. Children's ideas of the good not only related to their morality in the here and now, but reflected their plans and dreams for a good future. For example Atnafu, a 10-year-old boy in grade six at private school, pronounced that 'going to school is not only to get a job but also to have vision'. Children cared about being good and moral people, and this was an 'ultimate concern' that motivated them to go to school (Archer, 2000). The impact of this concern in shaping in Hawassa's school attendance illustrates the critical realist notion that people's ideas about what

is good and right, and the beings and doings that they value, constitute real reasons for action (Alderson, 2013; Tao, 2013).

Children in Hawassa's commitment to the collective fate of their families and communities can likewise be understood as 'ultimate' or moral concerns that were pushing them to act (Archer, 2000). Many of the young participants in this research also expressed deep concern for the collective prosperity, well-being and reputation of their national community. Female participants at both child conferences said that their education should help Ethiopia simply 'because Ethiopia is our country'. Girls at the first child conference also stated repeatedly that helping their country was of importance because they 'loved' and respected' their nation, whilst boys at the second talked about being 'responsible to serve [their] country'. These comments reflect a national identity, and a sense of being part of and committed to something bigger than just oneself and one's immediate family or community. This spirit of collectivity might be understood as a fundamental moral tendency for these children in Ethiopia, who did not subscribe to 'Western' individualism (Venta, 2004).

As well as wanting to believe in themselves as good, moral and right, the young participants in this research were motivated to go to school in order to be recognised as good people by those around them. Both male and female groups at the child

conferences said explicitly that they went to school 'to be respected'. Both female

groups expressed their belief that going to school and 'working hard' would also mean

that they would be 'loved', with one group expanding that they would have happy and

peaceful lives. Children's motivations for going to school can therefore be understood

as arising from their neediness and vulnerability; children wanted to be loved,

appreciated and valued by others as well as to value themselves. Vulnerability and

agency are not mutually exclusive, as intimated by accounts of children's school

attendance that seek to emphasise children's rationality and judiciousness in order to

assert their 'agency'. On the contrary, children in Hawassa's vulnerability and

neediness constituted the basis for their actions (*cf.* Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2013;

Sayer, 2011).

Children's desires to become good people that they and other people could be proud

of were 'ultimate' human concerns that motivated them to act, then. However,

understanding children's motivations to *go to school* in order to become 'good'

children and adults requires examination of the external generative mechanisms that

were operating outside of Bhaskar's (2008) first plane of *intersubjectivity* or inner

being (see *Figure 1*). These external mechanisms included factors that encouraged

children to understand 'goodness' in a certain way, and thus to aspire towards certain

indicators of 'goodness', and those that led them to identify formal education as the

route to achieving these aspirations. They operated in the remaining three of Bhaskar's (2008) planes of being; in the material realities of children's lives, in their interpersonal relationships with others and in wider structures and social relations.

Material realities

A key indicator of being a 'good' person for the children who took part in this research was being able to get a job that would enable them to meet the material needs of themselves and others. This included themselves and their families, but also poor people, orphans and 'beggars'. The emphasis that children placed on avoiding hunger and meeting basic needs was shaped by the *material realities* of their lives. Their society's collective memory of abject poverty and hunger, and many participants' own experiences of absolute and relative poverty, were leading children to wish for a better lifestyle, and to want their education to enable them to provide materially for their families and other members of the community. Even if they themselves were not experiencing absolute destitution, children in Hawassa may well have been motivated by a desire to avoid the hardships that their parents had lived through (Tadele and Gella, 2012), or those that they witnessed other children who did not go to school enduring. In Hawassa, young in-migrants to the city who engage in hazardous work and drug use are highly visible in public spaces. Being able to avoid these outcomes

was a key motivation for going to school for the children who took part in this research.

Interpersonal relationships

Children's motivations for going to school were also shaped by generative mechanisms in Bhaskar's third plane of *interpersonal relationships with others.* This is apparent in children's narratives about going to school in order to be 'respected'. For instance, a group of girls explained that they wanted to go to school because this would mean that they had a 'good image', and that people would have a 'good attitude about [them]' when they saw them attending school. Conversely, a senior member of staff at a private school in Hawassa reported that if a child was *not* attending school, members of their local community would 'pressure' them to do so; asking them 'why don't you go to school?'.

Children's understandings of what it meant to be a good person and attributing of moral functions to their schooling were particularly generated by their relationships with their teachers. The intergenerational, hierarchical dynamics of pupil-teacher relations meant that teachers held much influence over the formation of children's aspirations, as well as their understanding of the role of school attendance in their lives (Poluha, 2004). The young participants in this research varied in the degree of

emphasis that they placed on teachers' advice, guidance and/or discipline in 'reshaping' their behavior, but shared a clear expectation that teachers would transform them into 'good' and disciplined children. For instance, Dinknesh, who was 15 and in grade seven at government school, asserted her belief that 'even if we have some bad behaviours when we come to school, in the classroom the teacher teach us to behave'. Dagme, meanwhile, contrasted the morality of his free time in the 'village', where 'we spend our times in some bad places, like watching some bad movie… or fighting', with the structure and 'shape' of his life at school;

> But when we come to school, we are reshape our behaviour […] with
> the help of our teachers.
>
> (Dagme, male, 14, government school)

Children also talked about how their teachers inspired them to work towards professional adult futures, by 'facilitating' them to study hard and giving them good advice, but also by encouraging them that if they worked hard they would achieve their dreams:

> He give me… good advice. He said 'study hard so you will be… a good person in
> future, and you will achieve your dreams'. He always give advice like that.

Always my teachers advise us to study very hard, to achieve our dreams… we would be what we dreamed to be, if we study hard. He always advise us this way.

It was clear that many young participants placed much value on their teachers' advice and authority on employment issues, and these influential relationships will have had a significant impact on the formation of children's aspirations. Almost all of the children who took part in this research were also encouraged by their parents or caregivers to go to school, with many children's parents encouraging them to work towards professions such as engineering and medicine in particular. Observation of everyday life in Hawassa revealed children to be constructed as the lucky generation who stood to gain from the benefits of mass education, national economic growth and relative peace in the region, and the majority of parents to expect and encourage their children to go to school and get a 'good' job. This 'parental norm of investment in children's education "to give them the chances I never had"' (Leavy and Hossain, 2014: 20) will have had a direct influence upon the formation of children's aspirations.

Broader social relations and structures

Children's motivations for going to school were also shaped by generative mechanisms in Bhaskar's (2008) third plane of *broader social relations and structures*. Firstly, children's – and their parents' – understanding of school as an indicator of a good childhood reflected the ideas about education being a 'normal' part of childhood discussed above (Nieuwenhuys, 1996; Prout, 2005). As in nineteenth century Europe and North America, education has in the twenty first century come to be understood as a defining and righteous part of childhood in many parts of the majority word (Boyden, 2013). Many international organisations promote a moralised notion of childhood, based upon the 'sanctity' of the home and school as the appropriate arenas for childhood, and driven by the quest to abolish all forms of children's 'work' (Nieuwenhuys, 1996: 242). Furthermore, national governments throughout the South have signed up to targets including the Millennium Development and Education for All goals that designate these objectives as indicators of progress. The current Ethiopian government has implemented a myriad of structural, institutional and legal mechanisms that not only make it physically possible for children in Hawassa to go to school, but have reconstituted Ethiopian society so that a 'normal' childhood is expected to involve attending school and working diligently to become a good and productive individual and citizen (for further discussion of education and nation-

building in Ethiopia, see Abbay, 2004; Marshall 2015). These mechanisms have included building schools and training teachers, abolishing school fees, and outlawing children's participation in 'alternative' activities such as paid work and marriage. They generated children's understanding of education as an indicator of respectability and 'goodness', both directly and via the influential interpersonal relationships discussed above.

Secondly, children's aspirations towards the independence that they associated with productive employment reflected dominant ideas about what it meant to be an adult in their society. Being able to leave their parental home and start their own family in the future was a particularly important aspiration motivating the children who took part in this research to go to school. This aspiration stemmed both from children's desire for autonomy and independence, and from their wish not to remain a burden on their parents. Gaining employment and achieving independence from one's parents has been found to be central to social conceptions of adulthood across Africa (Camfield, 2011; Honwana, 2012; Sommers, 2012) and indeed globally (Jeffrey *et al*., 2005, Mason, 2012), culminating from neoliberal ideas of meritocracy and individual responsibility as well as local norms. These discursive structures were conditioning children in Hawassa's thoughts and actions in relation to their school attendance.

The notions of intergenerational responsibility and obligation that motivated

participants to go to school in order to gain productive employment were also shaped

by discursive mechanisms, and in particular reflected the Ethiopian culture of *yilunta*,

which renders the individual personally responsible for both their own morality and for

upholding the honour and respectability of their family (Heinonen, 2011; Mains, 2007).

Children expressed a sense of familial obligation, expecting to be responsible for

providing for their aging parents in the future (Poluha, 2004). Some spoke of wanting

to repay the parents and families who were making sacrifices for their education. For

instance, Mahilet, aged 15 and in grade seven at government school, said that she

wanted her education to lead her to get a job so that she could support her parents

who had been 'sending her to school so far'.

Children in Hawassa's preference for particular forms of employment also reflected

global discourses linking urbanity and modernity. Without exception, children reported

aspiring to modern, urban careers. Leavy and Hossain (2014: 8) have discussed how

children's preference for urban professions is often shaped by their schooling itself,

arguing that formal education 'is partly about learning and instilling respect for a life of

the mind as distinct from manual work'. Children in Hawassa's career aspirations were

also shaped by their encounters with the global media, which often presented life in

the 'modern' and urbanised West as affluent, glamorous and carefree (*cf.* De Boeck and Honwana, 2005; Leavy and Smith, 2010).

As well as these discursive mechanisms, children's motivations for going to school were shaped by structural realities that encouraged them to identify education as the means to achieving their aspirations. Aspiring to skilled professions such as engineering, medicine and law meant that academic achievement and progression was a prerequisite for realising the life trajectories that many children aspired towards. Furthermore, the job market in Ethiopia has been shaped by what Dore (1997) has termed the 'diploma disease'. The expansion of mass education in recent decades has meant that educational certificates have become less valuable as a growing proportion of the Ethiopian population has been able to attain them. Increasing competition means that students require higher levels of qualifications to get the 'educated' jobs that they desire, and indeed to get some kind of qualification to do any job at all. In urban Ethiopia, even unskilled labour is highly competitive and youth unemployment rates are extremely high. More than nine in ten unemployed 15-24-year-olds in Ethiopia in 2012 had obtained at least basic education, and more than one in six had been educated beyond secondary level (CSA, 2012). Children with no education at all are likely to fall to the bottom of the pile, and competition for jobs encourages children to go to school. These historical changes in Ethiopian society are rooted in

wider social structures. Going to school in order to be trained for work in the global capitalist economy would not constitute a motive for going to school, for example, if Ethiopia had not been incorporated into global markets and neoliberal economic policy. This is a key illustration of how real, inherited social structures were determining the behaviours and choices of these young people growing up in Hawassa. This is not to argue for economic determinism, or for theories of 'pure' rationality in human decision-making, but to point out that children in Hawassa were forming aspirations and committing to certain courses of action in the context of global structures that limited the options available to them.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the factors leading children in Hawassa, Ethiopia to want to go to school in order 'to become good people' in the eyes of themselves and others.

The findings discussed have revealed children's motivations for going to school to transcend the rational, economic cost-benefit analysis that is often presented by researchers seeking to emphasise children's competency and 'agency'. However, nor was school attendance in Hawassa simply normatively constituted. The participants in this research wanted to be able to get jobs that would enable them to provide for themselves and others, but also wanted to go to school in order to be able to make

decisions and participate in society, to contribute to the future of their local and national communities, and ultimately to become good and moral people that they and others could be proud of.

Based upon a critical realist understanding of human agency, this paper has argued that children's desire to go to school in order to be transformed into 'good' people rested both upon their 'ultimate' moral concerns and conceptions of the good, and upon external generative mechanisms that led them to identify participation in formal education as the key to becoming someone who they could be proud of being, and who others would recognise, accept and love. These generative mechanisms were rooted in local and global historical, political and economic processes. They included internationally pervasive notions of what constitute 'good' childhoods and adulthoods and traditional Ethiopian notions of collective honour, both of which were reinforced through children's interpersonal relationships with influential others, such as their teachers and parents. They also operated in the material and structural realities of children's lives, including their nation's integration into the global capitalist economy and the legislative and institutional structures that made it practically possible and ideologically 'normal' for them to go to school.

Children's values, motivations and courses of action need to be understood in the context of both their capability and their vulnerability as human beings. This paper has contributed to a growing field of research that locates children's lives and choices within the reality of local and global cultural, economic and political structures, but does not lose sight of children's own ultimate concerns and interaction within these mechanisms (see Abebe and Kjørholt, 2009; Boyden, 2013; Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2013; Morrow, 2013). It has established the value of a critical realist ontology in reaching such an understanding.

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