

Imagining and Navigating the Future:
Educational Aspirations and Agency of Economically Disadvantaged Ethiopian
Secondary School Students

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Note to readers: To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, the pseudonyms they chose are used throughout this dissertation. The name of the school is also changed.

For those who strive to pursue their dreams amidst obstacles!

Abstract

In Ethiopia, economically disadvantaged students are not equally represented in the education system, in terms of enrollment and attendance. A high drop out and low completion rates of these groups widen the educational inequalities in the country. The government of Ethiopia has sought to allocate resources to narrow the educational inequality, but the policy framework is not based on the capabilities of students or their ability to utilize resources to move forward to their aspired futures.

This dissertation examines how economically disadvantaged secondary school age youth in Ethiopia imagine and pursue their aspired future amidst supporting and constraining conditions. My study also explores how these students exercise their agency towards choosing and pursuing their educational aspirations. I situate the capability to aspire (the degree of freedom the youth have to aspire) and capacity to aspire (the ability to explore the future) within a relational capability theory, where aspirations are imagined with and for others. In this dissertation, I narrate the life history of six secondary school age youth in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, exploring their educational aspirations and their abilities to work towards their aspired futures.

The stories reveal that economically disadvantaged youth do have aspirations to improve their overall socio-economic well-being and the well-being of others, ranging from supporting one's parents and positively contributing to their community. Nonetheless, they might be constrained in their navigational capacity to explore alternative futures without the support of family, teachers, and society, and availability of meaningful opportunities. The youths' accounts further demonstrate that personal conditions, especially family economic situations, are mainly limiting, and societal

support and teachers' guidance are crucial for economically disadvantaged youth to pursue their desired futures. Therefore, I argue that there is a need to shift the emphasis from equality of resources in the Ethiopian context to equality of capabilities (real opportunities). This includes considering familial and socio-economic conditions influencing students' education and their educational aspirations.

Keywords: capability approach; aspirations; agency; the capability to aspire; the capacity to aspire; narrative inquiry; Ethiopia; Sub-Saharan Africa

Table of Contents

Abstract	v
List of Tables	xi
List of Figures	xii
List of Abbreviations	xiii
Chapter One: To Aspire - The Challenges of Economically Disadvantaged Youth in Ethiopia.....	1
Research Aims, Paradigms, and Questions.....	8
A Capability Framework for this Study	12
Aspirations	15
Agency	18
Conversion Conditions.....	20
Economically Disadvantaged Youth.....	21
Structure of the Dissertation	23
Chapter Two: Equality of What? Educational Opportunities for Economically Disadvantaged Students	25
Overview of the Ethiopian Education System	27
Perspectives on Educational Opportunities for Economically Disadvantaged Students ...	31
Human Capital Approach	32
Rights-based Approach.....	38
Capability Approach	43
Aspirations	48
Agency	62
Conclusion	66
Chapter Three: Methodology	68
Qualitative Research Design: Narrative Inquiry	68
Positionality in Narrative Inquiry	72
Research Setting.....	77
Local Education Context - Dire Dawa.....	77
Tesfa Secondary and Preparatory School	80
Data Collection	81
Interviews as Extensions of Conversations.....	82
Research Participants	86
Negotiating Access and Selection Criteria	86

Introducing the “Conversational Partners”	87
Data Analysis	88
Ethical Considerations	93
Trustworthiness.....	95
Limitations and Delimitations.....	96
Conclusion	96
Chapter Four: Navigating the Future - Imagining and Reimagining of Aspirations	97
Forming Educational Aspirations: The Capability to Aspire	99
Aspirations as a Remedy for Past Experience	100
Aspirations as an Interplay between What is Desired and What is Achievable	104
Aspiration Oriented Toward the Future: Knowing Talents	106
Navigational Information to Imagine the Future: The Capacity to Aspire	110
Guidance Toward a Concrete Plan: School, Family, and Social Environment	110
School Environment.....	110
Family and Social Environment.....	114
“Performance Without Rehearsal”: Unavailability of Meaningful Opportunities	118
“I Am Because We Are:” Relational Nature of Aspirations.....	121
“For Others”	122
“With Others”	124
The Role of Faith in Aspirations Formation	126
Discussion.....	128
Conclusion	134
Chapter Five: The Capability to Pursue - Availability and Ability to Use Resources for Aspired Futures.....	135
Family and Home-related Conditions	138
Family Economic Situation: “I spend my time in class thinking of what I would eat after school.”	138
Family Responsibility	143
Family Support.....	144
School-related Conditions.....	147
Teachers’ Support and Recognition	147
Unavailability of Resources in Schools	151
Language Barrier	152

Labeling	155
Uncertainty in Higher Education Environments	156
Social Conditions	158
Supportive Social Relations	158
Societal Negative Perceptions.....	160
Peer Pressure and Lack of Mentorship	162
Experiencing Sexual Harassment	163
Local Non-Profit Organizations' Support.....	164
Personal Effort in Nurturing Interest	166
Discussion.....	168
Conclusion	172
Chapter Six: The Inter-relationships of Aspirations and Agency.....	174
Reflective Agency.....	176
Acting at the Time of Conflicted Aspiration: “I wanted a different life for myself” ..	177
Acting to Find Alternatives: “What is my hope if I continue working as a day laborer?”	181
Chasing a Dream at Any Cost.....	185
Safeguarded Agency: The Role of Faith in Strengthening Agency.....	186
Exercising Agency with Others and for Others	189
Transferred Agency: Exercising Agency with Others	190
Altruistic Agency: Exercising Agency for Others	193
Constrained Agency: “The only alternative I had was to take the shortcut”	196
Discussion.....	199
Conclusion	205
Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Implications	206
Implications of the Study	209
Implications for Theory	209
Implications and Recommendations for Policy	210
Implications and Recommendations for Practice	211
Implications for Future Research.....	214
Concluding Reflections of the Researcher.....	215
Prologue	217
References.....	219

Appendix A.....	227
Appendix B.....	230
Appendix C.....	232
Appendix D.....	236

List of Tables

Table 1 - Interview guide	85
Table 2 - Introduction to the youth	88
Table 3 - Key thematic focus areas for each participant	90
Table 4 - Different forms of agency	200

List of Figures

Figure 1 - <i>The capability approach in education</i>	16
Figure 2 - <i>The conceptual framework for the study</i>	46
Figure 3 - <i>The inter-relationships between the capability to aspire and the capacity to aspire</i>	130
Figure 4 - <i>Multi-dimensional aspects affecting the capability to pursue aspired futures</i>	169

List of Abbreviations

CRC.....	Convention on the Rights of the Child
EPRDF.....	Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front
ESDP.....	Education Sector Development Program
ETP.....	Education and Training Policy
FDRE.....	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
GEQIP.....	General Education Quality Improvement Program
IDCJ.....	International Development Center for Japan
JICA.....	Japan International Cooperation Agency
MoE.....	Ministry of Education
MDGs.....	Millennium Development Goals
NGOs.....	Non-governmental organizations
SDGs.....	Sustainable Development Goals
SIP.....	School Improvement Program
UNESCO.....	United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNICEF.....	United Nations Children’s Fund

Chapter One: To Aspire - The Challenges of Economically Disadvantaged Youth in Ethiopia

One February morning at Tesfa secondary school in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, I was waiting for the school counselor to use her office to interview one of my participants. Tsinat, with whom I scheduled an interview, was already there a couple of minutes early and we started chatting about life in Tesfa secondary school. It was our first meeting, but we easily began to talk comfortably about what high school life looked like during my time. She then started sharing with me her plan after she completed grade 12. She was doing well in school, but she told me how she was desperate to start a job to support her mother, who helped her continue her education by working as a day laborer since Tsinat's childhood. She further added that she wanted to work as a flight attendant after she completed upper secondary school. Her height, proportional weight, and beautiful appearance meet all the commonly held stereotypes and unwritten criteria for this work. Later, through the three rounds of interviews, I learned that Tsinat's real ambition was to be a psychologist, but she wanted to be a flight attendant as a "shortcut"¹ to support her mother before she started living her dream.

Tsinat's story is one of the many that show the availability of opportunities (i.e., having access to school in this case) does not mean that students can use these educational resources to pursue their aspirations. Family, school-level, and community conditions influence students' abilities to use the available resources. These conditions

¹ The word "shortcut" is frequently used by the study participants. The Amharic version of the term (አቋራጭ) is widely used in the research context, denoting the idea of taking the shortest alternative route to get means of survival.

determine the degree to which a person transform educational resources into what they want to be (valued outcomes) (Robeyns, 2017). For instance, in Tsinat's case, different supportive and constraining conditions influenced her journey to what she aspires to be. She lost her father when she was three and started living with different guardians at various times while her mother worked in a different city. Tsinat was exposed to both physical and psychological abuse during her childhood by her caregivers. This abuse caused depression and drove her to be interested in studying psychology, so that she can help those who seek psychological support. Meanwhile, her mother supported her morally and financially by working as a day laborer in construction sites. Tsinat also claimed that no one took the time to ask her what she wanted to be even in schools. Yet, she talked about teachers who were also supportive of her education by understanding her conditions. The collaboration between her school and the local NGO was also a supportive condition that enabled her to get educational supplies. At the societal level, Tsinat mentioned that people in her neighborhood took on a parental role by taking care of her. Through all these challenges, she aspired to be a psychologist, but decided to take a detour and be a flight attendant so that she would have the financial means to support her mother. Tsinat even wanted to drop out of school to engage in income-generating activities, but her mother wanted her to finish at least grade 12. She is still in school to fulfill her mother wish. As such, all these familial, societal, and school-related conditions have affected her ability to pursue her aspired future.

As shown in Tsinat's story, children and youth from a disadvantaged economic background in Ethiopia pursue education as a way to achieve what they hope their lives will be like in the future, which is how I define aspirations in this study. Aspirations are

considered as a process wherein youth imagine and reimagine their future in relation to their past and present constraints and supports (Appadurai, 2004; DeJaeghere, 2018). Unfortunately, these young people face multiple indirect costs, familial, school-related, and societal constraints and support that influence their ability of pursuing their aspired future. As Young Lives² studies in Ethiopia reveal, poverty is a major obstacle to schooling, and children's development in general, as children from poor families are at greater risk of dropping out of school (Tafere et al., 2009). A showing example is how children from the poorest income quintile are equally represented in the first cycle of primary school (grade 1 - 4), but are increasingly under-represented at higher levels. For instance, these group represent only 15% in primary second cycle (grade 5 - 8), 5% and 2% in the first (grade 9 - 10) and second cycles of secondary education (grade 11 - 12), respectively, and 2% in tertiary education (World Bank, 2017b). Besides enrollment, attendance rate is also influenced by economic condition wherein those with the lowest wealth quintile documented the lowest attendance rate (52%) while those at the highest quintile recorded 83.9% attendance rate in 2011 at the primary level (Ministry of Education & UNICEF Ethiopia, 2012). Dropout and low completion rates widen the educational inequalities, especially for children and youth from economically disadvantaged families (Berry & Bogale, 2011; World Bank, 2017a). Youth from economically disadvantaged families are defined in this study as students who are unable to cover for their educational and personal expenses and are at the risk of dropping out of school.

² Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam over 15 years seeking to understand the causes, dynamics, and consequences of childhood poverty. In Ethiopia, the study follows the lives of 3,000 children.

The government of Ethiopia has sought to allocate resources within available means to narrow the educational inequality. For example, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education has been implementing the General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP). The focus of GEQIP is to enhance learning achievement at the primary and secondary school level, which is measured based on mid-term and final examinations at the end of every academic year, and national exams (grade 8, 10, and 12) (Ministry of Education, 2008). The GEQIP also focuses on providing educational resources including conveying sufficient teaching and learning materials, enhancing educational processes³ by strengthening teachers' and leaders' development, improving curriculum development, as well as enhancing assessments and examinations (Ministry of Education, 2008). However, despite more than ten years of implementation, recent reports show a high prevalence of repetition, dropout rate and a low-test score achievements, indicating that the GEQIP dimensions of providing equitable quality education have considerable limitations.⁴ More worrying still is the fact that this scenario is disproportionately seen in children and youth from economically disadvantaged families (Berry & Bogale, 2011). For instance, in secondary education, children from the richest 20% are more than twice as likely to attend secondary school as those from the poorest 20% as the later are forced to drop out of school (World Bank, 2017a).

In this dissertation, I analyzed the data from students' lived experiences that show the Ministry of Education approach is not successful as planned. This lack of success is

³ I use the term "educational processes" as defined by UNICEF (2000) to denote how teachers and school leaders use inputs to frame meaningful learning experience for students, which includes but not limited to ongoing professional development for teachers and school leaders, teachers' feedback mechanisms, students' participation in their learning, and so on.

⁴ According to the Ministry of education (2019), the dropout rates of students in grade 1 - 8 at the national level is 17.5% and it is highest in grade 1 at 25%.

not only because of unavailability of educational resources, but also is due to a policy framework that is not based on the capabilities of students (the ability to convert these resources into real opportunities that they aspire to achieve). As Warrington and Kiragu (2012) contend, providing equal educational resources or enhancing educational processes by itself do not equate to the provision of equal educational opportunities since economic, personal, environmental, social, and other conditions affect students' abilities to use these resources. For instance, as evident in Tsinat's story, she was able to access a nearby school with qualified teachers and access to a library, and as per the GEQIP definition, the presences of these conditions imply "good quality education." Availability of educational resources (building schools, availability of books, building IT centers) and educational processes (professional development for teachers and school leaders) do not guarantee that at their completion of their education, students are able to pursue their aspirations and be what they want to be. Students are often unable to use these resources because of personal, familial, societal, and school related conditions. In under-resourced countries like Ethiopia, unavailability of learning supplies and poor educational processes can be barriers for students and cause them to not achieve their aspirations. The education policy of Ethiopia in general, and the GEQIP in particular, recognizes this problem, but it fails to recognize the ability of the students to use these resources.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that further understanding of students' abilities to use the educational resources available should also be considered in policy formulation and implementation. Providing resources and means does not predict or indicate equal educational opportunities for all unless those opportunities are real. Real opportunities are when students from disadvantaged background, specifically those who

are from economically disadvantaged background as it is the focus of this dissertation, can use the opportunities to pursue their aspirations. This argument is framed within a capability approach, which assesses not only the provision of resources but also the availability of “real opportunities or capabilities” that translate into the actual use of resources, thus allowing people the freedom to be what they want to be (see McCowan, 2011; Sen, 1999). Research on how to bridge the gap between resource availability and actual use is vital to identifying educational advantages and disadvantages that result in educational outcomes. Towards this end, throughout this dissertation, much emphasis will be given to conditions affecting the transformation of aspirations into capabilities (real opportunities) by examining what personal, familiar, societal, and school-related conditions help or prevent the youth to pursue their aspirations.

In Ethiopia, previous studies to date examine educational inequality using outcome measures such as admission, progression, and completion rates and test results (CfBT Education Trust, 2015; Lemma et al., 2014;). Though all of these are legitimate means of assessing progress, they do not clearly show the journey students from economically disadvantaged families go through to pursue their aspirations. A few studies of Young Lives Ethiopia examine the causes, dynamics, and consequences of child poverty and how poverty affects child well-being, incorporating education as one part of their analyses (see Camfield & Tafere, 2009; Tafere, 2014; Tafere, 2017; Tafere & Camfield, 2009; Tafere et al., 2009). However, these studies have three major limitations: 1) They do not engage in how youth form and develop their aspirations and the opportunities and constraints related to it; 2) They lack information about supporting conditions for the youth that enable them to pursue their aspirations because they mainly

focused on constraining conditions; and 3) They focus on how poverty dictates the lives of the youth without considering their agency related to choosing what they value, and to pursuing their educational aspirations.

This study builds on the previous studies of Young Lives Ethiopia and aims to bridge the gap in the literature by examining the constraining and supporting conditions to have a deeper understanding of the range of youths' lives from economically disadvantaged families. To do this, I centered the voices of economically disadvantaged youths using a narrative, life history approach. As such, the dissertation narrates the life history of six secondary school age youth in Ethiopia (four in-school and two out of school) and their educational aspirations and their abilities to work towards achieving their aspired future. Narrating life history of the economically disadvantaged youths centers their voices to give insight for policy makers, while honoring their lived experiences.

Mainly, the stories reveal that economically disadvantaged youth do have aspirations to improve their overall socio-economic well-being and the well-being of others, ranging from supporting one's parents and positively contributing to their community. This finding challenges the dominant assumption that portray economically disadvantaged youths as having low aspirations (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996; Bernard, Dercon, & Taffesse, 2011). Nonetheless, they might be constrained in their navigational capacity to explore alternative futures without family, teachers, and societal support and availability of meaningful opportunities. The youths' accounts further disclose that personal conditions, especially family economic situations, are mainly limiting, and societal support and teachers' guidance are crucial for economically disadvantaged youth

to pursue their desired futures. The findings also highlight that youth are indeed agentic, but economic barriers might limit their ability to move forward to their aspired futures as it leaves them with no real options to choose from. Thus, the study underlines that policy makers and international development organizations should have deeper insights of in-school conditions and holistic strategies that remove constraints, including familial and socio-economic conditions.

In the following sections of this chapter, I first discuss the research aims, paradigms, and questions. Then, I will preview the conceptual framework of the study and define important terms, followed by a discussion on the significance of the study. Finally, I outline the remaining chapters of the dissertation.

Research Aims, Paradigms, and Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine how economically disadvantaged youth in Ethiopia imagine and pursue their aspired future amidst supporting and constraining conditions and how they exercise their agency towards choosing and pursuing their educational aspirations. The study also has three specific objectives. First, the study aims to examine the youth's capabilities to pursue their aspirations to underscore the availability of resources and the youth's ability to use these resources to pursue their aspirations. Second, the study aims to understand how youth choose what they want to be or if they feel compelled to adapt to their circumstances. I do this by questioning how they exercise their agency to choose, pursue, or reshape their aspirations. Third, it aims to provide this insight to policy makers and educators, in hope that they recognize the opportunities and constraints economically disadvantaged youth have in the process of exploring and developing their educational aspirations and remove the barriers.

In this dissertation, I narrate the lived experiences of youths to show their reality in terms of navigating their future and exercising their agency amidst opportunities and constraints. For this reason, I employ constructivism, which I use interchangeably with interpretivism (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This paradigm assumes that reality is variably constructed depending on the context (Willis, 2007). As such, researchers try to elicit the participants' views of their worlds and the events they have experienced (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Though constructivist orientation assumes individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live in, which is varied among individuals, social constructivism situates individuals in the society and broadens the paradigm. Creswell (2007) argues as follows:

They [meanings] are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives (p. 21).

Hence, my use of social constructivism assumes that their lived experiences are a reality that is socially constructed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, I considered not only the personal but also the school and family, as well as community-level conditions while examining individuals' experience of opportunities and constraints.

The social constructivism paradigm relates to my focus of narrating the life histories of individuals. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explain the interplay of social constructivism and stories as follows:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal

through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful (p. 375).

Stories and interpretation, or meaning making of one's stories, are inseparable. This meaning-making is constructed by the individual, however it is also made through one's interaction with others. Studies have shown that individuals make meaning of their aspirations and their agency in the interconnections with family and societal conditions (see DeJaeghere, 2018; Hart, 2013).

The research questions within this paradigm capture the social constructivist nature of this study. The overarching question that I seek to answer is: How do youth from economically disadvantaged families imagine and navigate their educational aspirations and exercise their agency amidst obstacles and opportunities? This question is further explored through the following sub-questions.

1. How do youth from economically disadvantaged families in Ethiopia imagine and reimagine their educational aspirations amidst supporting and constraining conditions?
2. How do these conditions support or constraint the youth's ability to pursue their educational aspirations?
3. How do youth exercise their agency to choose, pursue, or reshape their educational aspirations within supporting and constraining conditions?

The first question analyzes how economically disadvantaged youth form their aspirations, including how they utilize their resources to form their educational aspirations and how their aspirations are influenced by their opportunities and constraints. This question also examines how relations with parents, school staff members, and

neighbors influence their imagination of their future. The second question, which examines the in-school and out-of-school opportunities and constraints, seeks to understand the educational advantages and disadvantages that youth from economically disadvantaged families experience to be what they aspire to be considering their family, school, and societal situations. While stressing the importance of agency in using and accessing resources and social relations, the third question examines how the youth use their agency to convert scarce resources to aspire, reshape, and pursue their aspirations.

I examined these questions in the Ethiopian context, specifically in Dire Dawa, which is a home for diverse ethnic and religious groups and have both urban and rural areas. In Dire Dawa, there has been a dramatic increment in enrolment rate, but there is also a high dropout rate at the primary level, resulting in low enrollment rate at the secondary education. The net enrollment rate for the 1st cycle (grade 9 - 10) and 2nd cycle (grade 11 - 12) of secondary education is 19.7% and 7.8% respectively (Dire Dawa Administratin Education Bureau, 2019). The Education Sector Development Program V (ESDP V) of Dire Dawa Education Bureau emphasizes improving equity and access in general education, but it does not consider those students who are on the verge of dropping out of school (Dire Dawa Administration Education Bureau, 2015). Specifically, the study took place in Tesfa secondary and preparatory school,⁵ one of the oldest secondary schools and enrolls students between grade 9 and 12. I conducted three rounds of life history interviews with six youths. From Tesfa school, I selected four participants, two female and two male students. I also selected two out of school youth (secondary school age youth), and both are female. The youth are between 18 and 22

⁵ The school's name is a pseudonym, which means hope in Amharic.

years and they are a bit over-aged for secondary education. Most of the participants were out of school for years and started their education again.⁶ This dissertation narrates the educational aspirations and agency of these six secondary school age youth. The next section explains the conceptual framework that informs this study.

A Capability Framework for this Study

Narrowing educational inequality between students who are from rich and low-income families has become a focus of research and policy debate at the global level and in the field of international education and development. The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) focus on ensuring equitable quality education for all exemplifies the global focus on addressing inequalities. Specifically, narrowing this gap by enabling youths to pursue and realize their aspirations has become a focus of educational research (e.g., The Aspirations longitudinal research in Australia⁷) and educational policy debate (Hart, 2012). In the fields of comparative and international education and development, DeJaeghere (2018) also calls for studies that not only give attention to how marginalized youth navigate their futures for themselves and with others, but also how they exercise their agency amidst social, economic, and historical conditions. This dissertation seeks to answer that call by examining how school, family, and societal conditions enable or constrain aspirations and agency of youths who are from economically disadvantaged families in Ethiopia. To this end, the research framework draws on the capability approach informed by Sen's (1992, 1999) conception of well-being and agency, and

⁶ In the Ethiopian education system, students usually enter higher education at the age of 19 and start first grade at age 7 (but it does not seem so typical).

⁷ The research project is a longitudinal study examining factors that shape the career and educational aspirations of Australian school students involving more than 15,000 surveys and 1000 interviews/focus groups with students, teachers and their parents or caregivers (The University of Newcastle, 2018).

further expanded upon by capability scholars in education. The central aim of education, according to the capability approach, is to expand people's capabilities or "meaningful opportunities" (Barrett & Tikly, 2010, p. 187), including economic, social, cultural, emotional and other facets that enable them to live a life they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2006; Vaughan et al., 2007).

I employ the capability approach since it creates a framework for a broad interpretation of advancing equality in education. First, a capability approach focuses on identifying real educational opportunities that impact students' well-being (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). For this reason, the approach gives attention to various conditions that affect one's conversion of resources into valued outcomes by raising questions that often do not receive enough attention. Baxen et al. (2014) explain the capability approach as follows:

It does not only ask questions such as: What was the learners' performance in Mathematics? What percentage of the learners' completed Grade 12? Are there enough resources and qualified teachers? It urges us to *also ask*, for instance: *To what types of opportunities do learners have access? What are learners' valued functionings? To what extent does the content of the curriculum empower and support learners in actively pursuing these functionings? How free are they to exercise agency in pursuing them? What factors influence the ability of education participants to convert educational resources into capabilities?* (p. 100) (emphasis added).

Thus, the concern is not only about providing educational resources, but also whether the students can use these resources to pursue their educational aspirations and overcome obstacles that prevent them from pursuing their aspirations.

By evaluating real educational advantage and identifying constraining conditions, the capability approach lessens an over-reliance on an outcome-based measure of quality of education that does not fully show the disadvantages that students from poor families are facing (DeCesare, 2017). Though the GEQIP puts emphasis on educational outcomes measured through test results, even behind those outcomes, there might be different stories. Walker and Unterhalter (2007) argue it is this “difference that is germane to thinking about justice and equality” (p. 4). To substantiate the argument that different stories lie behind “equal” outcomes, Walker and Unterhalter (2007) compare the examples of two 13-year students in Kenya. These two girls participate in an international study of learning achievements and fail a mathematics exam. For one of the girls, a major reason for failure was her decision to spend less time on mathematics and more time with friends in the drama club and other leisure activities, despite attending a well-equipped school in Nairobi with qualified teachers. In the case of the second student, her results were largely due to the absence of a mathematics teacher at her school, despite her interest in mathematics and schoolwork generally. Additionally, her parents could not afford to pay for after school study, they prioritized their son’s education and well-being, and required her to perform housework and childcare so she had little time to prepare for the examination. As a result, while those girls’ educational outcomes are technically the same, they had different opportunities and abilities to realize their opportunities. The

capability approach creates a framework that examines not only outcomes, but also the availability of real opportunities as well.

The approach is also a powerful framework for understanding youth's well-being as related to their aspirations, as it requires us to think about complexities that characterize their lives ranging from opportunity freedoms to agency to achieve them (Hart et al., 2014). The key concepts and ideas in the capability approach that guide the study are summarized below.

Aspirations

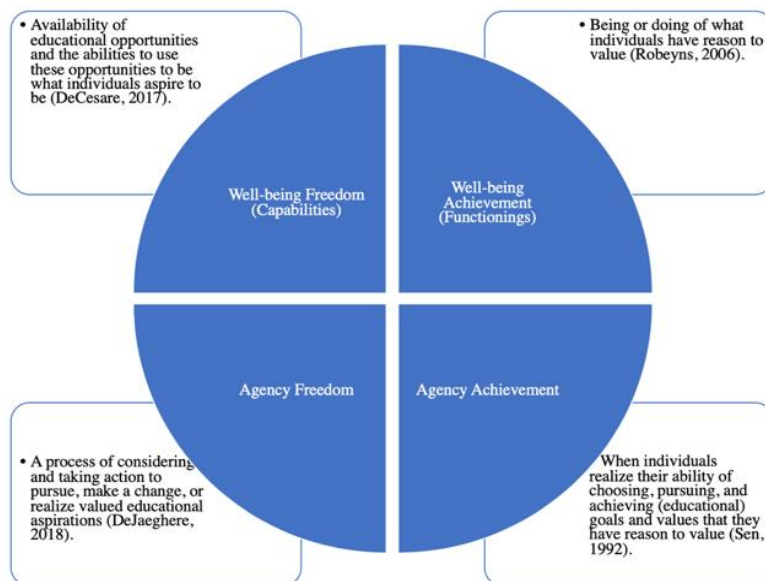
In this study, I define aspirations as a process wherein youth imagine and reimagine what their future looks like in relation to past and present opportunities (Appadurai, 2004; DeJaeghere, 2018), while understanding the notion as both goal-oriented and future-oriented (Hart, 2012). Specifically, educational aspirations are defined in this study as a desire to pursue higher education and aspired career plan. Aspirations also fit well with the capability approach. The capability approach theorizes the value of education not only in relation to increasing income or to have access to resources, but also to enhance peoples's freedom to be what they want to be (see Sen, 1999; McCowan, 2011). However, it is not enough to focus on the chance of realizing aspirations. It is also crucial to understand the degrees of freedom that individuals have to aspire, i.e., the *capability to aspire* (Hart, 2016). This approach provides a framework for understanding whether individuals have the freedom to imagine and reimagine their future and pursue a valued life.

The notion of aspirations also relates with the concept of well-being. Sen (1992) defines well-being as the availability of "real opportunities" (not just the availability of

opportunities but also the ability to use the available resources) to achieve a valuable state of being or doing that individuals have reason to value (aspirations) (p. 31). Well-being, thus, has two dimensions, i.e., well-being freedoms (capabilities) and well-being achievements (functionings) (Sen, 1992). The former refers to opportunities that individuals have and their ability of using those opportunities to be what they aspire to be while the latter refers to the corresponding achievements for those capabilities (Robeyns, 2017). For instance, the capability to aspire, which assess individuals' ability to imagine and reimagine their valued future is well-being freedom (capability), while being educated is the corresponding well-being achievement (functioning) (see Figure 1). Well-being is a combination of well-being freedom (capabilities) and well-being achievement (functionings).⁸ In this dissertation, I examined whether there are available educational resources and whether youth from very low-income families have the ability to use these resources or opportunities to pursue their aspirations.

Figure 1 - *The capability approach in education*

⁸ Nonetheless, not all types of educational functionings are valuable in the capability approach. Unless an education has an outcome that enhances “the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world” (Sen, 1999, p. 18), it is not compatible functioning with the capability approach.



This study amalgamates the capability approach with Appadurai's (2004) conceptualization of aspirations, i.e., the *capacity to aspire*. For Appadurai (2004), the *capacity to aspire* is related to youth's ability to read and understand "a map of the journey into the future" (p. 706). To understand and interpret a map, readers need to know how to familiarize themselves with symbols (e.g., park, road, railroad) and color-coded features (e.g., bodies of waters, mountains, and forests) of the map. Appadurai (2004) refers to these as "navigational information" (p. 68), and the *capacity to aspire* as a navigational capacity, requiring the linking of resources and available opportunities to explore alternative futures. The capacity to aspire has shared component with the capability to aspire, but they are different. The *capability to aspire* focuses on the aspiration formation process, including whether individuals have the freedom to form their aspirations and think about their future while the *capacity to aspire* focuses on individuals' ability of understanding the path to their aspired futures. Both the capability and capacity to aspire are influenced by familial, school, and societal conditions. Thus, it

is necessary to examine if these conditions influence the youths' aspiration formation process, as well as their ability of exploring the paths to their desired futures.

I further situate the capability and capacity to aspire within a “relational capability theory” (DeJaeghere, 2019b, p. 3) where aspirations are imagined “with others” (DeJaeghere J. , 2018, p. 239). This relational orientation of the capability approach considers the social not only as an external conversion condition that affects functionings (state of being or doing), but also as shaping the process of aspirations, agency, and ultimate well-being (DeJaeghere J. , 2019b). DeJaeghere (2018) also argues that Appadurai's conceptualization of aspirations as future-oriented and embedded in social relations complements the capability approach. This understanding sheds light on how these relations fostered aspirations toward the future, not only in the present.

Navigational capacity, thus, is a relational process wherein youth navigate alternatives toward their futures, including how to tackle constraints in their pathways, with others (DeJaeghere J. , 2019b). Thus, this study examined how youth from economically disadvantaged families imagine and reimagine their aspirations and how the opportunities and constraints experienced by them influence their aspirations, while taking into account the relational nature of aspiration.

Agency

In addition to evaluating people's well-being, the capability approach also focuses on who controls their decisions, or one's agency to think, choose and achieve what they aspire to be. The capability approach emphasizes individuals' freedom to choose what they have reason to value (agency freedom) and the ability to pursue and realize what they have reason to value, which can be guided by their own well-being or for the well-

being of others (agency achievement) (Comim et al., 2011; Sen, 1992). This process of choosing what is valuable is also significantly related to the notion of aspiration since agency is a process of deliberately choosing and taking action to pursue, making a change, or realizing valued aspirations (DeJaeghere J. , 2018). In this study, I situate agency in relation to aspiration. I understand aspiration as a process of imagining about future lives, whereas I consider agency as a process of choosing, reshaping, and pursuing the valued future.

In addition, agency, similar to well-being, has the freedom and achievement dimensions (See Figure 1 above). Agency freedom is concerned with the freedom to access information about education, engage in discussion, and decide on matters related to education (Unterhalter & Brighouse, 2007). This conceptualization of agency recognizes each person as a dignified and responsible human being who can choose what they value. Walker and Unterhalter (2007) argue that schools should create an environment for children and youth to develop their agency freedom. DeCesare (2017) furthers the notion of agency and argues that children and youth should not be an exception for the principle of being a dignified human being to choose what is valuable. Like DeCesare (2017), I maintain students should get a chance to engage in discussions concerning educational outcomes valuable to them and in identifying enabling and constraining conditions that affect their aspirations. DeCesare's (2017) claim makes more sense when it is read in line with Sen's (2005) as he highlights not only the "opportunity aspect," but also the "process aspect" of freedom (agency) (p. 153). The success of individuals in pursuing their chosen goals - "agency achievement" (see Sen, 1992; Thomas, 2007) not only matters - but also their freedom to choose, pursue or reshape

what they value (agency freedom) because agency is “socially embedded and economically mediated” (DeJaeghere et al., 2016, p. 3). Thus, I focus on the freedom that students have to act and make choices in the years leading to higher education from secondary school, as well as how they exercise their agency to use the scarce resources to pursue or reshape their aspirations. I also consider the socio-economic conditions they live in as it might enhance or diminish their agency. In the capability approach, the processes of how agency is fostered and supported alongside aspiration is critical. This study, thus, examines how the youth exercise their agency to choose, pursue, or reshape their educational aspirations within conversion conditions (supporting and constraining conditions).

Conversion Conditions

Youth imagine their future and form their aspirations, which do not always emanate from their preferences or wants. Rather, their aspirations might be influenced by how they are situated socially and reflect economic and other related conditions. These conditions might lead them to reimagine their future, change their aspirations, or adopt available options considering what they think is achievable based on personal, societal, economic, or other conditions. Conversion conditions are factors that affect youth’s abilities to change their resources into capabilities and then to functionings. Conversion conditions can be enabling or constraining for individuals’ well-being and agency (Sen, 1992; Robeyns, 2005; Robeyns, 2017). Thus, conversion conditions should be considered to evaluate whether students can use resources and social relations to be what they aspire to be in pursuing their valued future.

Economically Disadvantaged Youth

The study focuses on youth from economically disadvantaged families as studies indicate that these youth are less likely to go to school and even those who access the opportunity to go to school are more likely to drop out (see World Bank, 2018). The term economically disadvantaged can be defined differently according to the context, as those considered as economically disadvantaged in one context might not be categorized as such in a different setting. A report published by UNICEF Ethiopia and Central Statistical Agency (2019) defines multi-dimensional child deprivation in Ethiopia in nine dimensions, including development, nutrition, health, water, sanitation, housing, education, health-related knowledge, and information and participation. Unfortunately, such kind of data is not available at the local level. Instead, I followed the way the selected school defined the term. According to the principal of the school where I did my field work, economically disadvantaged students are those who are “the poorest of the poor”⁹ and unable to cover for their educational and personal expenses, including food, and known by the school administration as those at the risk of dropping out of school. I intentionally use the term “disadvantaged” rather than “poor” to externalize the source of their situation highlighting that they have fewer opportunities and resources because of their families’ economic situation.

The research participants are categorized as “youth” reflecting international and local policies. The UN refers to youth as those people between the age of 15 to 24 while the African youth charter defines youth as every person between the ages of 15 to 35. Ethiopia’s national youth policy (2004) takes the middle ground between the two and

⁹ It is a word widely used in Ethiopia to show the status of individuals who are in devastating economic conditions.

defines youth as those aged between 15 and 29. The young people in this study can be defined as “youth” in all the three documents. They are secondary school students and dropout youth in the age between 18 and 22. I will elaborate the selection criteria and the description of the participants in chapter three.

Significance of the Study

Through the life histories of economically disadvantaged youth in Ethiopia as they pursue their educational aspirations through enabling and constraining conditions, this dissertation makes several important contributions to theory and practice.

This dissertation contributes to the growing body of literature in the field of international development and education on youth’s aspirations, agency, and the capability approach by centering youths’ experiences in the Ethiopian context. Specifically, the study fills a gap in the literature by examining not only constraining, but also supporting conditions of young people in Ethiopia to pursue their valued futures. Importantly, this contributes a deeper understanding of a range of opportunities and constraints the young people experience. Specifically, this dissertation identifies constraints influencing the agentic power of young people that compelled them to make decisions against their aspired future. Analyzing the interplay between educational aspirations and agency to achieve them among economically disadvantaged youth adds to research in the Ethiopian context. Methodologically, this study narrates life histories using multiple rounds of interviews to provide a more complete pictures of youth by looking backward (past experiences) and forward (aspired future).

At the policy level, the findings provide insights for educational policymakers in Ethiopia. Previous studies about addressing educational inequalities do not consider

“real” educational opportunities; rather, they focus on the availability of educational resources and outcomes, which might be difficult to achieve unless students can use these resources to pursue their educational aspirations. This research could inform the next phase of the GEQIP by yielding insights for policy makers to shift the emphasis from equality of resources and equality of outcomes to equality of capabilities (real opportunities). This requires furthering the understanding of youth’s experience at the local level and examining the existence of real opportunities in a way that reveals what matters for the youth. This contribution can also be extended to other developing countries that are applying educational reforms by underscoring the necessity of looking at not only the provision of resources, but also the ability of students to use these resources to achieve their valued future. Especially at this time when the COVID-19 pandemic widened educational inequalities throughout the world and in Ethiopia, it is essential to consider the different conditions influencing the ability of students to pursue their aspirations to prevent exacerbating existing inequalities.

Finally, this study offers an alternative perspective for international and local organizations working to provide equitable quality education in Ethiopia and other developing countries. By providing multi-dimensional aspects to examine the educational well-being of economically disadvantaged students, the research findings can contribute to the effective design and implementation of initiatives that aim to improve educational opportunities in economically marginalized communities.

Structure of the Dissertation

In this chapter, I have explained the need to reconsider the policy emphasis on provision of resources for economically disadvantaged students and underscored the need

to examine the ability of students in using these resources to pursue their valued future considering the familial, school, and societal opportunities and constraints.

In the following chapter, I review divergent perspectives towards equality of educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students. Chapter two argues that the relational capability approach offers a broad framework to assess equality of real opportunities for a valued future. In chapter three, I describe the research design and methodology showing how the narrative inquiry methods that I used to scrutinize the life history of economically disadvantaged youth in Ethiopia enabled me to represent and understand their experiences. I then present the three analysis chapters.

Chapter four addresses the first research question and examines the degrees of freedom that youth have to aspire (the capability to aspire) and their ability to explore their future (the capacity to aspire). In this chapter, I claim that economically disadvantaged youth do have aspirations, not only for themselves but also for the well-being of others, unlike dominant narratives that depict them associated with low aspirations. Nonetheless, the findings highlight the need for accessible resources, meaningful opportunities, and guidance from family, teachers, and society to have a concrete plan for their future. Furthermore, this chapter highlights how the youth used their faith and religious institutions to aspire beyond improving their well-being and broadening their social relationships.

Chapter five scrutinizes how family, home, school, societal, and personal conditions influence the youths' capability to pursue their aspired future, focusing on the second research question. The findings in this chapter highlight that personal conditions, especially family economic situations, are mainly limiting, and societal and school

support is crucial for economically disadvantaged youth to pursue their aspirations. Furthermore, in collaboration with familial and social moral and material support (and even sometimes despite a lack of this kind of support), teachers' guidance assisted students in continuing their education and pursuing their aspirations. Family economic situation, family responsibility, societal perception about the importance of education, teachers' inability to understand the struggle of these disadvantaged students, labeling practice at schools based on academic performance, and language barriers are among some of the reasons mentioned by the study participants as constraining.

Chapter six examines how youth exercise their agency in making decisions and taking actions while choosing, shaping, and pursuing their aspirations, underscoring the interrelation between aspirations and agency. In this chapter, I underline that faith and their ability to have a clear picture of their future strengthen their agentic power. In contrast, economic constraints leave them with practically no options to choose from.

Finally in chapter seven, I draw conclusions from the analysis and reflected on some implications for research, policy, and practice. At the end, I include a prologue to share the youths' educational and work status as more than a year has passed after the interviews were gathered, and the global pandemic has impacted educational aspirations in many aspects.

Chapter Two: Equality of What? Educational Opportunities for Economically Disadvantaged Students

In chapter one, I discussed the necessity of examining economically disadvantaged students' ability to use available resources in pursuit of their valued

futures, in contrast to the policy focus on the provision of resources as a means of addressing educational inequalities. Amartya Sen (1992) contends that the crucial question in the analysis and assessment of equality is “equality of what?” (p. ix). Examining why there are profound inequalities notwithstanding, the improvement in access to education necessitates the question of “equality of what?” when one refers to educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students. Assessing this question is also central in the Ethiopian context, as there is still a high dropout and repetition rate of economically disadvantaged students despite their relative progress towards access (Berry & Bogale, 2011; World Bank, 2017a).

In this chapter, I review existing literature that engages with educational aspirations and agency of economically disadvantaged youth in developing countries in general, and in Ethiopia, in particular. I begin by overviewing the Ethiopian education system with the purpose of showing how economically disadvantaged students face multiple threat of severe dropout and repetition, low test achievement, and poor education quality. I then critically examine the ways in which some of the leading approaches in education aim to answer the “equality of what?” question. I will analyze the human capital, rights-based, and capability approach that represent three divergent, but complementary perspectives on what constitutes equality regarding economically disadvantaged students. The first two are incorporated in the economic strategy and the constitution of the country, whereas I included the last one as a better way of exploring educational inequalities, specifically in developing countries like Ethiopia.

The human capital approach, which finds its basis in economic scholarship, focuses on the value of education in terms of securing employment and contributing to

the economic growth of a country. The human capital approach focuses on equality of outcomes or achievements that results in equality of opportunity in the labor market. The rights-based approach focuses on having laws that recognize the right to education for every child. Thus, it focuses on equality in terms of providing resources and education processes. While recognizing the significance of educational resources and outcomes, the capability approach redirects the focus to what disadvantaged students can do using those resources. Thus, it defines equality in terms of the availability of *real* educational opportunities that youths have both in and out of school to creates spheres for them to be what they aspire to be. Later in this chapter, I discuss two key concepts in the capability approach, which are also the basis for this study, aspiration and agency. In conclusion, the chapter poses why the capability approach to understanding educational opportunities for economically marginalized students is relevant to my research.

Overview of the Ethiopian Education System

The basis of the current Ethiopian education sector reform is the Education and Training Policy (ETP) enacted in 1994 after the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991. The Education Sector Development Program (ESDP), intended to achieve universal primary education, was implemented to realize ETP (Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA] & International Development Center for Japan [IDCJ], 2012). Currently, Ethiopia is implementing the fifth ESDP (ESDP V), which focuses on expanding access to education and improve educational quality and efficiency (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2015).

Ethiopia was among countries that had achieved the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) education target by obtaining a notable increase in primary school

enrollment (World Bank, 2017b). The primary school gross enrollment rate in 2020 is 119% (World Bank, 2021), indicating the enrollment of overage children. However, Ethiopia has experienced high dropout rates from the primary grades. At the national level, the dropout rates of students in grade 1 - 8 is 17.5%, and it is the highest in grade 1, at 25%, indicating many children join the 1st grade leave the education system within the next year (Ministry of Education, 2019). The completion of primary education is alarming. For instance, in 2018/19, only about 62.1% of those who started grade 1 completed grade 8, which resulted in a lower transition rate to secondary schools (Ministry of Education, 2019).

The low primary education completion rate is one of the key challenges that constrain the growth of secondary education in Ethiopia (Joshi & Verspoor, 2013). According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Education 2019 report, the 2018/19 academic year gross and net enrollment rates of secondary education were 32% and 25.3%, respectively. In addition, a regional examination is given in grade 8 to certify completion of primary education, and the low achievement in the exam is also the other challenge that affects secondary education enrollment (Joshi & Verspoor, 2013). Besides, access to secondary education remains inequitable, especially for those who are from low-income families and live in remote areas, because of few schools in these areas and sometimes schools are located too far (Joshi & Verspoor, 2013). Furthermore, transition from the first (grade 9 and 10) to the second cycle of secondary education (grade 11 and 12) is low because of the national exam in grade 10 and high number of students join Technical and Vocational Education and Training Centers (Ministry of Education, 2019).

In recognition of these challenge, the government of Ethiopia has implemented the General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP) as part of the ESDP since 2008. Into its third phase as of July 2018, the focus of GEQIP is to enhance the quality of general education throughout the country, including early education, primary and secondary education (World Bank, 2017a). GEQIP measures quality of education in terms of five essential components including teachers' and leaders' development through pre-service training and in-service professional development; development of curriculum, and teaching and learning materials; school improvement program (SIP) (school based grant aiming at improving learning conditions); expansion of information and communication technology to improve the quality of teaching and learning; and quality assurance measured through school inspection, licensing, and assessment (Ministry of Education, 2015).

The GEQIP-E (Phase III), launched in 2018, uses the term “equity,” signaling a direct focus on equity than the previous phases. Use of this term marks an effort on the part of the Government of Ethiopia to include equity in the quality program as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) shift towards incorporating equity in defining quality. GEQIP-E also focuses on improving equitable access to general education in Ethiopia targeting three areas of improvement: gender parity in specific regions (in Afar, Somali, and Benesihangul-Gumuz); gross enrollment ratio of grades 1-8 in the mentioned pastoralist regions; and school participation of children with special needs (World Bank, 2017a). Though the current phase includes equity, it narrowly defines the term, only concerning children with disabilities, pastoral students, and students in emerging regions of the country, without involving other disadvantaged students (economic, ethnic, and

social) in the rest of the regions. Unfortunately, the GEQIP also omits students from economically disadvantaged families, although there are many children and youth in this situation throughout the country. Hence, it does not recognize the economic, social, and other constraints that those groups experience.

Nonetheless, after the country started implementing the GEQIP, provision of textbooks and other school resources have improved noticeably accompanied by modest improvement in learning outcomes at the primary level, yet there is still a high prevalence of dropout and repetition rates (World Bank, 2017a). Though GEQIP promotes the provision of educational inputs, practically, it is not being implemented as intended despite significant improvements (Ministry of Education, 2013). The social assessment of the second phase of GEQIP, for instance, indicated that lack of incentives for teachers in the remote areas coupled with under and delayed payments resulted in a dearth of teachers in Gambela and the Southern Nation, Nationalities, and Peoples (SNNPR) regions. This in turn affected the level of support and attention teachers could give to classes because of the high student to teacher ratio (Ministry of Education, 2013).

In addition to lack of educational resources or poor educational processes, the Ethiopian education system also faces a discrepancy between the availability of resources and the students' ability to use these resources at times when there are sufficient educational inputs. For instance, as indicated in the social assessment of GEQIP (phase II) study, in SNNPR region of Ethiopia, students mention high levels of sexual abuse and harassment of girls as a major barrier to remaining in school (Ministry of Education, 2013). Thus, the availability of educational resources, such as skilled teachers and relevant learning materials, is not enough by itself to guarantee students attendance, high

achievements, or realization of the students' aspirations. Yet, without the availability of such enabling conditions, students are particularly challenged to convert these resources to capabilities, or real opportunities to be what they aspire to be.

The strategies of GEQIP have not been effective as planned not only because of unavailability of school resources, but also because of having policy that is not based on the capability of students to use the available resources. For these reasons, understanding educational opportunities as embedded in and affected by socio-economic conditions enables the formulation of solutions that consider the realities of economically disadvantaged students. Critical to this understanding is situating students as individuals who are affected in school, but also by family and societal conditions. The following section discusses different perspectives on equality of educational opportunities. I emphasize the capability approach as a framework to redress the educational inequalities and widen educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students in developing countries like Ethiopia.

Perspectives on Educational Opportunities for Economically Disadvantaged Students

Debates about equality of opportunities in education are debates about which values should be considered as more relevant than others (Lazenby, 2016). Even though there is consensus about the need of equality of opportunities in education, there are debates surrounding what is required to achieve equality. For some, equality of opportunity is about having laws that recognize the right to education of every child and providing educational resources for all students. For others, it is about equality of outcomes or achievements. For the rest, it is about equality of *real* opportunities

considering what individuals can do with the available resources. Among the many perspectives about equality of opportunities in education, the human capital, human rights, and capability approach will be discussed below. The notions from the human capital approach are incorporated in the economic strategy and the ESDP of Ethiopia while the country's constitution enshrined concepts from the rights-based approach. I included the capability approach in the below discussion as a better way of exploring educational inequalities, specifically in developing countries like Ethiopia.

Human Capital Approach

The human capital approach addresses the “equality of what?” question in terms of creating equality of educational opportunity for the labor market focusing on the instrumental value of education. In other words, the approach focuses on the role of education to secure work and other measurable benefits, such as career opportunities and better life prospects through education. Having its basis in economics scholarship and informed largely by T. W. Schultz's (1960, 1961, 1963) and Becker's (1964) work regarding rates of return on investment from schooling, the human capital approach brought a new way of thinking of education in relation to a country's economic growth. Schultz (1960) explains how education is viewed as a means to increase employment, and ultimately, economic growth as follows:

I propose to treat education as an investment in man and to treat its consequences as a form of capital. Since education becomes a part of the person receiving it, I shall refer to it as human capital. Since it becomes an integral part of a person, it cannot be bought or sold or treated as property under our institutions. Nevertheless,

it is a form of capital if it renders a productive service of value to the economy (p. 571).

Education is a means that results in human capital formation. In other words, according to this economic perspective, if children have access to education, they will obtain gainful employment and contribute to their country's economic growth. Education is crucial as it eventually enables children to become well-trained in order to get jobs, and as a result, earn a higher income than without participation in education (Schultz, 1963; Becker, 1964).

The human capital approach has shifted from focusing on years of schooling to acquired cognitive skills. Years of schooling, on its own, does not translate to equal knowledge and skills gained from school, nor ultimately guarantee economic returns such as income from work (World Bank, 2007). According to the proponents of this approach (see Hanushek & Luque, 2003; Hanushek & Wobmann, 2007; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2008), cognitive skills are strongly related to individual earnings and economic growth; the stronger the cognitive skills, the better employment, and the higher the economic growth of the society or country. Thus, equality of educational opportunity is conceptualized in terms of addressing inequality by preparing students with the cognitive knowledge or skills for the labor market (Castello-Climent & Hidalgo-Cabrillana, 2012; Heyneman S. P., 2004), whereby their education and improvement in skills benefit both the individuals and the national economy.

Accordingly, one of the beneficial contributions of the human capital approach, especially for developing countries, is its emphasis on the development of skills that

contribute to individual and national economic growth. Schultz (1961) justified the importance of human capital formation, especially for developing countries, as follows:

Without it [growth in human capital] there would be only hard, manual work and poverty except for those who have income from property (p. 16).

As Schultz (1961) explained, the economic return of education is more appealing for children of poor parents since education can be an outlet to change their future life, as most cannot obtain income from property. For instance, during the imperial regime in Ethiopia (1941 - 1974), education was free to all, and the return from investment in education was clear to understand because, after few years of education, children from poor families found themselves in high positions with an income that could have been more than ten times the per capita income of their parents (Negash, 2006). Similarly, the ESDP V depicts that “regular adjustments to education and training be made so that human development investments focus on equipping a workforce that can meet the various productive sectors’ needs” (p. 12). Even the opponents of this approach (see Robeyns, 2006) recognize that the approach draws attention to the need for income-generating skills development through education, which is important especially for people living in severe poverty. In a study focused on underprivileged households around the world, investment in education was seen as the most important way out of poverty even though lack of money for education was mentioned as one of the prevailing problems (Narayan et al., 2000). As the above studies indicate, children from economically disadvantaged families aspired to grasp the instrumental value of education, such as career opportunities and better life prospects through education.

Nevertheless, the human capital approach has drawbacks, which limit its analytical power to address equality of educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students in this study. First, the human capital approach is criticized for treating learners as a homogenous group (Vaughan et al., 2007), rather than recognizing the difference among students. It does not consider different personal, social, economic, and other conditions that students experience to use the available resources. For example, the approach does not recognize the socio-economic barriers in how it explains gender equality, i.e., an equal number of boys and girls enrolled in school, attending classes, and progressing to complete examinations (Hanushek, 2008). However, this assumption of equal numbers and achievements as a sign of gender equality has its own weakness since it does not put emphasis on changing perceptions, pedagogy, and school practices in a way that promotes gender equality (Unterhalter, 2007). Moreover, the overreliance on quantitative data often comes at the expense of understanding the differential experiences of girls and women (Vaughan, 2007). Okkolin (2017) lists specific constraints that women in her study in Tanzania faced, including indirect cost of schooling (which affects girls' education more than boys because, when it comes to selection, priority is always given to boys); sexual harassment due to distance to school; and the cost and lack of sanitary materials. The human capital approach does not have a way to measure or understand these factors. Rather, it considers education merely as a means for economic growth, rather than as a potential tool for the achievement of social justice such as addressing inequalities in education (Unterhalter, 2007; Manion & Menashy, 2013). That is why examining the availability of students' real educational opportunities is absolutely necessary to understand different barriers experienced by students.

Secondly, the human capital approach, similar to what is manifested in GEQIP to a certain extent, puts emphasis on educational outcomes measured through standardized tests. Hanushek and Wobmann (2007) suggest student achievement on standardized tests correlates more strongly with economic growth more than simply years spent in school, but the focus on standardized tests raises questions of having real educational opportunities. As Tikly (2013) claims, conditions related to poverty significantly contribute to the low achievement of students. These conditions include, but are not limited to, attending class without having food, poor living conditions, having no access to books, and being involved in child labor (Tikly & Barrett, 2013). Test scores can show how a specific school or different schools in a country perform, but they do not reveal the opportunities the students have or the constraints they have faced that result in low achievement, repetition, or dropping out. Besides, the assessment of educational outcomes in terms of skills and benefits for future life might be measurable using standardized tests, such as literacy and mathematical skills, but other valued outcomes from education are less amenable to quantifiable measurements (Barrett, 2011a). Thus, the quantifiable targets that focus on test results narrow the relevance of education to instrumental benefits, such as the role of education to secure work and other measurable benefits. Focusing on quantifiable targets underrates the importance of the intrinsic (achieving a more rewarding and complex mental life regardless of economic gain or employment) and positional benefits of education (its benefit to increase the status and the reputation of the educated person that leads to advocating for social justice) (Unterhalter & Brighouse, 2007). Measures of learning outcomes through tests should be

considered as one partial source of information, as it does not fully measure what students need to accomplish in schools (Barrett, 2011b).

Thirdly, this economic conception of education has a significant downside since it encourages investment in education by valuing the costs and benefits (both at the individual and country level), especially when there is resource-constraints (Chattopadhyay, 2012). Schultz (1993), for instance, argues that developing countries should increase investment in educational access to girls and women to expand the economic growth of the women and the countries. Similarly, Cameron (2012) justifies a public subsidy to educating girls as the social benefits of girls' schooling are significant in developing nations like Sub-Saharan African countries. This assumption encourages parents and governments to invest in girls' education since it results in economic return, but not all parents agree with this argument, especially when there is an apparent disconnect between education and securing a livelihood. For instance, in a study that gathers the views of economically underprivileged families in 60 countries, many parents participated in the study did not want to send their daughters to schools when schools are located in a distant place or when they cannot afford the indirect costs of schooling, such as school uniforms, textbooks, transportation, and other fees, or when the family needs the child's labor in order to survive. These indirect costs disincentivize many poor families worldwide from investing in their children's, especially in their daughters', education (Narayan et al., 2000). In another example, a Young Lives study about the community understandings of children's transitions in Ethiopia revealed that even if some families manage the cost of schooling, the economic gain is not always worth the social cost of having a girl who picks up a boyfriend or who is "unmarriageable" after

spending her life in schools and being “old” to get married (Tafere & Camfield, 2009, p. 18). In addition, this notion of education as an investment pushes those who are poor to spend their time in income-generating activities. Although seemingly more income-generating at the time, such activities limit their future well-being.

Even though the human capital approach focuses on creating educational opportunities to achieve equality of outcomes (educational achievement), in the hope of expanding the labor market, this may not hold true unless those socio-economic and other related conditions that affect economically disadvantaged students’ education are taken into account. While the human capital approach continues to influence policymakers in developing countries in particular (Herz & Sperling, 2004), the next section will explain the rights-based approach as a complementary, not a replacement, to the human capital approach. The rights-based approach focuses on educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students as a human right to which every child is entitled.

Rights-based Approach

The rights-based approach addresses the “equality of what?” question in terms of the removal of formal obstacles for educational institutions and provision of resources for equipping economically disadvantaged students. The approach, which has established a legacy in international declarations and conventions, advocates education as a universal right given to every child, regardless of their economic and other status, by the mere fact that they are human being (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2007). For instance, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which is considered the milestone document for international human rights instruments, states that “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages.”

Similarly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) emphasizes that states should recognize the right of the child to education and “on the basis of equal opportunity”; states shall make primary education compulsory and available free to all; they should encourage the development of different forms of secondary education; and state should make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution resonates similar stand under Article 41 (4) as follows: “The state shall allocate progressively increasing funds for the purposes of promoting the people’s access to [...] education [...]”

The convention on the Rights of the Child further explains that this equality of opportunity includes avoiding deprivation of access to education and limiting of any person or group of persons to education of an inferior standard. Hence, the convention obliges states to have legislation that ensure there is no discrimination in admission of students in educational institutions and to abrogate any laws that involve discrimination in education (see Article 3). This approach, thus, assumes that removal of barriers that are basis for discrimination and provision of resources including having qualified teachers equally are the relevant value (Howe, 1993). This approach relates the idea of formal equality of opportunity in education to the removal of legal obstacles for access to quality education (Maclean, 2003). In other words, the rights-based approach underlines the need of removal of legal obstacles, in its widest sense, and equalizing of inputs or resources, in its strongest form, to address educational inequalities.

Accordingly, the rights-based approach has pertinent contributions in addressing inequalities in education. First, defining education as a universal right aims to establish a

certain degree of consensus and enables the prioritization of specific areas of action (Barrett & Sorensen, 2015). Internationally established goals and targets transcend national politics by setting the minimum obligation that states assume towards improving access to quality education and are not altered if governments shift policies (Rose, 2015). The universality of the right also imposes an obligation on states to ensure access to quality education (Anderson, 2006), which increases the accountability of governments to their citizens. Furthermore, following legally mandated procedures, like reporting mechanisms, enable to assess states progress toward improving the quality of education, which keeps countries on track (Colclough, 2005). In this approach, states are key duty bearers to right-holders, and they have an international legal responsibility to guarantee the right to education of all, including those children who are from economically disadvantaged families even though legal obligations do not imply assurances to realize the right.

Another important contribution of the rights-based approach is that it defines education as a fundamental human right, underpinning all other rights. Thus, the approach promotes examining the entire legal system and the necessity of safeguarding other rights that affect the right to education (Tomasevski, 2005). For instance, if a country accepts the right of access to quality education, it also shall incorporate other rights to give a full sense for the right to education, which includes protection from abuse including corporal punishment, the right to health, criminalizing child marriage, abduction, female genital cutting, etc. In this way, the Ethiopian constitution protects the rights of children against corporal punishment or any inhumane treatment in schools (see Article 36(1)(e)). In addition, the Ethiopian constitution recognizes that education shall

be provided in a manner that is free from religious influence, political partisanship, or cultural prejudices (see Article 90(2)). By safeguarding other rights related to education, the rights-based approach establishes grounds to fully realize the right to education considering socio-cultural and school conditions.

Nonetheless, having the right to education or recognizing enabling rights (e.g., the right to health) and criminalizing prohibiting issues (e.g., child marriage, abduction) do not necessarily comprise the realization of access to opportunities and these rights. It does not also mean that functioning will follow the right (Hart, 2014). For instance, Warrington and Kiragu (2012) revealed that girls are subject to harassment and violence from parents, teachers, or male members of the community in the Kajiado district of southeast Kenya. Similarly, Unterhalter (2007) illustrates the difficulties of accessing the formal right to education in South Africa because of hunger and social isolation related to wide-spread poverty. In particular, Unterhalter (2007) reflects on the experience of a girl in Durban, South Africa, who was unable to go to school because of shame as she could not wash herself or her clothes since she had no money for soap and water. Students often cannot avoid the constraints inhibiting their educational progress, even though their right to education is constitutionally granted. As Ray and Saini (2016) argue, the right to education does not naturally empower citizens to seek their rights and motivates states to implement an action that backs the constitutionally guaranteed right. If the right to education cannot be implemented, having the right by itself cannot enhance the well-being of the right-holder. That is why it is critical to examine how the right to access to education can be translated into real opportunities (capabilities).

Nevertheless, Tomasevski (2001) expands the scope of the right to education and proposed that the right needs to fulfill four conditions, which she labeled as the “4As” framework. The four conditions are availability (sufficient number of free of charge schools with teachers and infrastructure), accessibility (non-discriminatory admissions to school including financial and other obstacles and providing affirmative action for the most marginalized ones), acceptability (having curricula compatible to the cultures and languages of students), and adaptability (responding to changing society). Likewise, the international development agencies endorsing the human rights approach to education, such as UNICEF and UNESCO, claim that access to quality education includes five components including learners’ readiness for school (in terms of good health, nutrition, and family support); learning environment; content (develop curriculum that increases the cognitive and non-cognitive skills); teaching and learning process; and learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2015; UNICEF, 2000). For example, in Ethiopia, greater success in students’ persistence and achievement is observed in schools that scheduled breaks during harvest time, illustrating the adaptability element. Even though these conceptions of the rights-based approach expand the framework, mostly, the right to education is conceived in relation to Tomasevski’s (2001) “availability” element.

Even though both Tomasevski’s and the UN’s framework expand the concept of the right to education, there are still points wherein the approach needs further conceptualization for the purpose of this study. As McCowan (2011) elaborates, unlike the rights-based approach, the capability approach provides a powerful conceptual tool for understanding “real” as opposed to “formal” opportunities. McCowan (2011) contends the enjoyment of education is more than a formal entitlement to schooling and

includes economic, social, cultural, and other conditions “necessary for having access, being able to engage in learning meaningfully, and converging that learning into capabilities” (p. 293). For instance, students without a financial support at home need to engage in income-generating activities to support their families, often find difficulty concentrating in classes due to hunger, and might face other related problems caused by poverty. This shows how students might be unable to use available opportunities to follow their aspirations because of socio-economic conditions. So, equipping marginalized youth with the right resources does not tell a complete story. The availability of educational resources by itself does not necessarily enable students to pursue their educational aspirations unless they are able to use it. Without doubt, the availability of educational resources and good educational processes make significant contributions to students learning, but students who are from economically disadvantaged families might not use these resources in the same way as other students whose parents have relatively a better income.

Recognizing that the capabilities are not the substitute of rights and instead enrich and extend the rights-based framework (McCowan, 2011), the next section will explain the capabilities approach in widening educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students.

Capability Approach

The capability approach, first developed by Amartya Sen (1992) as a supplement for the human capital approach, addresses the “equality of what?” question in terms equality of real educational opportunities for a valued life. From the perspective of the capability approach, both economic growth and the realization of human rights are

essential, and the approach moves beyond the earlier two approaches by emphasizing the importance of education as it relates to well-being (Sen, 1992; Tikly, 2010; Sayed & Ahmed, 2011). By reconceptualizing equality in terms of real educational opportunity for a valued future, this approach considers social, cultural, and economic conditions experienced by disadvantaged students (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). As such, the capability approach addresses the challenges of the above discussed dominant approaches. The capability approach is an applicable framework for this study, as it allows for a broad interpretation of educational opportunities, especially for students who are from economically disadvantaged families.

First, the approach identifies educational opportunities that enhance students' capabilities by evaluating "real educational advantage" (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 5); thus, it goes beyond the formalist conceptions of equal educational opportunity (which promotes distribution of equal resources) and is concerned with "effective opportunities," which considers one's ability of using the available opportunities and convert resources to be what students aspire to be (DeCesare, 2017, p. 79). In education, as Walker and Unterhalter (2007) explain, evaluation of an education system in general or particular education programs should be concerned with a "dynamic relationship between opportunity and outcome, our capabilities and functionings" (p. 4). As such, resources should not be regarded without considering how the holder can use them (Unterhalter & Brighouse, 2007). In other words, how individuals can convert their resources to valued outcomes is vital to identify educational advantages and disadvantages that result in a specific educational outcome. Hence, educational equality

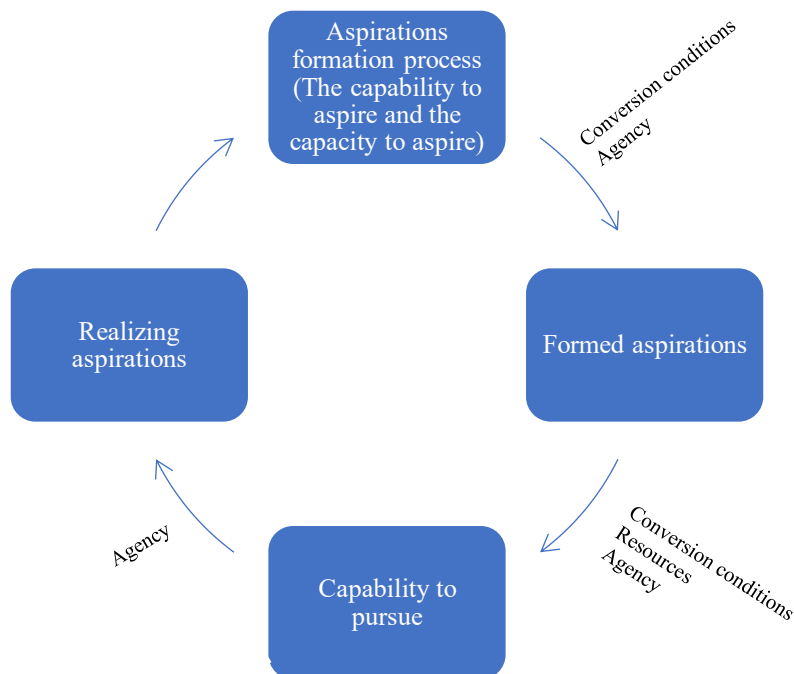
should not only be concerned with the availability of educational resources, but also how children can use these resources to achieve their aspirations.

The capability approach not only focuses on identifying educational opportunities that enhance capabilities, but it also enables to distinguish educational disadvantages. By giving attention to various conditions that affect one's conversion of resources into valued outcomes, application of the capability approach thus can work towards redressing inequalities. For instance, a Young Lives study (Camfield & Tafere, 2009) focuses on understanding the well-being of boys and girls in three Ethiopian communities indicates that lack of toilets and running water is more of a concern for girls than boys. The girls in the study explained the fears they have towards sexual violence in mixed or isolated toilets. The unavailability of running water was also more of a concern for the girls because of their value of being clean during puberty and being prepared for mensuration. A school without toilets and running water is inconvenient for both sexes, but for girls, it is detrimental to their well-being. In another study that assesses educational trajectories from childhood to early adulthood in relation to aspiration and gender in Ethiopia indicates that gender disparity in aspiration is clear. Both children and parents favor boys to reach the higher educational levels (Tafere, 2017). Similarly, in their analysis of comparative case studies in marginalized communities in Malawi and Bangladesh, Chisamya et al., (2012) study reveals that factors such as negative perception towards girls education (i.e., schooling might be against the girls' future roles as wives and mothers) makes girls not achieve in school, even though the national statistics show that girls and boys have achieved parity of enrollment in primary school. These gendered perceptions cannot be solved by numerical parity or equality in cognitive test results or

equality of right. One must also identify educational disadvantages by reflecting on the causes and consequences of these societal perceptions and change them if they are barriers for students' education. Thus, one of the foundations of addressing inequalities within the capability approach is paying attention to learners' heterogeneity in their ability to achieve valued functionings (Baxen et al., 2014), focusing on the "lived realities of learners" in specific contexts (Tikly & Barrett, 2011, p. 6), and examining how capabilities are being developed or denied.

This broad interpretation of equality includes three critical elements, i.e., aspirations, agency, and conversion conditions. Both agency (the ability of choosing what individuals' value, pursue, and realize) and conversion conditions (enabling or constraining personal, socio-economic, cultural, and institutional conditions) affect individuals' aspiration as well as their ability to use the available educational opportunities. Hence, agency and conversion conditions render opportunities "real" or not. In return, functioning is a sum total of all these factors, or in other words, it is what is achieved given the aspirations, agency, opportunities/resources, and conversion conditions in which one lives. Figure 2 explains the interrelationship among these concepts.

Figure 2 - *The conceptual framework for the study*



In the process of forming aspiration, individuals' freedom of thinking about their future (the capability to aspire) and their ability of understanding the paths to their aspired future (capacity to aspire) are significant component of the process as can be inferred from the figure. In this process of aspiring, socio-economic circumstances (conversion conditions) as well as the individuals' ability of exercising their agency influence the aspirations they form (both their capability and capacity to aspire). For instance, if a woman thinks taking beauty classes and becoming a makeup artist is a good educational and career path for her, but the career is not acceptable in her community (societal conversion condition), she might not choose being a makeup artist as her aspiration. Similarly, if it is not acceptable in her community and she has never been exposed to it before, she may not even think about it initially. On the other hand, even if the field is not conventional in her society, she might decide to pursue it as a career path (exercising agency). Nonetheless, forming aspirations is not the end of the story. After individuals choose their aspirations, the availability of resources and different familial,

school-related, and societal circumstances (conversion conditions) influence their capability to pursue or realize their aspirations. The freedom they have to pursue the aspired future (agency) is another component affecting their capability to pursue/realize. Taking the example mentioned above, the woman might not be able to join beauty schools because of unavailability of such kind of schools in her locality (availability of resources) and discouragement of her family (familial conversion conditions). But she might act to find alternatives by watching videos on YouTube and teach herself to pursue what she aspired to be (exercising agency). After reaching this point (i.e., having the capability to pursue), how the individuals exercise their agency influences whether they are going to realize the aspired future (actual achievement) or not. Nonetheless, achieving aspiration is not the end; rather, it feeds back into other aspiration formations. The next section elaborates aspirations and agency in detail, which are the critical elements of creating equality of educational opportunities for a valued future in the capability approach. Since this research focuses on the process that leads to this achievement, I omit functioning in the below discussion.

Aspirations

Aspiration is a process that includes imagining and reimagining of the future (Appadurai, 2004; DeJaeghere, 2018). It also evokes the idea of life dreams valued by individuals assuming that would make their life worthwhile (Conradie, 2013). Aspiration is a prominent concept, especially in the capability approach, as it understands the value of education as to enhance individuals' freedom to be what they aspire to be (see Sen, 1999; McCowan, 2011). Even though having aspirations is not the same as having real opportunities to achieve aspirations, aspiration matters since it influences the kinds of

capabilities for which individuals strive (Hart, 2014, 2016). Aspirations, for instance, enable economically disadvantaged children to imagine an alternative future that can change their current well-being since aspiration can also arise from the need to escape a present way of life (Hart, 2016). It also enables further capabilities and functionings (Hart, 2012). The next section analyses the literature about different features of aspirations, including social situatedness of aspiration, aspirations as future-oriented, and two dominant narratives about aspirations of educationally disadvantaged students.

Social-Situatedness of Aspirations. Since this dissertation took place in a society that promotes communal way of life, I engage with the criticism of the capability approach as being too individualistic¹⁰ and focusing on the well-being of individuals rather than societies (Stewart & Deneulin, 2002). However, the capability approach, specifically the capability to aspire, considers societal relations at least in two ways and is, therefore, not just individually focused. First, individuals' capability and capacity to aspire may be nurtured or constrained through relations with others; therefore, social relation is critical in influencing youth's aspirations (DeJaeghere, 2018; Hart, 2013). For example, when parents recognize the relevance of girls' education, they will send their daughters to school and allow them some time to study at home, rather than making them do chores around the house. The support of their parents will give the girls real opportunities to proceed with their education or not, which ultimately affects their well-being. In another example, Hart's (2013) study of British youths' aspirations for higher

¹⁰ In response to this critique, Robeyns (2005, 2017) underscores the need to distinguish between ethical individualism and ontological individualism wherein the previous contends that individuals are the unit of moral concern and the latter claims that society is nothing but the sum of individuals. As Robeyns (2005) argues, the capability approach embraces ethical individualism, and it does not contradict with the notion of the approach, which recognizes the connections between people, social relations, and social embedment.

education reveals that having a support from family including food, shelter, clothing, access to a quiet study area, may contribute to an individual's capability to aspire by giving individuals the opportunity to think beyond their basic needs. As Hart's study further indicates, a number of students undertake paid employment in order to contribute to the family expense, which influence their educational aspirations. Second, these social relations become part of the process of aspiration formation and individuals form their aspirations with others, which DeJaeghere (2018) refers as relational nature of aspirations. The relational capability theory for redressing inequalities considers the "social" not as external condition influencing the achievement of aspirations and agency but recognizes that social relations are part of aspirations formation and exercise of agency (DeJaeghere J. , 2019b). As such, even though aspirations related to preferences and choices, it is never simply individual as it is formed in interaction with others (Appadurai, 2004), and hence, aspirations are socially situated.

Narrower conception of aspirations as individually held might results in misunderstanding what needs to be done to redress inequality among different socio-economic groups and for how they can be differently resourced (Gale & Parker, 2015). Thus, aspirations should be understood in relation to an individual's socio-economic environment as aspirations are "contextual" (Stockfelt, 2015, p. 6) and a "complex social-cultural phenomena" (Zipin et. al, 2015, p. 227). For instance, in a study that assessed factors impacting boys' educational aspirations in Jamaica, participants mentioned that "Things are tough in Jamaica, [...], our experiences are different, so our aspirations are different" (p. 6) (Stockfelt, 2015). Hence, the aspirations of those young boys participated in the mentioned study is influenced by their socio-economic context.

While explaining different ways in which aspirations can be socially situated, Gale and Parker (2015) discuss “doxic aspirations,” which they define it as aspirations based on dominant beliefs and assumptions in the society. Doxic aspirations, mostly, are what students respond to when asked what they want to be when they grow up, and it shows what is valuable in that society (Gale & Parker, 2015). For instance, in a study that assess aspirations of students from low socio-economic status in Australia, one of the participants state her strong aspiration of becoming a nurse, which was a dream of her immigrant mother in their home country that her mother could not pursue (Zipin et al., 2015). This dominant belief in the family or society push youth to be a victim of the “symbolic violence of doxa” (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 232). Students, especially those from low-income families, end up blaming themselves thinking that “I might have worked harder but I was distracted by problems in my life” or “I tried but I guess I am not really smart enough after all” (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 232). This symbolic violence discourages students from poor families and they see themselves in deficit and think that it is their fault. This deficit framing induces policy makers to judge that these students lack appropriate strategies (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, & Gale, 2015).

Besides doxic aspirations, which are based on dominant beliefs and assumptions in the society, another concept that shows the social-situatedness of aspirations is what Gale and Parker (2015) called “habituated aspirations” (p. 85) based on existing socio-economic status. The concept of habituated aspirations emerges from Bourdieu (1984) notion of “habitus” meaning “predispositions or tendency” (p. 562). Habituated aspirations imply that “what has been will be” (Gale & Parker, 2015, p. 85), underlining the reproduction of social structural positions in a society. For instance, in a study that

examine factors impacting economically disadvantaged secondary school boys' educational aspirations in Jamaica, the participants choose survival over future plans because of economic challenges, wherein they decide not to join higher education; rather, decide to help their parents for survival (Stockfelt, 2015). On the above-mentioned example of the study in Australia, the student who wanted to be a nurse, because her mother shared a previous desire of pursuing a profession in nursing. Yet, this student also mentioned that "I am also looking at hairdressing [...], in case I don't get into nursing at university" (Zipin et. al, 2015, p. 234), reflecting her thinking that there was a high probability that she could not achieve her aspiration considering her situation. Some scholars similarly described habituated aspirations as "realistic voicing of aspirations" (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 234).

Even though doxic and habituated aspirations shows the social-situatedness of aspirations, it is often too deterministic and emphasizes the power of the past in shaping aspirations. Shifting the focus from the past, while recognizing its influence and underscoring the role of the present and the future, DeJaeghere (2018) defines aspirations as the process of imagining the future "with others" (p. 239). For example, a Young Lives study focuses on educational aspirations, and barriers to achievement for young people in Ethiopia shows that children's educational aspirations are largely shared within the family. When parents see new schools in their communities, for instance, they become inspired to support their children in making use of the new opportunities available to their children though they did not get this chance in their childhood (Tafere, 2014). The next section discusses the future-oriented nature of aspirations, and how social relations fostered aspirations toward the future.

Aspirations as Future Oriented. Unlike the doxic and habituated aspirations, “emergent aspirations” are not based on “the past-made-present” rather it bases on the “present-becoming future” (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 236). The future-orientedness of aspirations is clearly embedded in *the capacity to aspire*, which Appadurai (2004) defines as individuals’ ability to understand “a map of the journey into the future” (p. 76), which includes having “navigational information” (p. 68). Gale and Parker (2015) explain the notion of *navigational information* in terms of “tour knowledge” and “map knowledge” (p. 89) wherein the person with a tour knowledge is like a tourist and follow the pre-determined route to their destination, and those with map knowledge are like locals who are familiar with the bigger picture and understand how to travel from one destination to another. In a study that examines students’ aspirations from low socio-economic status background in secondary schools in Australia, Gale and Parker (2015) narrate about youth who want to pursue a veterinary career, but they do not specifically identify it as such. Rather, they describe it as being zoologists or working with animals in some capacity. In addition, the youth mentioned universities where these courses were not offered, which shows that they have a “tour knowledge.” In another example, Gale and Parker (2015) mentioned a student who wants to study art and display an understanding of what is required in the industry because of knowledge and experience she shared from her father who worked in the same field, which shows what they referred as “map knowledge.” This capacity to navigate intermediary steps between past, present, and the future relies on economic, social, and other resources in the society (Gale & Parker, 2015). Thus, according to Appadurai (2004), the capacity to aspire is having these

navigational capacity to link available resources and opportunities to explore alternative futures.

Even though everyone can have aspirations, the capacity to aspire is not equally distributed in any society because it is shaped by the availability of navigational information, which requires a range of resources, including economic, social, and cultural experiences (Appadurai, 2004; Bok, 2010). Appadurai (2004) discusses the relative advantage of those who are in a better off situation:

The more privileged in any society simply have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically, and to share this knowledge with one another more routinely than their poorer and weaker neighbors. The poorer members, precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practice the use this navigational capacity (in turn because their situations permit fewer experiments and less easy archiving of alternative futures), have a more brittle horizon aspiration (p. 69).

Because of the socio-economic advantage they have, as the above quote explains, those who have a better material and social resources have the potential to clearly see their future and have a concrete plan of their future backed by exploring possibilities and options. For the economically disadvantaged ones, “poverty diminishes of the circumstances in which these practices occur” (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69), unless they get support to receive knowledge and experiences to help them build concrete plans for their aspired futures.

In strengthening the capacity to aspire, especially among the economically disadvantaged individuals, Appadurai (2004) suggests that local teaching should enable

them to cultivate an understanding of the link between specific goals and the means and opportunities to reach to their goals considering the context. In a study that explores the aspirations of students from a public primary school in Australia, Bok (2010) states:

The capacity of low SES [socio-economic status] students to navigate their aspirations may be like performing a play with no rehearsal - experiments and experiences - to prepare them and a minimal script that requires much improvisation (p. 175 - 176).

As the above quote indicates, students from economically disadvantaged families have difficulties to explore alternative futures because they “play with no rehearsal,” and without knowing what routes and steps to take to be what they aspire to be. As such, DeJaeghere (2019a) suggests that pedagogical practices in education should enable students from low-income families to navigate their aspirations by enabling them to have exposure to knowledge and experience about pathways that can help them pursue their aspirations. Such pedagogical practices enable youth to reimagine alternative futures and develop understanding of the constraints that the youth’s face, while also identifying social support or alternatives to enable them to pursue their aspirations (DeJaeghere J. , 2019a).

However, it might be hard for youth to have the *navigational information* and develop their capacity to aspire by themselves. Rather, youth can access these pathways if they are provided with knowledge and experiences that enable them to make a meaningful choice (Bok, 2010). Having this navigational information will enable youth to reflect and think about what they are interested in and what to do to reach to their goals. DeJaeghere (2019a) asserts that imagining alternative futures is not an individual

effort, but also acted with others and requires understanding youth's lived situations, what they value, and supporting them to remove their obstacles. So, the navigational information to understand their "map of a journey into the future" enables youth to think beyond what they wish and have a concrete plan of their future backed by exploring possibilities and options. Both the capacity and capability to aspire are influenced by conversion conditions as will be discussed in detail next.

Conversion Conditions. Resources in education might include classrooms, books, computers and so on, but what matters most in the capability approach is how well individuals can use these resources to be what they want to be or to do what they want to do (Unterhalter & Brighouse, 2007). As such, the capability approach recognizes that different people have different abilities to use educational opportunities and resources to pursue their educational aspiration. Sen (1992) explains how equalizing of resources might not result in equalizing of real opportunities to use the resources:

Equalizing ownership of resources [...] need not equalize the substantive freedoms enjoyed by different persons since there can be significant variations in the conversion of resources [...] into freedoms (p. 33).

Embedded in Sen's argument is the idea that individuals might have different abilities to change their resources into capabilities and then to functionings even though they have the same resources. Similarly, in a study focus on entrepreneurship education for youth in sub-Saharan Africa, DeJaeghere and Baxter (2014) affirm that employing a skill by itself does not expand capabilities unless there is supportive economic and social environment to increase the opportunities for the those with the valued skills. Sen (1992) referred to these factors as conversion conditions.

Extending the work of Sen (1992), Robeyns (2017) classified conversion conditions into three groups – personal, social, and environmental. Personal conversion conditions, are internal to individuals and include physical conditions, sex, intelligence and so on (Robeyns, 2005; 2017). Social conversion conditions include social norms, gender roles, and other societal power relations that stem from the society in which one's lives (Robeyns, 2005). Though Robeyns did not mention it explicitly, social relations can be categorized as one of the social conversion factors since they influence how students can use their scarce resources to pursue their aspirations as will be discussed in the following paragraphs. Finally, environmental conversion conditions emerge from a physical or built environment wherein ones live in and might include geographical location (Robeyns, 2005). I extend this conversion conditions to include infrastructural factors, as it recognizes not only the extant physical environment but also the built environment. Nonetheless, Robeyns fails to include economic issues in her list of conversion factors, which constitute a significant element that can influence the educational aspiration of students, especially those who are from economically disadvantaged families. Thus, one cannot merely assume that the availability of resources (e.g., the proximity of schools, good teachers, school equipment) expands capabilities without considering the personal, social, economic, and other conditions. However, conversion conditions are not always constraining, and sometimes, they enable individuals to pursue what they value. Social relations, for instance, play an important role in transformational effects of education to secure employment and well-being, specifically for marginalized youth who have scarce material resources (DeJaeghere et al., 2014). Thus, conversion conditions should be considered to evaluate whether students

can use resources to pursue their aspirations in addition to focusing on providing additional resources.

Nonetheless, the capability approach is criticized for the empirical challenges of taking all factors influencing one's real opportunities into account to make policy changes (Sugden, 1993). This critique can be answered by underlining the importance of the inherent multi-dimensionality of well-being (Robeyns, 2017), which enables policymakers to avoid immersion in only educational outcomes or inputs to the detriment of students' well-being. Rather a comprehensive understanding of school and community conditions can influence educational aspirations of students to be what they want to be. By presenting the common patterns shared across the students' lived experiences, this study furnishes policymakers with insights so that they can find effective ways to enhance the well-being of the students by finding strategies that can mitigate or transform the constraints faced by the students. While discussing conversion conditions influencing the aspirations of economically disadvantaged youth, it is important to discuss the two dominant narratives that do not pay attention to the significant role of conversion conditions.

Lack of Aspirations? One of the dominant narratives in the discussion relating to aspirations is that youth from low-income families lack aspirations, and schools must teach them to aspire. As a response to this "lack" of aspirations, raising disadvantaged youth's aspirations is the focus on educational research wherein policies promote raising aspirations of these groups by increasing access to school for them (Gale & Parker, 2015; Zipin et al., 2015). The notion of raising aspirations has become a widespread policy prescription for increasing human capital and economic growth. Nonetheless, these

policies fail to address the economic, social, political, and other conditions that influence youth's aspirations (Zipin et al., 2015). Bok (2010) explains the insufficiency of such kind of approach as follows:

The policy rhetoric of “raising aspirations” is inadequate for describing the needs of students in disadvantaged contexts [...] a discourse that is offensive in its suggestion that students attending schools categorized as low SES “lack” adequate desires for their future (p. 176)

As Bok (2010) contends, the focus on raising aspirations is not only inefficient in terms of addressing the challenges of economically disadvantaged youth, but also “offensive” to suggest that those students do not think about their future.

Nonetheless, as studies shown, economically disadvantage children and youth have aspirations, like others, even though they might lack a strong capacity to aspire. For instance, in a study that explore a public primary school students' aspiration, who are classified as economically disadvantaged, Bok (2010) states that the students participated in the study did not lack aspirations; rather they lack access to the “scripts” (p. 176), understood as the economic and social resources. This lack of access that make it hard for students to change their general preferences to specific goals with a concrete plans to follow and realize their aspirations. Similarly, in a study that assess the educational aspirations of economically disadvantaged boys in Jamaica, Stockfelt (2015) finds out that the students have the desire to join higher education, but they do not have the means to pursue their dream. As a Young Lives study indicates, children living in poverty want to change their lives. Hence, aspiration motivates them to change their current living condition rather than remaining immersed (Tafere, 2014). The study further claims that

the students fail to progress in education because their effort is impeded by poverty, not because they do not have aspiration. As shown, it is necessary to examine how youth from economically disadvantaged families form their aspirations and the constraints and opportunities they have to pursue their aspired futures.

Too Ambitious? Another dominant narrative in the discussion of aspirations is that youth from low-income families have aspirations indeed, but their aspirations are unrealistic compared to the situation they are in, and thus, it should be readjusted or guided towards realistic aspirations (Baird et al., 2008). Categorizing aspirations as dream aspirations and realistic or achievable aspirations is the basis for the argument that poor students are too ambitious because of the “perceived distance between their immediate lives and their future” (Bok, 2010, p. 168). However, assessing the achievability of aspirations seems against the basic principle of the capability approach as it values what is valued by individuals despite the feasibility of what they value. Mainly, this argument is limited as it has deterministic characteristics and assumes that even with adequate support and effort, what is not feasible today cannot be possible in the future.

Instead of judging economically disadvantaged youth as being too ambitious and need to readjust their aspirations (which are deficit orientations to aspirations), it is essential to look at conditions influencing them to change their aspirations to what others named as realistic. Even capability scholars such as Sen agreed with this deficit orientations to aspirations. Sen (1999), for instance, used the term an “adaptive preference” to show how economically disadvantaged ones “adjust their desires and expectations to what they unambitiously see as feasible” (p. 63). Similarly, Stockfelt (2015) argue that aspirations are “inherently developmental” (p. 6), and youth adjust their

aspirations to match with their economic and social reality when they mature. The Young Lives study regarding educational aspiration of students in Ethiopia indicates that when girls have tried very hard to attend school but found that they could not achieve their dreams, they jump into other life transitions, such as early marriage, as an alternative path even though it is prohibited by law (Tafere, 2014). In another study of the Young Lives Ethiopia, poverty is noted as having a strong impact on children's aspiration as they mature and understand what is achievable (Tafere, 2010). If they do not have higher grade levels, they choose to engage in other income-generating activities, for example as casual laborers or waged laborers in private institutions and garages, than staying in school (Tafere, 2010). As revealed in this study, very few poor children were able to realize their ambitions since they are unable to overcome impediments caused by poverty. Nonetheless, the studies emphasize the interplay between aspirations and educational advancement in the course of the children lives and barriers to their aspirations and fail to engage with the concept of agency in relation to choosing what they value, changing or pursuing their educational aspirations. More importantly, the above-mentioned deficit orientations to aspirations (such as adaptive preferences and lacking navigational capacity) shift the focus to individuals than what causes the negotiation between what is desired and what is possible.

However, it should also be noted that change in aspiration does not necessarily mean that individuals adapted their preference. In a study that focuses on girls' educational aspirations and agency in low-resourced Tanzanian communities, DeJaeghere's (2018) findings indicate that girls in the study emerge with new aspirations through mentorship from other peers and teachers that helped them to envision various

paths to their future. In order to enhance individuals' well-being, it is beneficial to examine whether an individual has adapted her academic preferences to suit her under-resourced environments or not (Calitz, 2019). In the capability approach it is critical to examine how agency is fostered and supported alongside aspirations. Thus, this study examines how students from economically disadvantaged families describe their educational aspiration; how the opportunities and constraints experienced by the students influence their educational aspiration; and how they exercise their agency to choose, pursue or reshape their educational aspiration within supporting and constraining factors. Since agency is one of the factors that makes opportunities real or not, the next section focuses on another key element in the capability approach, i.e., agency.

Agency

The individuals' freedom in choosing what they value (agency freedom) and the ability to pursue and realize what they have reason to value (agency achievement), is equally important to what is valued by individuals in the capability approach is (Sen, 1992; Comim, Ballet, Biggeri, & Iervese, 2011). This process of choosing what is valuable is also significantly related to the notion of aspiration since agency is a process of considering and taking action to pursue, making a change or realizing valued aspirations (DeJaeghere, 2018). Thus, in this perspective, people are perceived to be able to act on behalf of their aspirations. Relatedly, someone who is not agentic is considered oppressed or passive (Sen, 1985; Alkire, 2005).

Examining agency is noteworthy as the capability approach evaluates educational disparities by looking at the freedoms to choose to pursue valued outcomes (Tzenis, 2018). While considering the freedom that people have to make decisions they value, the capability approach enables to remove barriers that affect their valued aspirations and the

obstacles to the freedom they have to be able to make decisions (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). For instance, in a study conducted by Loots and Walker (2015) on South African higher education institution, students choose four capability themes they valued including bodily integrity and safety; dignity and respect; to have one's opinions valued and heard; and the value of knowledge and education. Choosing what is valuable is one form of exercising agency (in addition to pursuing, reshaping, and realizing one's aspiration). After identifying of what these students value to pursue and realize their aspirations, the capability approach highlights barriers that affect well-being, while bearing in mind that individuals are a dignified human being to choose what is valuable for them.

Agency can also be seen in strong determination to keep trying and spending energy and resources judiciously (Conradie, 2013). In a Young Lives Ethiopia study, a youth called Mulu lost her father when she was ten and engaged in paid work picking fruits for seven years. She had endured economic difficulties and a fear of failure in education, in which she has pinned all her hopes. By the time the Young Lives Ethiopia researchers interviewed her, she was in grade 12 studying hard to join higher education. When she joined grade 12, she stopped working completely and focused on her schooling because her elder sister supported her. Mulu explained her life path and her concerns as follows:

Due to the death of my father, we faced a lot of problems... *We faced food shortages*. My family were [was] oppressing me, for instance, with respect to [not buying good] clothes. They were making me work what others dislike [undertake difficult work] ... In Grade 10, *I was stressed because of the fear of failure*. Most of the time, I was quarreling with family. I was studying hard. Finally, I scored a

good result. I scored 3.00.... *I regret that I did not have any foundation in physics and mathematics. I was not able to do well in these subjects because I had no time to study due to heavy domestic and paid work* (Tafere, 2017, p. 15) (emphasis added).

Mulu's story illustrates how youth' use their agency to follow their aspirations as Mulu decided to engage in an income-generating activity to pursue her dream though her parents were unable to support her at the early stage of her education. Although the income she earned helped her to continue her education, it affected her educational performance in some subjects; it might also affect her future studies since educational pathways constructed in accordance with the score in grade 12 national exam. But she persisted in finding alternatives to pursue her educational aspirations despite the constraints she had. In another example, a Young Lives study that focused on aspiration, gender, and poverty in Ethiopia, indicates some children and youth demonstrate agency in pursuing their school by undertaking a part-time work to support their education despite living in poverty (Tafere, 2017).

Agency is not individually held or enacted; rather, it is socially embedded. The capability approach also recognizes that choosing functionings from one's capability set requires choice, which is influenced by societal structures and relations (Robeyns, 2005). Sen (1999) also acknowledges this complementarity:

The freedom of agency that we individually have is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us. There is *a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements*. It is important to give *simultaneous recogniton* to the centrality of

individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom” (p. xii) (emphasis added).

Even though Sen recognizes the socio-economic influences on individual capabilities and agency, it does not explicitly recognize the collectivities as an integral part of capabilities formation and exercising of agency (Carpenter, 2009). The capability approach values the notion of reasoning, but it does not fully recognize that reasoning depends upon the “meanings that we share and that are constructed through our relationships in society” (Deneulin & McGregor, 2010, p. 512). For instance, girls’ decisions to pursue their education or not can be affected by societal perception towards educated girls. The reasoning or meaning shared in the society might influence the choice girls from this kind of neighborhood make. Similarly, DeJaeghere (2018) demonstrates that social relations, especially with teachers and peers, can offer guidance toward alternative futures for improved well-being, which in turn nurture their aspiration and sense of agency. For instance, one of the girls in DeJaeghere’s (2018) study returned to vocational school after being out of school for some time. Her teacher advised her to study livestock and agriculture, and she also saw value in studying it since what she has learned in school was different from how her family raised livestock. In this way, her schooling offered her specific guidance toward her aspiration and agency to act on them. Bok (2010) also claims that less familiarity with education institutions may limit parents’ capacity to help their children successfully negotiate school pathways. Accordingly, children and youth are subject to “intergenerational transfer of capabilities” (Biggeri et al., 2011, p. 294) since the capabilities of their parents affect the children in one way or another. Similarly, in a study that focuses on entrepreneurship education for youth in Sub-Saharan African,

DeJaeghere and Baxter (2014) pointed out that the youth interviewees used to spend extra income on leisure activities, luxury items, and relationship. But through the life skills and adult mentoring (counsel from elders in the community) components of the programs, the youths were encouraged to plan for their futures and to reflect on the consequences of the choices they make, and because of this, the participants explained that they began to change their spending habit. As shown, agency is not simply an individual choice; rather it is embedded in relations with peers, family, teachers, and communities (DeJaeghere et al., 2016). Accordingly, aspiration, like agency, is also nurtured or constrained through social relations. In addition, the notion of agency extended beyond personal well-being as it can be directed for the well-being of others, which might compromise individuals' well-being (Hart, 2012; Walker, 2012). As Sen (1992) claims, "realization of goals one has reason to pursue which need not be guided by her own well-being" (p. 56 - 57). For this study, I conceptualize that both the capability and capacity to aspire is influenced by conversion conditions and agency wherein resources, conversion conditions, and agency influence the capability to pursue and realize aspirations, which feeds back into other aspirations formation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I critically examine how the leading approaches in education address the "equality of what?" question in explaining what constitutes equality regarding economically disadvantaged students. As discussed in the chapter, human capital theorists promote the idea of equal educational opportunities for economic development while focusing on equality of outcomes or achievements. Human rights scholars underline the importance of education, as it is a human right entitled to everyone, whether

they are from poor or wealthy families. The human rights approach focuses on equality in terms of providing resources and education processes. The capability approach promotes creating *real* educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students so that they will be able to live a life they aspired for.

In the context of Ethiopia, the GEQIP emphasizes providing resources, process (e.g., curriculum development, teachers and leaders development), and educational outcomes measured through test results. Nonetheless, the GEQIP does not follow a comprehensive approach by examining real opportunities available for economically disadvantaged students. Yet, dropout, nonattendance, and repetition rate are severe problems in Ethiopia for children and youth from poor families (Berry & Bogale, 2011), impeding their ability of pursuing what they want to be. Very little empirical research undertaken in Ethiopia has examined educational aspirations of economically disadvantaged youth. Moreover, no published studies that I'm aware of have considered the capability to aspire of economically disadvantaged youths in Ethiopia and examined the interplay among children's aspirations, the real educational opportunities available to them, and their agency in pursuing their educational ambitions. Thus, the study places the capability to aspire to empirical investigation in an Ethiopian context to generate new knowledge while examining the socio-economic barriers or enabling conditions. In doing so, this dissertation will add to the scholarly work on the capability approach, children, and education in the Ethiopian context. In addition, it provides practical implication for policymakers to consider real educational opportunities available to students, who are from economically disadvantaged families, by narrating their lived experiences. In the next chapter, I present the methodological approach of the study with its justification.

Chapter Three: Methodology

I employed a life history narrative methodology to address the research questions, centering the voices of economically disadvantaged secondary school age youth. Youth life history narratives can offer a window into the youth various opportunities or obstacles that expand or constrain their capability to aspire and pursue their aspired future, not just those envisaged by policy or experts. Narrating the stories of the youth is also a way to empower them by honoring their experience as a source of knowledge (Clandinin, 2013). Listening to the youth voices as “authorities about their own experiences” (Calitz, 2019, p. 67) can also offer an emic perspective regarding the interplay of social, economic, and academic challenges experienced by disadvantaged students (Calitz, 2019). That seems why Clandinin and Caine (2013) argue that the introduction of narrative inquiry as a research methodology reshaped qualitative research by highlighting experiences. In doing so, a narrative inquiry facilitates the amplification of voices normally unheard, including those of economically disadvantaged youth (Casey, 1995). All in all, “all people have stories to tell” (Creswell, 2007, p. 119). Thus, in this research, stories matter.

In this chapter, I first discuss the rationale for narrative inquiry and my positionality in the study. Then, I describe the research setting and the participants. In conclusion, I discuss the data collection process and data analysis followed by ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the study.

Qualitative Research Design: Narrative Inquiry

“The oldest and most natural form of sense-making is that of stories or narratives” (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 33).

In this study, I utilized narrative inquiry, a qualitative research approach. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. The key to this approach is that it uses stories as data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Narrative inquiry aligns with the social constructivist paradigm that I used in this study, as the paradigm assumes that lived experiences are realities that are socially constructed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Centering the detailed stories of experience has personal, practical, and theoretical advantages for the purposes of this study.

Firstly, as someone who was from economically disadvantaged families, I understand that students pass through a lot to pursue their aspirations and the processes matter as much as, if not more than, the end outcome. Narrative inquiry is the finest way of representing and understanding such kind of experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and supports the purpose of this research to understand the experience of youth from economically disadvantaged families.

Secondly, narrating the youth's experience allows for centering the voice and experience of the youth in the discussion of educational equity in Ethiopia. Since the government of Ethiopia focuses on improving equitable quality education at both primary and secondary levels, it is also practically essential to highlight the opportunities and struggles that the youth experience. In addition, previous studies do not incorporate the voice of students to inform the policy framework in Ethiopia. Thus, it is reasonable to bring the lived experience of the youth to the forefront to allow policymakers to understand the youth's constraints and supporting factors.

Thirdly, the capability approach that I employ for my study underscores what is valued by individuals and a focus on stories advances this knowledge. By adding the

relational element to the approach and by situating individuals within a social and cultural context, narrating the youth's stories enabled me to understand the educational opportunities and constraints experienced by the youth and how they exercise their agency to choose, pursue, or reshape their aspiration to be educated amidst of supporting and limiting factors. The focus of a narrative inquiry is not only about individuals' experience; rather, it views "experience as relational" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 18). The relational element of experience includes consideration of the social, cultural, familial, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, and enacted by emphasizing the entangled relation of the personal and social (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin, 2013).

While underscoring the need for situating individuals in a social context, Clandinin (2013) defines the relational approach of narrative inquiry broadly:

The relational between the person and his/her world; a temporal understanding of the relational between past, present, and future, including the relational in the intergenerational; the relational between person and place; the relational between events and feelings; the relational between us as people; the relational between the physical world and people; the relational in our cultural, institutional, linguistic, and familiar narratives; and so on (Clandinin, 2013, p. 23).

As explained, a relation is not only between individuals and the society they live in, but also includes the relational in time, place, events, feelings, people, and so on. The relational aspect of narrative inquiry also extends to the relational engagement of researchers and participants, which will be discussed below in the part which discusses the ethical considerations. Thus, narrative inquiry adopts a relational methodology

approach, reflecting my aim understand how the school, family, and community level conditions support or constrain the educational aspirations of youths.

I specifically used a life history narrative inquiry method to capture the lived experience of the youth. Creswell (2007) explains that life history depicts an individual's entire life, which includes a narrative of an individual's personal experience found in single or multiple episodes. I chose to use a life history as it allowed me to capture the experience of the students by looking back, looking forward, looking inward, and looking outward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) to understand how conversion conditions affect their aspiration, agency, and experience of educational resources and opportunities. Life history also enables researchers to learn about the way people live (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) propose the "three- dimensional narrative inquiry space" (p. 50) to understand stories of experiences. The first dimension, temporality or continuity, underscores that researchers shall give attention to the past, present, and future of people, places, things, and events under study. This dimension helped me to assess the experience of the youth not only based on their current experience, but their past experience and their future expectations, in order to understand their capability to aspire and pursue as a whole. Their experience of the present cannot be assessed separately from their past experience, and their past and present experience also affect their future expectation. The temporality dimension was especially relevant for me in understanding the interplay between aspiration and agency in the past, present, and future.

The second dimension of the narrative inquiry space, as explained by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is sociality or interaction. Considering the relational nature of narrative inquiry, this dimension underlines that narrative inquirer should attend to both personal as well as social conditions. Similarly, I employed the sociality element of the approach to understand how conversion conditions, including personal, familial, community, and school factors, support or constrain the education of the youth as well as their aspiration. The sociality element also helped me to answer how family members, teachers, and neighbors support the students to overcome their constraints, when necessary.

The third dimension among the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space is place or situation. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, narrative inquirers should also consider the specific locations in which the storytellers' landscape, including their physical location and how activities or norms in that place affect their experience. This element enabled me to consider the youth's experience in different settings such as in school, at their home, and in their community. All in all, the narrative inquiry recognizes that people, time, and place are important elements of the inquiry, and one dimension cannot be fully understood without the others (Clandinin & Caine, 2013).

Positionality in Narrative Inquiry

As Creswell (2007) explains, social constructivist researchers should recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation of the individuals' experience. Likewise, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that narrative inquirer should start from their own narrative of experiences. Besides being aware of my experiences as someone

who is from an economically disadvantaged family, I kept reflecting on my positionality in the field, in the analysis process, and after fieldwork, while writing the research text.

I grew up in an economically disadvantaged family in Ethiopia. Both of my parents were, and still are, supportive of my education in different ways. My father encouraged me not only to pass grades, but to get the highest score in my school. Though I know he also viewed education as a means to get out of poverty, education held a higher value in the eyes of my mom. My mother, originally from the rural areas in the northern part of Ethiopia, dropped out of school after completing grade 4 due to the long distance to school and her parents' unwillingness to send her a far distance at her young age. As I am my mother's first child, she invested all her energy and effort to make sure that I pursued my education and earned good results in school. She frequently reminded me that "your only way to get out of poverty is your education." For my mother, education not only resulted in my future economic benefits, but also as a means of empowerment. If I were educated, my mother theorized, I would have equal say with my [future] husband in making decisions and have more freedom to engage in the things that I wanted to do, such as helping others in need. My mother often reminded me to utilize the educational opportunities offered to me, stressing "that is the only thing I can give to you as an inheritance."

Though I had the opportunity and familial support to enroll and succeed in school, the economic aspect was the biggest constraint for me to fully unleash my potential. I vividly remember how my parents struggled to buy learning materials and uniforms for my younger sister and me. Sometimes I wrote two subjects in one exercise book. Other times, I gave my notebooks to my younger sister when the semester ends, so that she

could use the remaining pages since she did not need many pages to write. Many other students dropped out of school since they did not have anyone who could help them to cover for the indirect costs of schooling, even though there was no school fee. I received material and moral support from some neighbors, and occasionally, my teachers. Two of my neighbors always come to my mind first whenever I think of my childhood. I always went to them to show my report card at the end of every semester. One of them always bought me a coke as an award for my good results. The other one always rewarded me for my progress and bought me whatever he could afford, from candies to learning materials. As a top scorer in my school, I also got special attention from my teachers. Unlike other students, I had a relative privilege with access to material (e.g., exercise books, uniforms, reference materials etc.) and moral support. I am where I am now because of supportive conditions that influenced my journey.

Nevertheless, some people were not always supportive of me to pursue my education. Some neighbors sent their daughters to school but did not predict their daughters' future as anything other than as wives. I was also approached by neighbors who told me that I would marry a rich husband because they thought I was a beautiful teenager. Even at my young age, I wondered how they could not see a better future for me, particularly as someone who was trying hard to succeed in school. I remember one lady who used to tell me that it is impossible for a girl to continue excelling in her education. When she heard that I got the highest score from my school when I was in grade five, she told me that girls could not excel in their education after grade five. When she heard about my grade eight regional exam result, she repeated that girl's excellence in education cannot be above grade eight. Then, I scored a good result in the grade ten

national exam though it was somehow below my expectation; then, this lady repeated that girls' brilliance ends in grade ten when they attain adolescence. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I have not seen her after I completed my secondary school. These societal messages, although vastly different from my parents and other supportive adults in my life, also impacted my educational journey.

Although I had a great personal motivation to pursue my education, occasionally it was hard for me to keep my enthusiasm within the economic constraints, especially after I joined higher education as I did not get support from the NGO that helped me throughout secondary school. Starting my second year at a university, I worked part-time in a local television station as a TV anchor. My salary was not enough to cover my education and personal expenses and my family's expenses. There were times where I had to write out long assignments by hand as I did not have a laptop. When I did not have money to copy learning materials, I had to wait until my friends read it and loaned me their copies. Even if I learned how to survive in the system by working part-time at the television station and occasional works with advertisement agencies, in large part, the support from others, particularly neighbors, teachers, and other people in my social network helped me succeed in my academic goals.

Sharing some of these experiences with my research participants gave me an easier entry to their world. While explaining about positionality in narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue how narrative inquirers enter into the field amidst of things:

Their [the research participants] lives do not begin the day we [researchers] arrive, nor do they end as we leave. Their lives continue [...] We see ourselves in

the midst in another sense as well; that is, we see ourselves as in the middle of a nested set of stories - ours and theirs (p. 63 - 64).

Since I entered into the field in the middle of the “nested set of stories” between the research participants and me, I decided to narrate to them my experience as an economically disadvantaged youth, which enabled me to enter into the field easily.

Though narrating my past made me vulnerable, I did it to build trust between my research participants and me so that they would openly share their experiences. Knowing that I understand their situation made them felt comfortable. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further argue that, “in narrative inquiry, it is impossible (or if not impossible, then deliberately self-deceptive) as a researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self (p. 62).” In addition, realizing that I enter into the field amidst the participants’ lives and my lives (both personal and professional) enabled me to understand how my stories can affect my understanding of the youth’s experience and how my interaction with them might influence the way they told me their stories.

In addition to the insider perspective, I also had an outsider perspective as someone from a Western institution and advancing in further education. I was also out of my homeland in general, and Dire Dawa, specifically, for a couple of years, and that gave me a fresh eye to observe the education system and the youths’ experiences. The youths were excited to learn more about what the education system looked like in the US and wondered how I became interested to learn about their stories. I was transparent in explaining what the research is all about, but I emphasized that their stories matter to epitomize the lives of many economically disadvantaged youths in Ethiopia. I always told them that I am humbled to learn their stories and educational paths.

Research Setting

Local Education Context - Dire Dawa

Dire Dawa, the site for this study, is illustrative of the Ethiopian context. Firstly, it is one of the few cities in the country that has urban and rural areas compared to the rest dominated by rural settlements. The city administration of Dire Dawa has both an urban settlement, which includes nine *kebeles*¹¹, and the non-urban areas, which include 38 rural *kebeles*. Secondly, Dire Dawa is home to diverse ethnic and religious groups who coexist together, in which more than 70 ethnic groups live in the city administration (Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia, 2007). Thirdly, Dire Dawa is where I was born and raised. As such, I have a better understanding of youth's lives in the city. In addition, available statistics about primary schools in Dire Dawa indicates a tremendous enrollment rate coupled with a high dropout rate at the primary level and low rate of net enrollment ratio in the secondary schools, which features more reasons to select the participants from the area.

In Dire Dawa, there has been a dramatic increment in enrollment rate, but the dropout rate is still high. The gross and net enrollment ratio for the primary 1st cycle (grades 1- 4) in the city administration is 135.5% and 95.9%, respectively, indicating that a number of children outside the official school-age (aged 7 - 14) attending primary school (Dire Dawa Administration Education Bureau, 2019). However, the dropout rate at the first cycle of primary education (grade 1 - 4), especially in grade 1 and 2, is higher than the second cycle of primary education (grade 5 - 8), and only 55.6% of students completed the first cycle of primary education in 2018 (Dire Dawa Administration

¹¹ Kebele is the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia.

Education Bureau, 2019), which affects the enrollment rate at the second cycle of primary education and secondary school. The gross and net enrollment ratio for the 1st cycle of secondary education (grades 9 and 10) is 53.3% and 19.7%, respectively, indicating overage students enrolled for grades 9 and 10 and high repetition rates. The enrollment rate becomes significantly low in the 2nd cycle of secondary education (grades 11 and 12), wherein the gross enrollment rate is 14.8%, and the net enrollment rate is 7.8% (Dire Dawa Administration Education Bureau, 2019).¹²

Besides the low rate of net attendance ratio in the secondary school, the dropout rate and the low achievement in national exams are widespread problems to secondary schools in Dire Dawa. For instance, the average percentage of students who passed grade 10 national exams from 2001/02 to 2010/11 is only 53.5%, which is the second-lowest achievement in Ethiopia next to the Gambella region (JICA & IDCJ, 2012), which in turn affects the enrollment rate to the 2nd cycle of secondary education. The dropout rate is also high because of students' engagement in income-generating activities (Dire Dawa Administration Education Bureau, 2015). In research that focuses on assessing educational barriers of secondary school girls in Dire Dawa, Admassie (2017) indicates several factors, including economic problem which forces girls to engage in informal and low-level jobs, such as migration to Djibouti, and other Arab countries; serving in hotels and bars; employed in coffee processing industries, marrying at an early age and so on, rather than continuing their schooling. The absence of follow up and lack of attention to girls' education by parents and lack of access to secondary school in rural areas are also

¹² Recently, after the completion of the interviews for this study, the Ethiopian education system has adopted one cycle of secondary education and students take only one national examination at the end of the secondary level (grade 12). However, for years, it used to have two cycles (1st cycle (grade 9 and 10) and 2nd cycle (grade 11 and 12), and the previous structure continues to impact the current students.

among factors that hinder girls' secondary education participation in the city administration, as the mentioned study revealed.

Despite a high prevalence of dropout rate in Dire Dawa, the city administration itself acknowledges that the city has not given sufficient attention to students who are at the risk of dropping out from schools, dropped out students, and out of school children (Dire Dawa Administration Education Bureau, 2015). As the Education Sector Development Program V (ESDP V) of Dire Dawa Education Bureau depicts, the city administration has recently worked on equity and access in general education focusing on gender, urban/rural enrollment parity, and special need students (Dire Dawa Administration Education Bureau, 2015). Nonetheless, it does not consider particularly those students who are on the verge of dropping out of school. Thus, it is essential to examine the school, family, and community conditions that support or constrain economically disadvantaged youth's education to be what they aspire to be as these are not well accounted for in current policy and practice.

For this reason, this study focused on youth who are enrolled in secondary school and those who dropped out of school and are of the same age as those who are still in school. It included students who attended public schools instead of private secondary schools, assuming that youth in this position cannot afford to pay for tuition. Among the public schools in the city, I chose Tesfa secondary and preparatory school. Tesfa is one of the largest secondary schools in Dire Dawa in terms of students' enrollment and has a diverse group of students compared to the rest. Most students from the rural areas of the city administration enroll in this school due to its proximity to most rural areas in the city

administration. In the next section, I will discuss in detail about Tesfa secondary and preparatory school where this research took place.

Tesfa Secondary and Preparatory School

Tesfa secondary and preparatory school is one of the oldest secondary schools in Dire Dawa, established in 1962 G.C. With a vision of providing quality education that enables students to be competitive at the national level, Tesfa secondary and preparatory school enrolls students from grade 9 to grade 12. Currently, the school has 1,545 students, from which 897 are male, and 648 are female students (Tesfa Secondary and Preparatory School, 2019). The school has a library for the entire students and another library exclusive to female students, laboratory rooms, and an ICT center with computers in two rooms. The campus is clean with a variety of trees, and it is convenient for students to study individually and as a group during their leisure time.

In terms of meeting quality indicators incorporated in the GEQIP, Tesfa preparatory and secondary school has a good performance notwithstanding the high dropout and repetition rate. The school has 110 teachers, from which 30 of them have a master's degree, and the rest 80 teachers have bachelor's degree, and most of them are pursuing their second degree (Tesfa Secondary and Preparatory School, 2019). The school also has a noble performance in terms of other indicators, in which the Pupil-Teacher ratio (PTR) is 15, the Pupil-Section Ratio (PSR) is 50, and the student textbook ratio is 1:1 (Tesfa Secondary and Preparatory School, 2019). In all these indicators, the school has a low rate of PTR and PSR compared to the national standard and meets the national goal of distributing textbooks at a 1 to 1 ratio (Tesfa Secondary and Preparatory School, 2019). Nonetheless, the repetition and dropout rate are still a problem in the

school. In the 2018/19 G.C. academic year, 13.05% of the students who enrolled in grade 9 dropped out from school, and 13.2% repeated the grade. In the same academic year, only 16.28% enrolled (after grade 10 exams) in grade 11 at the school, and 3.1% repeated grade 11 (Tesfa Secondary and Preparatory School, 2019).

Unfortunately, this data cannot show what kind of opportunities or constraints the students experience, and thus, it tells only part of the story. It is necessary to examine what opportunities students have to pursue what they aspire to be and what constraining conditions influence them not to use the available educational resources, resulting in drop out and repetition. The next section introduces the youth whose life history is examined.

Data Collection

To collect the life histories, I developed a matrix that connects the research questions with the data collection methods, sampling techniques, and data analysis (see Appendix B). Besides the life history interviews I intended to do with the selected participants, I had planned to interview at least one of the participants' family members and their teachers and have an informal conversation with their neighbors to have a fuller understanding of the youth's story. Nonetheless, the Covid pandemic hit Ethiopia immediately after I finished the three rounds of interviews with the participants, and I could not schedule these interviews as planned. I had also planned to visit the youths' favorite resource center that they shared is a meaningful place for them to pursue their aspirations. Again, because of the lockdown, I was not able to do this as I intended. Nevertheless, the data I gathered from the participants was rich enough to be able me to understand the youth's story and the opportunities and constraints they have experienced.

Interviews as Extensions of Conversations

In narrative inquiry, interviews are one way that field texts are composed; nonetheless, conversations are a much more common method of data collection (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Rubin and Rubin (2005) argue that qualitative interviewing requires more listening compared to ordinary conversations. Besides, an interview obliges respect and curiosity for what the participants say, as well as gives researchers the ability to dig in-depth about what is not yet known. While recognizing the differences between conversations and interview, Rubin and Rubin (2005) define “interview as extensions of ordinary conversations” (p. 12). The main feature of using interviews as an extension of ordinary conversations includes creating space for both participants and researchers to tell and hear stories, and as such, it is not fully directed by pre-determined questions (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Rubin and Rubin (2005) also recognize that interview is mostly, at least at the beginning of the research, is between strangers; hence, they recommend to establish a connection or trust for better exchange of ideas as conversations. I employed this perspective of considering interviews as extensions of conversations to learn more about the youth’s stories. Considering interviews as extensions of ordinary conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) also helped me narrow the gap between me and the youth. I shared with them how my mother struggled to support my sister and my education and all the struggles I have faced in my educational path. Since I shared my stories, it encouraged them to be comfortable with being vulnerable compared to formal interviews. For this reason, I call my research participants “conversational partners” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 14). Having this perspective reminded me, as a researcher, that the direction of the interview is shaped by

both the researcher's as well as the interviewees' concerns (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Besides, this perception enabled me to emphasize the uniqueness of each youth whom I talk to and their distinct experience.

Using the notion of an interview as an extension of conversation and interviewee as a conversational partner leads to an interview-style called "responsive interview" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The term responsive interviewing implies that qualitative interviewing is an active process, not a set of tools to be applied mechanically. Rather, researchers should customize questions for each conversational partners, and Rubin and Rubin (2005) explain the importance of responsive interview:

Asking everyone the same questions makes little sense in qualitative interviewing.

An interview is a window on time and a social world that is experienced one person at a time, one incident at a time (p. 14).

As such, I conducted responsive interviews for three reasons. Firstly, it enabled me to generate the depth of understanding about the experience of the youth since it explained an interview as a conversation. Secondly, responsive interview heavily relies on the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, which I employed for this study since it focuses on in-depth interviewing by "learning what is important to those being studied" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 15) and by having broad questions to allow stories to emerge. Thirdly, I used a three-part interview sequence, as will be discussed below, and a responsive interview enabled me to customize questions for each conversational partners based on their stories that I would learn in the first part of the interview.

I conducted the life history interviews using responsive interviews strategy in three parts. I did the first round of interviews for the purpose of getting to know the

participants and for them to know me. As discussed above, establishing a connection is essential to use an interview as a conversation. Getting to know them enabled me to form a relationship with them instead of starting the interview on the first day. It also enabled me to think about possible questions that I can ask them based on their introduction to learn more about their lived experiences. This introductory conversation approximately took 60-90 mins. In this round, I asked the participants some background questions including, but not limited to, their upbringing, their parents' livelihood, their childhood, and primary and secondary school experiences (see Appendix C, part 1). I also explained to them the purpose of the study and some background information about me, so that they would be comfortable to talk to me as if it were a conversation rather than a rigid interview. When starting the first round of interviews, I read the consent form for the participants and requested them to sign in the consent form (see Appendix A). After the interview, I wrote notes about the conversations and include points that I would like to ask them during the second round of interviews.

In the second interview, I asked the participants detailed questions to learn about their lived experiences focusing on opportunities and constraints they experienced in the primary and secondary schools (see Appendix C, part 2). The third round of interviews focused on their aspired futures, how these futures were shaped through time, and how they exercised their agency to pursue their aspirations (see Appendix C, part 3). It was hard to distinguish between the past, the present, and the future. At points where we talked about their past, they travelled in time and talked about their futures and while explaining about their futures, they go back in time and talked about past experiences that influenced them to think of their futures in a certain way. The second and third round of

interviews took approximately 120-150 mins. In total, I met with each participant at minimum of three hours or up to four hours at the maximum. Table 1 shows the interview guide based on the theoretical and methodological approach I employed to this study. To see the interview questions based on this guide, refer to Appendix C and D.

Table 1 - Interview guide

Dimensions	Topics of discussion
Aspirations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The idea of the educated person • Childhood aspirations • Support and challenges • Changes through time • Looking forward • Hopes and fears about the future
Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision making concerning education and schooling • Choices regarding aspirations
Resources/opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School infrastructure • Safety issues • Learning facilities • Teaching and learning
Conversion factors	
<i>Family-related conversion conditions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family education and occupation • Typical day at home • Costs of schooling (direct and indirect costs) • Family perception about the educated person • Family perception about the importance of children's education • Support or challenges
<i>Conversation conditions related to educational institutions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memories (first, best, worst) • Typical school day • Extracurricular activities and responsibilities (work/sports/theater/etc.) • Human relations (peer groups and relationship with teachers) • Learning outcomes • Support or challenges
<i>Social conversion conditions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typical day in the community • Societal perception of the educated person • Societal perception about the importance of education • Support or challenges
<i>Personal conversion conditions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation • Personal strength

While having conversations with the participants, I took brief notes when it was natural and did not take away their attention. I instead relied on recordings, so I could

listen attentively with curiosity to learn about their stories. All interviews were conducted in Amharic since all participants spoke the language fluently. For all participants who took part in the study, I give them small gifts to thank them for their time at the end of the third round of interviews.

Research Participants

Negotiating Access and Selection Criteria

I used my previous contacts in the Dire Dawa Bureau of Education to negotiate access and to introduce me to the principal in the selected secondary school after receiving research IRB approval from the University of Minnesota. Then, the school principal introduced me to the school charity club that has been working on supporting economically needy students. I realized that the school charity club has a list of economically disadvantaged students whom they refer as “the poorest of the poor.” According to the school administration, the term is defined as the most disadvantaged students who are unable to cover for their educational and personal expenses, including food. This list was what the school provided when potential private donors, businesses, or local non-profit organizations came to support economically needy students. Since it was a long list, I needed to add other criteria to narrow down the potential participants. I asked the school principal and the head of the charity club to help me in narrowing down on students who are the verge of dropping out of school while considering the gender balance. The school administration and the head of the charity club (who is also the school counselor) were aware of the students’ situation because they reached out to them for support. As a result, only students whose situations were known by the school administration were in the selection pool. Then, we narrowed down the list to ten

potential participants and they reached out to the candidates. The school principal recommended that the school counselor reach out to the selected candidates first to check for their willingness, instead of me reaching out to them directly in order to make sure that the students agreed to be part of the study with their free and full consent. Among the ten candidates, five of them agreed to be part of the research and they gave me their contact information. Then, I called them and explained about the objective of the research in detail and asked them their interest. Finally, four of them gave me verbal confirmation to be part of the study and we continued the three rounds of interviews.

Besides the four students whom I selected based on criterion sampling method, I also selected dropped out students to understand constraining conditions that prevented them to not pursue their aspirations, even though they had the desire to stay in school. I was interested in students who dropped out of school for economic reasons though they had a strong desire to continue their education (see Appendix D for interview questions for these group). Those who dropped out of school for other reasons were not the focus. Selecting these youth was a bit difficult. The school administration did not have a contact information of some of the dropped-out students. For those who had their contact information, the youths were not interested when they receive a call from the head of the school charity club. Finally, two dropped out students who received the call become interested in partaking in the study. They were in the same age group with those students who were still in school.

Introducing the “Conversational Partners”

I interviewed six youth in three rounds of interviews. Out of the six participants, four of them were in school (between grade 9 and 12), and two had dropped out of

school. The youth were between 18 and 22 years old, and four of them were female, and the two were male. The following table presents a short introduction to the youth.

Table 2 - Introduction to the youth

Participants' name	Personal information
Tsinat	She was born in Djibouti and raised in Dire Dawa. Tsinat was 18 years and enrolled in grade 11 (social science stream) in the 2019/20 academic year. She wanted to be a psychologist.
Selam	She was born and raised in Gondar's rural area. Selam dropped out of school for three years before finishing primary school. In the 2019/20 academic year, she was in grade 11 (social science stream) and 20 years of age. She wanted to be a lawyer.
Ermias	Ermias was born and raised in Dire Dawa. Ermias was out of school for three years until he retook the national exam and joined the social science stream in grade 11 in the 2019/20 academic year. At that time, he was 22 years. He wanted to be a writer and an actor.
Solomon	Solomon was born and raised in Dire Dawa. After being out of school for three years, Solomon continued his education in the 2019/20 academic year in grade 9, and he was 21 years old. He wanted to be a psychologist.
Aster	Aster was born in one of the rural areas near Dire Dawa. In the 2018/19 academic year, she passed the grade 10 national exam, but did not continue her education. In 2020, Aster was 18. She wanted to be an accountant.
Edel	Edel was born and raised in Dire Dawa. She dropped out of school after she did not pass grade 9. In 2020, Edel was 18 years. She wanted to help others when she is financially able to do so.

Data Analysis

In narrative inquiry methodology, as explained by Polkinghorne (1995), stories can be analyzed mainly in two ways i.e., analysis of narratives (paradigmatic reasoning) and narrative analysis (narrative reasoning). In the analysis of narratives approach, researchers collect stories and analyze them by classifying the stories into different categories or concepts (paradigmatic process) focusing on commonalities that exist among different stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). Whereas in the narrative analysis

approach, researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings and synthesize the data using a plot into a story or stories focusing on the particular characteristics of each person (Polkinghorne, 1995). Thus, analysis of narratives enables researchers to generate general knowledge from a set of particular instances by moving from stories to common elements, whereas the purpose of narrative analysis is to produce stories as the outcome of the research (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Before deciding which approach to follow to analyze my data, it was essential to refer to the purpose of the research. On one hand, one of the purposes of the study was to present the common patterns shared across the youth lived experiences to furnish policymakers with insights so that they can find effective ways to enhance the well-being of the youth by finding strategies that can mitigate or transform the constraints faced by them. On the other hand, the capability approach informing my study, recognizes diversity and focuses on what is valued by individuals to be what they want to be or to do what they want to do through time (Sen 1999; Robeyns, 2006), which requires underscoring the distinctiveness of each person and how they change through time. Thus, I used the hybrid of these approaches as the two ways of analyzing stories are complementary to each other.

This hybrid analysis of stories is employed by life history researchers in education. Vavrus (2015), for instance, uses hybrid analysis in narrating the life history of a close friend and interviews with youths when analyzing cleverness as a schooling strategy in Tanzania. Willemsen (2016) uses a similar approach in her dissertation work to analyze gender empowerment, schooling, and relationships. She specifically narrated

three full life histories among the girls, while at the same time, each life history is used, analytically and alongside themes drawn from each of the other girls' life stories.

While analyzing my paper, I used a similar hybrid approach to narrate the stories. Using analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995), I used categories that emerge from theories, specifically from the capability approach, and from the participant interviews. The themes that emerged from the capability approach includes social conversion conditions, family-related conversion conditions, conversion factors related to educational institutions, opportunities, resources, and abilities to use the resources in pursuing aspirations and exercising agency. But I also used narrative analysis by underscoring the distinctiveness of each person and how they change through time by providing detailed description of their experiences. While “restorying” the youth’s narratives, I gave meaning to each part in relation to other parts of the youth’s stories considering epiphanies or turning points in which the storyline changes direction dramatically (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). Table 3 map out key focus areas in each chapter for all research participants.

Table 3 - Key thematic focus areas for each participant

Research participants' name	Chapter focus	Key focus area	Specific topic
Ermias	The ability to form and navigate alternative futures	The capability to aspire	Aspirations based on reflection of one's talent and interests
		The capacity to aspire	Supporting condition (local NGOs support) and constraining condition (lack of teachers' guidance, discrimination because of his mother illness)
		Aspirations for others	Aspirations for improvement of his neighborhood
		Faith in aspiration formation	Faith and religious institutions as a place to cultivate desired futures and building social relationships
	Family and home-related conditions	Constraining condition (family economic situation - inability to cover living and educational expenses)	

	The capability to pursue aspirations	School-related conditions	Constraining conditions (lack of recognition, unavailability of resources in schools, language barrier, labeling at schools based on academic performance)
		Societal conditions	Supporting conditions (neighbors' support, mentors' guidance, local NGOs support) and constraining condition (peer pressure)
		Personal effort in nurturing interest	Using digital technology to cultivate his interests
	Agency	Reflective agency	Acting to find alternatives (Looking for paid work) and chasing a dream at any cost
		Safeguarded agency	Using faith to keep moving in adversities and not to be influenced by peer pressure
Tsinat	The ability to form and navigate alternative futures	The capability to aspire	Aspirations as an interplay between what is desired and what is achievable
		The capacity to aspire	Supporting condition (school as safe heaven and community members as parental figure)
		Aspirations for others	Aspirations for the well-being of beloved ones
	The capability to pursue aspirations	Family and home-related conditions	Supporting condition (family material and moral support) and constraining condition (family economic situation)
		School-related conditions	Constraining condition (uncertainty in higher education institutions)
	Agency	Transferred agency	Sharing decision making power with loved ones
		Altruistic agency	Exercising agency for the well-being of others
Constrained agency		When finding alternatives did not work and youths left with no real options to choose	
Solomon	The ability to form and navigate alternative futures	The capability to aspire	Aspirations as a remedy for past experience
		The capacity to aspire	Supporting condition (social relations)
	The capability to pursue aspirations	Family and home-related conditions	Constraining condition (family economic situation and lack of emotional support from family)
		School-related conditions	Supporting condition (teachers as a source of moral support) and constraining conditions (lack of recognition, unavailability of resources in schools)
		Societal conditions	Supporting condition (social networks as a means to access resources, local NGOs support) and constraining conditions (lack of mentorship, exposure to sexual harassment)
		Personal effort in nurturing interest	Participation in volunteer service to develop skills needed for his aspired future
	Agency	Reflective agency	Acting at the time of ambiguity
		Safeguarded agency	Using faith to keep moving in adversities
		Altruistic agency	Exercising agency for the well-being of others
	Selam	The ability to form and navigate alternative futures	The capability to aspire
The capacity to aspire			Constraining condition (family and societal expectations)
Aspirations for others			Aspiration to advance for the eradication of a customary practice
Faith in aspiration formation			Faith as a means to think beyond personal well-being
The capability to pursue aspirations		Familial and home-related conditions	Constraining condition (family economic situation)
		School-related conditions	Language barrier
		Societal conditions	Constraining condition (societal negative perception toward education for domestic workers and exposure to sexual harassment)
Agency		Reflective agency	Acting at the time of conflicted aspirations and acting to find alternatives
	Safeguarded agency	Using faith to keep moving amidst obstacles	

Aster	The ability to form and navigate alternative futures	The capability to aspire	Aspirations based on reflection of one's talent and interests
		The capacity to aspire	Constraining condition (unstable living arrangement)
	The capability to pursue aspirations	Familial and home-related conditions	Constraining condition (family economic situation and family responsibility)
		School-related conditions	Supporting condition (teacher material support) and constraining condition (language barrier, labeling at schools based on economic situation)
		Societal conditions	Supporting condition (local NGOs support) and constraining condition (exposure to sexual harassment)
	Agency	Reflective agency	Acting at the time of ambiguity and acting to find alternatives
		Safeguarded agency	Turned to faith not to be influenced by peer pressure
		Transferred agency	Sharing decision making power with loved ones
		Constrained agency	When finding alternatives did not work and youths left with no real options to choose
	Edel	The ability to form and navigate alternative futures	The capability to aspire
The capacity to aspire			Supporting condition (teachers support) and constraining condition (unavailability of meaningful opportunities, inability of teachers to understand economically disadvantaged students' challenges)
The capability to pursue aspirations		Familial and home-related conditions	Constraining condition (family economic situation)
		School-related conditions	Supporting condition (teacher material support) and constraining condition (labeling at schools based on economic situation)
		Societal conditions	Supporting condition (local NGOs support) and constraining condition (societal negative perception about education for economically disadvantaged students)
Agency		Constrained agency	When finding alternatives did not work and youths left with no real options to choose

When it comes to coding, I translated, transcribed, coded, and analyzed the data on an ongoing basis as I used them to inform further rounds of interviews. I transcribed the first two rounds of interviews in Amharic and then translated the documents from Amharic to English, but I directly transcribed the last round of interview in English as the first method was time consuming. However, I took time to make sure that I did not lose meanings in translations. After transcribing all the data, I entered the data into Nvivo. Then, I used in vivo coding and open coding as a first cycle coding method by reading and re-reading the transcripts several times (Saldana, 2016). In vivo coding enabled me to capture the participants' own terms since I employed constructivist epistemological assumptions, whereas open coding enabled me to have categories and themes related to the research questions and the theoretical framework (Given, 2008). Then I used axial

coding as a second cycle coding method, and in this stage, I identified main concepts and categories and relationships among themes (Given, 2008; Saldana, 2016). For instance, after coding all different conditions influencing the youth capability to pursue their aspired futures, I categorized them based on different forms of conversion conditions incorporated in the capability approach, i.e., family and home-related conditions, school-related conditions, and social conditions (see table 3).

Ethical Considerations

One of the ways that narrative inquiry reshaped the field of qualitative research is through the importance of the relational engagement of researchers and participants (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Because of the relational aspect of narrative inquiry methodology, ethical considerations are at the heart of the inquiry process (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Relational ethics, as defined by Clandinin (2006), includes negotiation, respect, mutuality, and openness to multiple voices.

Negotiation, as part of relational ethics of narrative inquiry, requires researchers to co-compose interim and final research texts with the participants (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). As will be discussed below in the trustworthiness section, I co-composed the interim text through member-checking by allowing the participants to check my interpretation of what they have said and their representation in the analysis at the end of the third rounds of interviews. It also enabled me to co-compose and negotiate the retelling of the stories. In addition to negotiation, relational ethics include respect and openness to multiple voices. Though the study poses no harm to the participants, narrative inquiry requires me, as a researcher, to move beyond doing no harm to be an empathetic listener by being nonjudgmental (as cited in Clandinin & Huber, 2010). The

respect element also extends to “treating participants as whole people rather than as just subjects from which to wrench a good story” (Tracy, 2013, p. 245).

Relational ethics lead to social responsibility and to negotiate ways that researchers can be helpful to participants both during and after the study in order to maintain trust and a sense of care (Clandinin, 2013). As a short-term responsibility, I supported the youth participants financially or in material form to support their education related costs. Instead of guessing what they need, I asked the participants what they wanted to have when they join higher education or to continue their education for those who dropped out of school. I did this after I finished the data collection not to affect the data. I also discussed with the school principal about possible ways of collaboration in the future and as a short-term goal, I facilitated and mobilized resources to cover for 40 students’ academic needs in the school. As a long-term responsibility, I plan to continue my relationship and communication with the youth to follow-up on their progress.

As part of ethical considerations, in addition, I obtained permission from the University of Minnesota IRB to ensure the protection of the research participants, but IRB is not required by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education. I also obtained a written consent from my participants to be part of my study. To be in line with the “notion of informed consent” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 261), I explained to the research participants the purpose of the study, what would be expected from them during the inquiry process, and their option of opting out from the study at any time though it was clearly incorporated in the consent form. In addition, the pseudonyms the participants choose are used throughout this dissertation to keep their anonymity, and their identities de-identified.

Trustworthiness

As discussed above, narrative inquiry is a relational and reflective methodology as well (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). This relational inquiry process makes researchers find ways to inquire about their own and the participants' experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that researchers must “fall in love” with their participants, but they should not fall too much in love to the extent that it makes the researchers become blind to observe their own as well as their participants stories in the inquiry and the context (p. 81). To combat this bias, they recommend writing field texts by “turning inward and watching outward” to keep the validity of the study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 86). In my process to maintain trustworthiness, I wrote field notes after conducting the interviews as a way of “watching outward” and reflecting on my thinking, including the decisions I made in the field and what I thought about the participants. Thus, memo writing was among the ways that I used to show the validity of the study. Specifically, in the analysis, I used multiple quotes using the actual words of the participants to show multiple realities because of the epistemological assumption that I used for the study, which recognized the idea of multiple realities (Creswell, 2007).

In addition, I used a member-checking technique to allow participants to check the accuracy of what they said, how they feel about their representation, and about the interpretation after writing a short summary of their stories while I was in the field and read it to them. The relational ontology of narrative inquiry requires researchers to co-compose the interim research texts, which are shared and negotiated with participants before composing the final research texts that will be available to the public audience (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin et al., 2016).

Limitations and Delimitations

This study is not intended to provide all forms of aspirations of economically disadvantaged youth; instead, it focuses on educational aspirations of the youth. As such, the study scope is limited to examining in-school and out-of-school conditions influencing youths' educational aspirations formation and their ability of pursuing their valued educational functioning. However, the study does not intend to explore the youths' achievement of well-being or whether the youth achieve their aspirations. Instead, it seeks to examine the processes by which opportunities and constraints influence their educational aspirations and agency, conceptualized as the capability of the youth to pursue their valued future. The study also examines the agency freedom that the youth have to reflect and make choices of their aspirations, but it does not intend to assess how education enhanced the youths' agency or not.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explained why the narrative inquiry methodology goes in line with the research questions. Using stories as a data, Merriam and Tisdell (2016), narrative inquiry enabled deeper understandings of the experience of youth from economically disadvantaged families. By centering the youths' voices and honoring their lived experiences, the next three chapters address my three research questions. All participant youths' stories are incorporated in each chapter, and no chapter is dedicated to one or selected participants. Chapter four focuses on how youth, who are from economically disadvantaged families, imagine and reimagine their futures amidst supporting and constraining conditions. However, having aspirations does not mean that youth have the potential to achieve their aspirations. This transformation process of changing aspirations

to capabilities (one's freedom to pursue and achieve their aspirations) will be the main focus of chapter five. Thus, chapter five will examine how youth utilize their resources (at the school and in the community) to pursue their educational aspirations while considering personal, family-related, and school-level conversion conditions. As aspirations and agency are interrelated concepts, chapter six will examine how youth use their agency to choose, pursue, or reshape their aspirations within supporting and constraining conditions. Honoring the youths' experience, I used the first person to narrate the stories i.e., telling the stories in their own words. My reflection and the discussion of the findings concerning previous studies are included in the discussion part at the end of each chapter. All in all, the following chapters narrate the youths' stories by looking backward, at present, and looking forward.

Chapter Four: Navigating the Future - Imagining and Reimagining of Aspirations

No one talked about pursuing higher education in a rural area of Ethiopia where Selam was born and raised. In her community, education is something left for those who are in the urban areas. Instead, the girls' role is limited to getting married and taking care

of their family. When her parents pushed her to migrate to the Arab States and work as a domestic worker or get married to a rich guy, she refused, saying it was not the life she dreamt of. Even at this time, she was 14 and did not have any clear picture of what she aspired to be. In her early primary school years, for Selam, her future was nothing more than an Ethiopian Airline pilots' poster hanging in her home. She aspired to be a pilot because she was impressed by how the pilots in the picture looked. Sadly, she became a victim of sexual violence, which led her to envision being a lawyer and stand for justice. By changing the tragedy to a grander ambition, her spiritual faith made her aspire to more than her personal well-being. She wanted to eradicate a norm of blood avengers that is common in a community where she was raised.¹³ Even at times she wondered if it is worth studying law for five years instead of three- and four-year degree programs, she reminded herself, "I know that is what I want to be no matter what!"

Selam's story implies that aspiration formation is not an individual journey. Rather, aspiration formation is influenced by relations with others, as well as both in and out-of-school conditions. Previous studies in the Ethiopian context have not engaged with how youth choose and develop their aspirations.¹⁴ Thus, it is essential to examine how youth imagine and navigate their future as it will enable policy makers and educators to recognize the opportunities and constraints economically disadvantaged youth have in the process of exploring and developing their educational aspirations. This chapter will

¹³ This practice called *Dem melash* in Amharic, which is a name given to someone who is expected to avenge a lost life of close relatives. As will be discussed later in this chapter, her father lost one of his relatives because of this norm, which is one of her reasons to be interested in eradication of such kind of practices.

¹⁴ Some studies of Young Lives Ethiopia address the interplay between aspirations and educational progression (Tafere, 2010), aspirations and gender disparity in educational trajectories (Tafere, 2017), and educational aspirations, and barriers to achievement (Tafere, 2014).

emphasize the process of aspiring to address the first research question: How do youth from economically disadvantaged families imagine and reimagine their futures amidst supporting and constraining conditions? In addressing this question, the chapter aims to scrutinize the degree of freedom that the youth have to aspire (the capability to aspire) and their ability to read and understand the *map of their journey* into their futures (the capacity to aspire).

I begin the chapter by examining how economically disadvantaged youth form their aspirations, underscoring that the aspirations of the youth are not only affected by their past but also the present and their possible futures. Then, I explain the impact of a broad range of opportunities and constraints on the youths' capacity and capability to aspire, including family, community (including peers and social networks), and school environments as well as the availability of resources. In the second section of this chapter, I argue that economically disadvantaged youth do have aspirations, countering the dominant narratives that negatively associate them with low aspirations. The youths' narratives highlight the need for accessible resources, meaningful opportunities, and guidance from family, teachers, and society to have a concrete plan for their future. Thus, this chapter adds new knowledge about the process of youths' aspirations within the Ethiopian context. The third section reiterates the social situatedness and relational nature of aspirations extending DeJaeghere's (2018, 2019) work. In this chapter, I argue that youth form their aspirations not only for themselves but also *for others* and *with others*. The last section of the chapter brings new insight to the field by examining the role of faith in aspiration formation process.

Forming Educational Aspirations: The Capability to Aspire

For youth from low-income families, aspirations are formed in a way to change their current living conditions and escape from poverty, in order to improve their individual and others' well-being. It is important to examine how youth from economically disadvantaged families form their aspirations to understand and remove the barriers they face and to enhance supporting conditions. The findings from the study indicate that youths from economically disadvantaged families form their aspirations based on their past (as a remedy for past experience); in their present (influenced by the constant dilemma between what they desire and what they can achieve considering their socio-economic conditions); and possible future (by searching for what they are talented at). This section discusses in detail the educational aspiration formation process of the youth participants, including the degrees of freedom they had to aspire (the capability to aspire).

Aspirations as a Remedy for Past Experience

One of the recurring themes in this study is that youth imagine their future from their past personal experiences and mostly as a remedy for a past tragedy. Youth imagined a grander vision from tragic experiences, implying their personal courage, the strength of their faith, and the support they have in schools and in their communities. Selam, who was in grade 11 (social science stream) at the time of the interview, narrated how and why she aspired to be a lawyer.

Before I decided to come to Dire Dawa, the first thing I did was go to Gondar town, a couple of kilometers away from the rural area where I was born and raised. I know someone who is a broker and helped many girls in finding a job to work as domestic workers in Gondar and he helped me to find a job as a housemaid. My employer's mother was a nagging lady, and I could not stay there longer. I had never been to Gondar town, and I did not know where to go. So, I called this guy and he promised that he would immediately reach out to someone he knew who was looking for a maid and told me to come to a place where he

worked as a part-time guard. I stayed there the whole day, but the lady he mentioned did not come, and I felt terrified when it was getting darker. He was a guard with another guy, and they offered me to drink *Tela* [a traditional beer, mostly brewed from various grains], but I declined as I never had drunk alcohol. The guy was my father's age, and I was 14, but I was old enough to guess where things might go. I started praying in my heart and sat at the compound's corner with my belongings in a small plastic bag. I kept asking him if my potential employer was coming or not, and finally, he said she could not come on that day, and I had to spend the night there and meet her the next morning. Then he offered me to sleep over on a bed in a room reserved for the securities. Since he did not have an additional bed to sleep in, he asked me to sleep against the wall so that he would sleep next to me. I told him that I did not want to sleep; rather, I prefer to spend the night sitting down at the corner. Then, he pulled my scarf and tried to drag me to the bed. The door was partially open. Then, I immediately ran to the fence, but it had anti-climb fencing spikes, and it tore my palm when I tried to jump on the fence [she showed me the big scar she had on her hand]. I shouted for help before I tried to jump over the fence, but his friend was silent, and I realized that he was also part of the conspiracy. They did not expect that I would climb the wall, but I used to climb trees effortlessly when I was a child, which helped me escape the trap. After I jumped the fence, he tried to catch me, but I kept running; it was late at night, and no one was around. After a few blocks, he stopped following me, and I found someone and asked him the nearest police station, which was not far from where I was. I told what happened to the police while weeping. Then we went to where he was located, but he acted as if he did not know anything. One policeman asked me if I wanted them to beat him and did not file a charge, or take him to the police station and open a legal suit. I chose the first option, and they beat him with their baton, and he gave me back my belongings. I went back to the police station with them, and the officer said: "you rural ladies, you came to the cities and burdened our work." It hurt my feelings. He had no idea why girls flee from rural areas to the cities. He kept asking me if he raped me, but I said no and explained that even the attempt of rape by itself is a violation of my dignity. Unfortunately, for him, it was fine unless I was actually raped. He tried to explain that the legal procedure would be complicated since the act did not occur. Then, two policewomen took me to the nearby clinic as my hand was bleeding a lot. They mistreated me and said to each other how tired they are because of rural women who came to Gondar city to work as domestic workers and complained about rape and how it overburdened them to take girls to clinics every time. Even though I understand their point, I could not believe they said that to me while I was in that situation, and I kept lamenting. The next day they told me to go back to my parents' village instead of filing a lawsuit against the offender. This bad incident sparked a light in me to be a lawyer and be a voice for those who seek justice.

Then, I went back to my family. When the priest I knew told me that his relatives in Dire Dawa were looking for a maid, I decided to move there even though I had never been there before, and it is too far [more than 1,000 km] from where I was born. I started going to school in the evenings while working as a

domestic servant. When I was in grade 9, one of my classmates introduced me to a guy she claimed helped many other economically struggling women to keep going to school as he was a street boy at some point. I started living with him, his family, and some other women he supported. Through time, the other women left the house when they found a job, and I was the only one who lived with his family. I became close to two of his daughters. I suspected that he had the intention of having an affair with me, but it had never crossed my mind that he would rape me. I even cried when I saw his daughters. Besides what he did to me, trying to hide this thing from his family so that they would not be hurt was what wounded me the most. I left his house and rented my own and started working a small business. I was depressed for a long time to the extent of committing suicide, but the faith I have in God keeps me longing for the future. It is unfortunate, but these experiences make me more interested in being a lawyer. I am now 21 and in grade 11 because I dropped out of school for three years. Sometimes I reflect and think if it worth studying law for five years while there are three- and four-year degree programs. But I know that it is what I want to be no matter what.

Selam's story shows how she explored her future even amidst adversities and their ability to direct their future as a remedy for past experiences. She experienced rape and an attempted rape at two different points in her life. This personal tragedy did not deter Selam from thinking about her future positively. Even though she was in a depressed state of mind and to thought of suicide, the hope she had in God helped her consider the future, rather than dwelling in her past. The relationship between faith and aspirations will be discussed later in this chapter. Through time, Selam started having a clear picture of her future. She wanted to become a lawyer and fight for those who similarly did not get justice. She formed her aspirations by reflecting on what she had been through and channeling the injustice she had experienced to improve not only for herself, but others' well-being.

As the experience of sexual violence made Selam interested in pursuing law, mistreatment in his childhood made Solomon, who was in grade 9 at the time of the interview, interested in studying psychology. He narrated his story:

When I was only 13 years old, I had already seen the ups and downs of life. I lived on a street for a while, but at that time, I started living with other youths in a tiny house. I saw my mother a long time after those ups and downs. She was married and had children [from another man]. Unfortunately, I stayed with my stepfather for a couple of days. Since he was not comfortable in my presence, I entered the kitchen when all the family members were asleep and stayed overnight there. If he woke up before me in the morning, he came to the kitchen and peed on me and my exercise books. If he woke up in the middle of the night, he told me to leave the house, and I spent the night on the street. I did not do anything that annoyed him for as long as I remember. He even bit me for no reason. When he did all these things to me, he sent his children to a private school. I wondered why he could not treat me, at least, as a human if he cannot see me as his child. At that time, my dream was to join the military and take revenge against him. This experience makes me interested in psychology as I read many self-help psychology books to heal from the trauma. These books influenced me to pursue this field because I wanted to help those in the same situation as I used to be.

It is not the only experience that makes me aspire to be a psychologist. When I was earning money by selling boiled eggs at bars at night, two of my customers attempted to rape me. I threw *mitmita* [a powdered spice], which I used when I sold the eggs, in their eyes and ran; then I found two police on my way who took us to the nearest police station. The public prosecutor opened a charge on one of the offenders, but the other escaped, and he had been following me for a while for revenge. Then, I stopped selling eggs at late nights and started selling *kolo* [a traditional Ethiopian snack consisted of roasted grains such as barley, chickpeas, sunflowers, and peanuts] besides eggs up to 9 and 10 PM. In addition, the societal perception after I experienced an attempted rape made me sick. They assumed that I was raped and had the virus [HIV]. I could not handle the rumor and took the test and then posted my result on one of the walls in the neighborhood.

Another incident that makes me to be more interested in studying psychology is the passing of my father, which I learned about on my 13th birthday. It broke my heart. It is not only his passing but the thinking that it is a murder, not a natural death, that always sickened me. Since I was too young to take legal action, there was no legal prosecution, but I felt that he had a property to receive as an heir from his paternal side. I suspect that his relatives killed him for inheritance. After some time, I went back to that place to check about the issue, his relatives assumed that I came there to ask for an inheritance, and they were unwilling to talk to me. My brother also asked them explicitly to give us our share of the inheritance as we lived in a devastating situation, but they refused, claiming that we are not entitled to inherit any property. My brother was desperate and tried to kill himself by burning himself with gasoline, but he survived by the grace of God. These terrible experiences made me devastated. Then I attempted suicide and [after that] was following up with psychologists. But I changed my mind and was determined that I can change many others' lives if I keep my education and be a psychologist.

As can be learned from Solomon's and Selam's stories, youth exhibit a tendency to orient themselves towards a future as a remedy for their past personal experiences, if they get appropriate support. In the case of Solomon, the self-help psychology books that he got from people in his circle, as will be discussed later, helped Solomon to have what he considered as a better aspiration. Both his mistreatment and misrecognition by his father and sexual harm are tragedies he channeled toward a grander ambition. Selam and Solomon were able to look beyond these misfortunes with societal and religious support. Their experiences show that the past is not always deterministic of the youths' aspirations for their future. The next section illustrates how youths form their aspirations by navigating the interplay between what they aspire to be and what they can achieve considering their current social and economic situation.

Aspirations as an Interplay between What is Desired and What is Achievable

Youths' aspirations for their future may not always emanate from their preferences or desired possibilities. Rather, their aspirations might be influenced by their economic, familial and other related conditions. These conditions might lead them to reimagine their futures, change their aspirations, or adopt available options considering what they think is achievable. Tsinat, who was enrolled in grade 11 (social science stream) at the time of the interview, narrated below how her aspirations for the future are influenced by her present circumstances.

I wanted to be a psychologist because I needed someone who listened to my sufferings when I was physically and psychologically exploited as a child. After my father's passing when I was three, my mother brought me to Dire Dawa, assuming that I could get a better education in the city. Since we did not have any relatives in Dire Dawa, she had me stay with people she knew who owned a hotel. The hotel is where most of the passengers from Dire Dawa to Djibouti stayed overnight or have their meals before their travel. Since most of the passengers

came in the evenings or late nights, I needed to stay late to serve the customers. Even though I was a child, I used to work as one of their employees. I was also expected to work the household and the hotel chores after school. I did not have time to take a break or to study. I had never played with kids as a child. Even if I spent most of the evenings serving customers, they had never given me breakfast. Even in this situation, I used to be one of the ranked students when I was in kindergarten and in the early ages (or grades) my primary schools. Since my caregivers did not feel happy when I scored the highest grade or received an award, I told my teachers to keep my awards at the school; rather than being beaten by my custodians. They did this because one of their daughters, who was two grades above me, was a lazy student, although she went to private school and had a private tutor after school. This experience negatively influenced my academic progress still now. My mind, unfortunately, associated getting good results in exams with a bad experience. One of the teachers was close to me, and she was the one I reached out to share all my burdens with. She bought me food when I was starved and could not focus in class. Then I lived with three different families hoping that I would get better hosting families to raise me as their child. That was the time in my life where I highly needed to see a counselor. Even doctors did not figure out what was wrong with me. But I knew that I had depression. I did not have anyone to tell what I had been through. When things got out of my control, I went to the restroom, locked it, talked alone as a mentally ill person, and cried a lot. There were many times where I passed out. People told my mother to take me to go to a monastery for prayers. Then, when I was in grade 8, I told my mother that I want to live alone, and she rented me a house. My mother is the one who covered my rent, my educational, and living expenses while working as a day laborer.

I know that many children have been through a similar situation and seek someone who can help them materially and in terms of listening to their struggles and showing them the way for a bright future. But for now, I know that I cannot join higher education and study psychology as I do not want to continue being a burden for my mother; I would rather prefer to work as a flight attendant.

To be honest, I choose to be a hostess as a **shortcut** to help my mother and open the non-profit association that I would like to have to support children in the same situation as I used to be. Among other income-generating options, I prefer working as a flight attendant because I heard people could easily make money and change their lives. Nonetheless, my long-term plan is to work as a counselor by going back to college and study psychology and psychiatry after working as a hostess for a couple of years.

Tsinat's experience reveals how youth from economically disadvantaged families constantly examine their desire and what they can achieve because of their economic constraints. Like Selam and Solomon, Tsinat aspires to be a psychologist based on her trauma of dealing with physical and psychological abuse as she wanted to be a light for

those who need a counselor who understands their situation. However, she decided at the time of the interview to take a detour from her ultimate destination of being a psychologist. This decision was in order to support her mother, rather than continue being a “burden” to her by joining higher education. For youth like Tsinat, forming their aspirations occurred in the interrelations between their past, present, and future and was navigated between what was desired and what was achievable. The economic situation of her family, to some extent, has affected Tsinat’s aspiration formation. Nonetheless, Tsinat did not want to let poverty fully dissuade her from what she wanted to be, even though she changed her route from her original academic preference to suit her under-resourced environments. Rather, in the process of reimagining her future, at grade 11, she temporarily planned to work as a flight attendant to support her mother and to open a non-profit organization. However, she eventually wanted to go back to school to study psychology. The economic situation she experienced during her secondary schooling years lengthened her path to be what she aspired to be, but it did not fully impede her decision to pursue her aspirations. The next section elaborates how youth form their aspirations by reflecting on what they are talented at despite the economic constraints.

Aspiration Oriented Toward the Future: Knowing Talents

Economically disadvantaged youths’ aspirations were not only influenced by their past experience or present conditions, but also by reflecting on their talents and interests. Ermias’s story shows how he imagined his future. He has changed through time from what Gale and Parker (2015) called “doxic aspirations” (p. 85) or aspirations based on dominant beliefs and assumptions in a society, to an aspiration formed through reasoning about his talents. He explained his educational aspiration formation process:

Like many children, I wanted to be what I saw when I was a child. When I was in grades 1 up to 4, for example, I wanted to be a professional football [soccer] player because the Dire Dawa football [soccer] team was famous at the national level at the time. I also saw when our seniors got recruited for Division-B, and it gave me hope that I could reach there if I worked hard. As a matter of fact, I was not good at my education during those school years. So, being a football player was my dream.

As explained above, Ermias wanted to be a football player because it was what he saw as a booming field when he was a child. He was interested in the profession not only because it was a known possibility at that time, but he also saw hope as others in similar situations rose to the level to be professional football players. He said it gave him hope that he could reach that goal too, if he was dedicated. Even though doxic aspirations might not always show what individuals really want to be, seeing someone in his neighborhood who achieved what he aspired to be motivated youth like Ermias to put effort into something they were interested in.

Ermias's interview also shows that children, irrespective of their economic status, start reimagining alternative futures at early stages, even though they needed guidance from their teachers, family, and society to explore alternative futures deeply. For instance, in Ermias case, he saw that his academic performance was not good, and he identified being a football player as an alternative. But, he joined a religious private school in grade 5 and received support from those who run the orphanage and his teachers. Once he got access to a good quality education, he reimagined his future.

Ermias narrated this transition:

I was in grade 4 when my mother passed away. My sister and I decided to stay with our auntie since we did not have anywhere to go, but I stopped going to school, and our living condition was devastating. Months after the passing of my mother, we heard about a religious non-profit organization called Hope. The organization connects individual beneficiaries with donors abroad. First, my sister got the chance to join the orphanage, but I would have been alone, and we begged

them so that I could join the orphanage with her. We had our bed and closet. We started to live as children again. I began to call the people who run the organization “mom” and “dad.” Gizachew is not the name of my biological father; rather, the name of the person who used to administer the orphanage. He is the one who gave me my current name. My mother used to call me Khalid. I was in a devastating situation after my mother’s passing, and it gave me new hope to join the orphanage.

Before I joined the orphanage, I used to get 46th rank out of 50 students. But after I started living at the orphanage, I got a chance to focus on my education fully, and I got the 8th rank. Then, I even became among the ranked students. I felt I was settled, and I could be whatever I wanted to be, and I tended to like my education. The program administrators, who lived with us, followed up on our performance. We even had a tutorial class after school. We did not worry about what to eat or what to wear. I thought I had overcome all the difficulties that prevented me from focusing on my education. So, I started morally supporting other children in the same situation, preaching for them God will make a way. This practice made me interested in psychology until I completed grade 8.

When I grew up [in secondary school], I started figuring out my talents and what I am best at. Then, I realized that I am good at writing and acting. So, I want to be an actor and a writer. What I want to be is an influential writer.

Ermias’s story underscores that aspirations are not something static. Rather, aspirations are imagined and reimagined at different phases of an individual’s life based on availability of meaningful opportunities and familial, societal, and school level support. Ermias reimagined his future when he had access to a good quality of education with a continuous follow-up from those who ran the orphanage. Ermias became interested in psychology because he wanted to morally support those who are in a situation similar to the one he used to be in. At this point, his aspiration emanated from his personal experience, but he did not stop there. During his transition from childhood to adulthood, he started thinking about what he was good at instead of simply following what was valued by society when he was a child, i.e., soccer player, or what is good for others, i.e., counseling service. He grew more interested in knowing his talents and thought more about how he could influence his community using his talents.

Besides showing the dynamic nature of aspirations, Ermias's story also indicates aspirations of youth from economically disadvantaged families are not entirely dominated by their past and present but also future-oriented. Ermias's aspiration was not dependent on his past experiences of focusing on daily survival. Considering the economic situation that he had been in, especially as someone who had no one to support him, striving for daily survival was what was expected from him. But he did not let his past or present conditions haunt him. Rather, Ermias reflected on what he wanted to be and cultivated his aspirations. Even though he changed his aspirations, he did not adapt his aspirations to achievable goals considering his social environment. Rather, his change in aspirations emerged from his reflection of knowing his talents. Ermias spent his time figuring out what he is best at, instead of what was achievable. During our interviews, Ermias mentioned several times that he went to the theatre club training sessions (where he participated for years) with an empty stomach as it is where his soul was satisfied. Thus, Ermias's story implies that the aspirations of youth who grew up in economically disadvantaged families are not dictated by their past. Their aspirations were formed in the present as well and the youth remained future-oriented. Ermias, at least after he joined the orphanage, had access to educational opportunities, which enabled him to think about his future beyond his basic needs.

As shown in the youths' narratives, economically disadvantaged youth form their aspirations as a remedy for past experience, as an interplay between what is desired and what is achievable, and by exploring their talents when they have access to meaningful opportunities and familial, societal, and school level support. Along with identifying

one's aspirations, youth also need to explore their area of interest to have a concrete plan of their valued future (the capacity to aspire), as discussed in the next section.

Navigational Information to Imagine the Future: The Capacity to Aspire

To have well-defined aspirations, it is essential for youth to understand or have the picture of linking specific goals with the means and opportunities to reach their goals, considering the context (Appadurai, 2004; Gale & Parker, 2015). Youths' ability to access information to imagine and see alternative futures and understand the map of a journey into the future (capacity to aspire) impacts their ability to pursue and realize their aspirations. Family, teachers, and societal support help economically disadvantaged youth to prepare for the future, coupled with the availability of meaningful opportunities to have a concrete plan about their aspirations. This section discusses these conditions that support or constrain the youth ability of navigating toward their future.

Guidance Toward a Concrete Plan: School, Family, and Social Environment

School Environment

One of the themes that emerged from this study was the importance of guidance in schools in terms of enabling the youth to imagine their futures, to explore what they are really interested in, why they are interested, and how they can reach that goal. The navigational information to understand their "map of a journey into the future" enabled youth to think beyond what they wish and have a concrete plan of their future backed by exploring possibilities and options. The students' narratives indicated that teachers support can make the difference for economically disadvantaged students to stay in school and in guiding them to have a detailed plan about their future and lack thereof influence them negatively.

Pedagogical practices that support disadvantaged youth, for instance, improve students' engagement in the classroom and the way they imagine about their future in general. Edel, who dropped out of school at the time of the interview, did not have a support system at home. Even if she did not have a clear vision of what she wanted to be, one of her teachers at the primary school helped her to think that she could be whatever she wanted to be with a support from her teachers. Edel explained her experience of teachers' support and its influence on her educational path and the way she thought about her future.

I do not live in an environment suitable for study. Mostly, I go to school without food. After I go back home, I lost my energy, and my body becomes weak; so, I lack the motivation to study. I could not even attend class attentively, and there were many times where I slept in class. Some teachers asked why I slept in their class, and sometimes they let me go back home and rest. Some others bought me food. I am grateful for my elementary school teacher called Abebech, who was my English teacher. She bought me food at break time. She even allowed me to sleep on the classroom chair whenever I felt tired. When I missed classes or was not fully awake in the classroom, she tutored me at break time. She even took me to her home and gave me clothes. She has a daughter, who is my age, and she gave me some of her clothes. Sometimes, she brought me non-perishable foods. She was even interested in raising me with her children, but my mother disagreed. When my mother came home late that night being drunk, she beat me for revealing our life to my teacher. She said "no" because she did not want me to have a better life. I wish I could get a chance to live with my teacher. I even like the English subject class because of her. I participated in-class activities and tried my best to listen to her attentively. I asked her what I did not understand at break time. I still have high respect and affection for her. She understood me as a person. When I run into her, she always asked me if my situation gets any better. Unfortunately, there is nothing new, except my age. The school principal was another person who understood my situation and was keen to listen to my problems. He even explained my situation to other teachers when they blamed me without knowing my circumstance. I felt comfortable telling him about my struggles. He encouraged me to interpret the bad things that my teachers said to me in a good way.

Unfortunately, some of my teachers did not understand my situation. There was a teacher called Gemechu, and he was my math teacher from grade 6 up to 8. He was one of the teachers who did not understand or pay attention to his students' problems. Though I told him my situation, he thought I was not too fond of his class, and he assumed that was why I slept when he was teaching. He never

called me by my name; instead, he called me “እከሌ” [you girl]. He did not treat me as one of his students. There were many times when he physically punished me for my handwriting. He told me not to use cursive writing, and that was the only handwriting I knew. He is a math teacher, and that should not bother him, but he was always against me as he thought I was a lazy student, although I told him my circumstances. I even hated that class because of him. He charged me to the school principal to take a disciplinary measure against me, and he said he wanted to see my mother believe what I told him is true. I took him to the place where my mother sat and begged. I showed her from afar, and he talked to her, and she replied that she did not have a daughter named Edel. So, he took me to the principal again, and he said I was lying. Then, I took both the principal and my teacher to the place where I live. They talked to our neighbors, who explained everything to them. The principal understood my situation when he heard from our neighbors, but they did not convince my teacher. Unfortunately, he understood my circumstance later after I left the school.

Edel’s story underscores the need for pedagogical practices that recognize the difficulties of economically disadvantaged youth and find alternatives accordingly in a way that solves their difficulties in the short term and enables them to pursue their aspirations in the long run. Even though it is not stated in the above narration, Edel also mentioned during the interviews that books and other learning materials were available for students in her school, but none of her teachers asked or guided her about her future. Hence, teachers need to recognize that schools are shields for many disadvantaged students from familial and economic disadvantaged they experience and adopt practices that consider the difficulties these students have. Tsinat, who used to be physically and psychologically abused by her guardians, emphasized how schools are safe havens for disadvantaged youth.

The school was the only place where I got peace. I missed going to school not only to get knowledge but, importantly, to get relief from the exploitation and ill-treatment I had experienced. Even though I was ill, I preferred to go to school than staying at home.

For youth like Tsinat and Edel, pedagogical practices in education should enable them to navigate their aspirations by exposing them to knowledge and experiences that can help

them pursue their aspirations. This is important as they do not have a support system at home that can help them to explore their future. For instance, Edel's English teacher's care and guidance is exemplary pedagogical practice that creates a favorable environment for economically disadvantaged youth who come to school facing many difficulties. To put it in Edel's words, it is equivalent to understanding these students as a person. Even though she expressed herself as a below-average student, she put all her energy into attending attentively and participating in her English class. On the other hand, she hated math class because of the teacher who refused to understand her situation. Thus, guidance in school and good pedagogical practices play a significant role in supporting youth to explore their future and set goals to reach where they aspire to be.

In contrast, a lack of teachers' guidance may cause students to falter in navigating the future. Ermias's story distinctly shows this phenomenon.

Fortunately, I formed my own aspiration, but no one in our school took the time to ask us what we want to be. I wanted to be a football [soccer] player when I was a child and changed it to aspiring to be a psychologist at middle school. Now I figured out my talent, and I am more interested in art and plan to study in Addis Ababa University's theatrical art department. I figured out all these things by myself. Most teachers in public schools do not care that much about their students. Instead of asking us what we want to be, some of our teachers insult us saying, "the street youth." When we enter grade 11, we should choose to study either the social or natural science stream. None of our teachers guided us in this process; instead, students chose the field by themselves. So, everybody tries to figure out his path through different means. For instance, those who want to pursue an architecture field tend to watch YouTube videos about 3D designs.

The above story shows the impact of a lack of guidance in school on students' ability to define their educational path and formulate their aspirations into concrete plans. Ermias mentioned that there is no guidance for students in his school to choose between the social and natural science streams, let alone to nurture students' aspirations. Rather, students tried to figure out everything by themselves without the guidance of their

teachers. Even though students like Ermias can identify and form their aspirations, it is not necessarily true that all students can explore their futures by themselves. In his school, Ermias underlined that no one took time to ask what students wanted to be. This left students alone to map out their future. His story highlights the need for schools to create a space for the youth to have exposure to experiences that enable them to develop the road map for their aspirations.

Family and Social Environment

Both familial and societal support enabled youth to envisage their educational aspirations, while a lack of these supports had a negative influence. Among the constraining conditions within family and community, unstable living arrangement emerged as an important theme that influenced the youths' capacity and capability to aspire. In some cases, insecure living arrangements were the cases of unsettlement, physical and psychological abuse, and other childhood vulnerabilities. For instance, for Aster, who had just left school at the time of the interview and aspired to be an accountant, an unstable living arrangement was among the main conditions that constrained her abilities to explore her future. Because of her family's disintegration at a young age, Aster lived with many of her aunties on both sides. One of her aunties, where she stayed most of her primary education, bit Aster in the pretext of disciplining her even for minor faults, and sometimes, when she was disappointed in her personal life. Aster worked as a domestic worker where she was physically abused. All these experiences affected her ability to think about her future.

Furthermore, bad childhood experiences blocked youths' interest in navigating their future. Ermias narrated a detailed account of his childhood experience that

obstructed him from thinking about his future. His mother struggled alone to raise him and his sister by working many humbling jobs. She used to be a prostitute and HIV patient, ostracizing the family in society. Ermias recounted his story:

Our [Ermias and his sister] childhood was full of changing from one rental house to the other when she [Ermias's mother] could not afford to pay for it or when the landlords figured out that she was HIV positive. By that time, people with the virus were highly discriminated. This made me have bad childhood memories. Most people knew that we are free from the virus. Unfortunately, they assumed that parents disciplined their children differently, including biting them, and assumed we might be infected; but our mother highly cared about us and never did such a thing. Because of her rejection, we were also not accepted in the community. I did not have the luxury to think about my education and my future [at that time].

For Ermias, it was a “luxury” to think about his education and his future, because he was unwelcomed by the society and spent his childhood changing different neighborhoods. Thus, at least at the early stage of his life, unsettlement inhibited him from formulating concrete plans to lead to his desired future.

Girls who experienced multiple vulnerabilities struggled to develop their ability of seeing the pathways to their desired future and to receive support for it because of family and societal expectations. Selam's story depicts these vulnerabilities.

When I was a child, a poster hung on the wall of our house for years, which had photos of pilots at Ethiopian airlines. I had no idea what pilots do, but I wanted to be like the people on the poster when I grow up. I was one of the top scorers in my class until I reached grade four. My mother gave birth to my little sister when I was in grade five, and I had all the responsibility to take care of her. Unfortunately, my mother became critically ill after I started grade six, and I had no time to go to school or study other than taking care of my mother and sister and doing all the household chores. The family was even afraid that we might lose her. I did not attend most classes in grade six, but the teachers let me pass to the next class level because they knew my performance before this incident. Then, I started grade seven in another school, and it was the most challenging time for my family. They sold their lands, and my mother was still in bed. Since I did not learn grades five and six properly, I could not catch up after I started grade seven. Then, I become losing my interest in education over time. Unfortunately, many youths in my village did

not pass the grade ten national exam, and they complained about how the exam is difficult. Most of the villagers reminded me that those who finish secondary school did not get anything other than being unemployed. So, no one talked about joining higher education. Even I advised my elder brother to keep going to school after he passed the grade eighth national exam, but he lost hope in pursuing education because of many unemployed youths in the village. All these things influence my interest in pursuing my education.

Selam's story uncovered multi-level vulnerabilities and struggles of girls from economically disadvantaged families, especially those in rural areas, to get support of their aspirations, inhibiting their ability to see the pathways to their aspired futures. As the first girl in the family, Selam acted as a parent, even though she herself was a child. She was the one who was responsible for looking after her younger sister and taking care of her mother when she was sick. As a result, she did not have a clear picture of what she wanted to be as a child. She wanted to be a pilot, even though she had no idea about the field or how to reach that goal. It was a general preference that she replied as a child when asked what she wanted to be. Being highly involved in household chores and taking care of her siblings, left Selam with no time to reflect on her future.

In addition to navigating her aspirations and ways to realize it, the societal perception about education was another main condition that discouraged Selam from imagining a better life through education. As she explained, in the rural community where she was born and raised education was discussed as something left for those who are in the urban areas. The rural community members she grew up among frequently mentioned that even those who finished secondary school did not get anything other than being unemployed. This belief relates to the return on education that society expects, specifically in terms of income. The high unemployment of those who have already graduated discouraged them from hoping for a better future through education. Thus, the

absence of economic return on education affected the imagined future of youth, especially girls, from economically disadvantaged families and their parents' ambition for their future. The societal perception about education was also discouraging for those who live in urban areas, as learned from the story of Edel who was born and raised in the urban part of Dire Dawa. This perception related to the current high unemployment rate throughout the country, which made it even harder for economically disadvantaged youth who struggled to continue their education.

In contrast to family and social conditions that did not support the capacity to aspire, social relations are means for those youth to look forward to the future amidst obstacles. Tsinat had such supports through frequent customers of the hotel, where she worked as a child. These customers treated her like their daughter, even when her hosting families did not see her as such.

The daily workers who worked at the train station were among the hotel's daily customers, and most of them were kind to me as they knew how the owners treated me. I had a special father-daughter relationship with one of them called Geremew. I even used to call him *Aba* [father]. He fed me food that he bought from the hotel. Sometimes, he gave me money to buy food at school because I did not get enough food at home. Some of the daily workers assumed that I would revenge my caregivers when I grew up as they abused me. But Geremew always helped me to stay motivated and to have a positive imagination for my future. When I was in grade three, he always told me that I was about to join grade four. He always helped me to look for the next grade level and encouraged me to keep going to school. He is the most important figure of my childhood who helped me to stay positive despite the abuse I experienced by my guardians.

As narrated above, Geremew helped Tsinat to look forward to her next grade level and to have perseverance by providing her both material and moral support. His presence filled the gap that she could not get from her biological parents and guardians.

Support from parents and the community, both in material and moral form, encouraged youth to be excited about their future and helped them develop plans and

goals, while lack of guidance and moral support inhibited youth from getting the support they needed to develop solid knowledge about the pathways to their desired future. The next section highlights the importance of meaningful opportunities in the process of building concrete plans for the aspired future.

“Performance Without Rehearsal”: Unavailability of Meaningful Opportunities

Even though the guidance of family members, teachers, and societal support played a significant role in helping economically disadvantaged youths have a concrete plan for their future, the unavailability of meaningful opportunities, both in and outside of school, influenced their ability to formulate their aspirations into concrete plans. Edel, for instance, was no longer in school at the time of the interviews and she had a hard time articulating any aspirations. Edel’s story is a typical case to show how lack of meaningful opportunities impedes the ability of youths from low-income families to nurture their interests and have goals to pursue what they aspire to be.

Through time, what makes me more interested is to share whatever I will have with children and youth who drop out of school when I am economically strong. To achieve this dream, I know that I have to continue my education, but I do not have the basic things that I need, like learning materials and food. To cover these expenses, either I have to work or find someone who can help me. What I am thinking about my future is starting from scratch like a janitor in any organization and going up to the professional ladder by continuing my education. I know there are many challenges to achieve this. I need to have someone who can help me, at least who can listen to my struggles though they cannot help me financially. As I told you, my sister lives in Wurso military camp, and now she is married and only comes to visit us for the holidays. Since she comes to the neighborhood once in a while, and she spends most of her time in Dire Dawa by visiting her old friends rather than asking me about my situation or advising me. My brother also spends almost all his life on the street. He comes only for holidays to see us and never talks to me as a brother. I am the only one who stays at home for almost the whole day. My mother leaves the house early in the morning and comes back late at night. I do not have anyone to share my struggles with. Having no one on my side makes me worried when I think about my future. But I am here because of my patience and strength to change the situation I am in now. So, I have never thought about what I want to be or to do for myself. To be honest, to think about

your future calmly, you need to be in a position where you got peace. But I know that whatever I will be in the future, I want to help others if I am in a good financial situation. That is enough for me.

The main constraint Edel experienced that impeded her from having a good navigational capacity and a strong capability to aspire was lack of opportunities, both in and outside of school. She had some broad aspirations i.e., to help others but had no information to know how to do this. As can be inferred from the above narration, Edel did not have the “privilege” of thinking about her future, forcing her to be unprepared for school and “ill-prepared” to explore her future, as the below poem of Wislawa Szymborska illustrates:

Life While-You-Wait.
 Performance without rehearsal.
 I know nothing of the role I play.
 I only know it's mine. I can't exchange it.
 I have to guess on the spot.
 Just what this Play's all about.
 Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,
 I can barely keep up with the pace that the action demands.

Edel’s story reveals that youth need to understand and interpret different pathways to navigate the map into the future. Having this navigational information will enable youth to reflect and think about what they are interested in and what to do to reach their goals. Edel did not have a clear vision of what she wants to be. Rather, she knew at this stage that whatever she will be in the future, she wants to support others who need help. She did not know her potential or abilities, interests, steps she needs to take, or how to tackle obstacles on her way to her dream. For now, she only had the wish to help others. As the woman portrayed in the above poem, Edel was “ill-prepared for the privilege of living” as she did not know how to move from general preferences to more concrete educational and career pathways. Going to school without food and proper learning materials and unable to focus on class because of her mother’s abuse made her question the necessity of

going to school. She even mentioned how it was hard for her to think about her future without peace at home, as she was physically abused by her mother daily. She went to school with an empty stomach and struggled to not sleep in class. When she returned home, she did not have the energy to study, let alone think about her future because she did not live in a “suitable environment.” Having no one from her family and neighborhood who can support and guide her, at least, morally, was her main obstacle in exploring her future. In addition to the lack of moral or emotional support, her parents could not afford to buy her educational materials. Edel’s story reveals how some youth from economically disadvantaged families lack the capacity to explore their future without guidance from family, society, or teachers and without the availability of meaningful opportunities both in and outside of schools.

It is important to recall the story of Ermias as it reveals how the availability of meaningful opportunities and the security to not have to worry much about the present can help youth imagine their future. Ermias used to rank 46th out of 50 students before joining the orphanage and became one of the ranked students after joining the center. As narrated previously in this chapter, when he joined the orphanage, he stopped worrying about what to eat and he felt settled. He then started reimagining his aspiration, and then he became interested in psychology. The availability of these opportunities also allowed him to reflect more on his talents. Before he got these opportunities, he did not think this way. Ermias mentioned that he had the means to leverage his interest, as he was part of a youth association in his church, in which he advised youths who were addicted to illicit drugs. Thus, being settled (having the opportunity not to be worried about daily survival)

and having the means to leverage his interests are important points in Ermias's story that enable youth to explore the future.

Having real opportunities to aspire is not the same as having opportunities to achieve aspirations. However, at least, these opportunities helped youth look beyond their daily needs and explore what they are good at. Thus, the availability of social and economic resources enable youth to navigate, pursue, and achieve their aspirations, beyond the capability to aspire. This need for social resources in forming and pursuing aspirations will be discussed in the next section in detail while explaining the relational nature of aspirations.

“I Am Because We Are:” Relational Nature of Aspirations

Similar to Ubuntu's philosophy that honors communal relationships, the findings from the study highlight the social-situatedness of aspirations. As the stories narrated below reveal, aspirations are formed “for others” and “with others.” The notion “for others” indicates that these youth formed their aspirations not only to improve their well-being, but for the well-being of others, including their parents and their community at large. The concept of forming aspirations “with others” emphasizes the process of aspirations formation. This process is formed not only by individuals' reflection, but also by their social interactions and the ability to develop concrete plans for the aspired future as strengthened through these relations. This section elaborates the relational nature of aspirations highlighting that aspirations are not merely individual. Rather, aspirations are socially situated as they are formed (capability to aspire) and developed (capacity to aspire) through social interactions.

“For Others”

Youth from economically disadvantaged families aspired to change their current situation and improve their well-being. Nonetheless, their aspiration is not limited to achieving individual progress; they also aspired to support their parents and their community to the extent of helping others to achieve their desire. Ermias’s story clearly shows this relational nature of aspiration.

Many youths from my neighborhood and the city are addicted to illicit drugs. They drink alcohol, chew khat, and smoke drugs. Then, they start neglecting their education, family, and themselves. They become careless about everything and eventually start hating the life they live. Unfortunately, it is hard for most of them to quit such habits. So, I am part of a youth association in my church where we reach out to youth. Since we are of the same age as them, we understand their struggle better than older adults. They are where they are now because of peer pressure, and we know what it means because we have also experienced peer pressure. So, they are willing to talk to us. Unluckily, my neighborhood is one of the harshest areas to live in Dire Dawa. There are many clubs, prostitutes, gang fights, and so on, but we help those youth to keep their eyes on what they want to be despite all those things. Their journey might be difficult and tiresome, but they should appreciate even a slight move towards what they want to be, considering the environment we live in. So, I want my neighborhood friends to have a purposeful life and not leave their family's and many other efforts in vain. Through this volunteer service and my writings, I want to teach this generation to appreciate the price paid for them so that they can live their dream. I want them to recognize their parents’ values and use their families’ gracious support to follow their aspirations. I believe that we can make a difference at the national level if we start working from the family level. If we have disciplined and ethical youth, they can influence their communities, and a more significant impact at the national level will occur. I do not have any training as a psychologist, but I am doing it out of a passion for helping those whom I think have problems. I want to be among those who empower this generation to be named as a good one. For instance, if there are 1,000 writers in Ethiopia, I do not want to be mentioned as the 1,001st writer. What I want to be is an influential writer. I want to be remembered through my work, just like I feel the presence of those who sacrificed a lot for me even though they passed away. That is why I want to teach my community using the talent that I received from God.

Aspirations, as can be inferred from Ermias’s story, are not only related to what individuals want to be to improve their well-being but also what they aspire for the well-

being of others. He wanted to preach what he thinks are good moral virtues to the society, through his writings and counseling service. As he mentioned in his own words, he lived in one of the harshest neighborhoods, and his inspiration to help youth to see beyond their environment and have a grander ambition comes from this reality. Ermias affirms the social situatedness of aspirations, as what he wants to be or to do for his community was influenced by the society where he lived.

Similarly, Tsinat imagined and reimagined her future in terms of her mother's well-being. She wanted to be a psychologist, but she did not want to join higher education to study her area of interest. She chose to support her mother first by finding a job, specifically by working as a flight attendant. By taking what she assumes as the shortcut to support her mother, Tsinat eventually wanted to have her own non-profit organization, which could assist students who are in similar condition that she experienced. She explained her dream:

My dream is big. I want the NGO to be a place where the children get both material and psychological support until they join higher education or take the path they would like to take. The material support might include accommodations for those who do not have anywhere to live. I do not want the NGO to depend on donations. I want to start it with my own earnings.

Her act of aspiring for her future, not only for the well-being of oneself but also to make a better world for others, shows the relational nature of aspirations. However, relational aspiration is different from aspirations influenced by family and social conditions. Hart (2012) mentioned how family-related conditions such as family background, living arrangement, structure, and adult-child relationships are significant in young people's decision-making and educational aspirations. Thus, the capability to aspire might be nurtured or constrained through relations with others (Hart, 2012). Nonetheless, relational

aspirations do not only focus on how individuals' aspirations are influenced (either nurtured or constrained) through relations with others, but also how these relations are part of the process of aspirations formation. As can be inferred from Tsinat's story, her aspiration was formed based on her relationship with her mother. Thus, for economically disadvantaged youth, aspiration is not limited to improving their personal well-being but often extends to positively influence their community and support those who need their help.

“With Others”

Besides forming their aspirations beyond personal improvement and benefits, youth also imagine their future with others by making their beloved ones part of their aspirations formation. Their relationships “with others” also strengthen their capacity to aspire and have a clear picture of their pathways. This section discusses how familial and social relations are part of the process of aspirations formation and a means to build navigational capacity, and lack of such kind of support make it difficult for youth to imagine their future alone. Social support is one means through which youths formulate their aspirations with others and how others help them in strengthening their capacity to aspire by supporting them to develop more concrete plans for their imagined future.

Ermias, who wanted to be a writer and an actor, explained how participating in one of the city's prominent theatrical clubs helped him navigate his future and pursue his dream.

The theatre club I am in now helps me a lot to cultivate my potential. First of all, it helps me to get audiences for my work. They listen to my works and encourage me if it is good or criticize me and give me advice on how to make it better so that I will learn from my mistakes. I know how my acting performance has significantly changed after I join the club. Even my writing has changed through time because of the feedback I receive from the club members, and it helps me improve my writing style. Their support and criticism nurture my talent and serve as a springboard for me to be what I want to be. I also got to learn from my

seniors because of the good relationship I have with them. When necessary, I even went to their houses, and they taught me the basics of writing a film or a theatre script and acting techniques. Besides that, I feel like I am with my family members whenever I have time with them. That gives me the strength to stretch to where I see myself.

The theatre club had a strong influence on Ermias in identifying his paths. Even though Ermias did not get guidance and support from his school, he had a strong sense of his future because of the theatre club, where he received recognition and guidance. The theater club was a niche for him to cultivate his talents by learning scriptwriting and developing his talents in acting. As he stated, the theater club served as “a springboard” to be what he wanted to be. He already identified that he wanted to study theatrical art when he joins higher education. As mentioned previously in this chapter, he wanted to study at Addis Ababa University, one of the pioneer and famous universities in his field of interest. Because of his involvement in the theatre club, he had the basic understanding of how to write novels and perform plays, paving his way to be where he sees himself. The theater club was also a place for him to get an audience for his work that he would not have got otherwise. Even if he did not have any close relatives when he grew up, except his older sister, he considered the members of his group as his family members, which gave him additional strength. All these things helped Ermias have a clear picture of his future and developed more concrete “scripts” (Bok, 2010, p. 175) to pursue his aspirations because of the mentors he has in the theatre club.

In contrast, some youths struggled to imagine their future alone unless they feel supported by their family or society. Edel narrated how the absence of family love and support negatively influenced her inspiration to move forward as she lost interest to imagine and navigate her future alone.

Whenever I go to school, I feel like I do not have any reason to strive for it as my life has no purpose. No one cares about me. Even my mother does not say that “you will be someone someday.” That makes me feel that I do not make any difference for anyone whether I finish school or not.

Edel’s story highlight that imagining alternative futures is socially situated. The absence of familial support affected her navigational capacity but also her inspiration to move forward. She lacked the motivation to explore her aspirations because she understood her future in terms of its importance for others. Thus, family and societal support plays a role in backing youth to imagine and navigate alternative futures.

The Role of Faith in Aspirations Formation

One of the recurring themes in this study is the role of faith in aspirations formation. The youths in the study underscore that faith has two main purposes in terms of forming their aspirations. Firstly, the youth’s faith made them have aspirations for others, beyond improving their personal well-being. Secondly, spiritual congregations served as a means of developing social relations for the youth. Young people also use their faith to believe that God¹⁵ will make a way for them as he is “the one who puts the will in them,” as will be explained in chapter six. This section focuses on the role of faith in the aspiration formation process.

Spiritual faith enabled youths to have aspirations beyond their personal well-being. Despite forming her aspiration from her unfortunate experience of sexual violence, Selam, for instance aspired to make a better world for others because of her strong spiritual faith.

Besides being a voice for those who seek justice, I would also like to end the practice called *Dem melash* [a name given to someone who is expected to avenge

¹⁵ I use the word “God” because it is the term the participants’ youth despite their religious affiliation. Being respectful of their word preference, I continue using the same word unless in situations they use another word in exchange for the word “God.”

a lost life of close relatives]. If someone killed another person, whether intentionally or accidentally, his relatives are expected to kill that person or his relatives. Even that person and his family change their domicile, they are still at a target of murder if the deceased's relatives know their whereabouts. It is like inheriting hate and revenge from your families. It was commonly practiced back in the days, but it is not fully eradicated even at this time in the place where I was born and raised. I want to change this practice and teach my neighborhoods about forgiveness and love.

Besides planning to improve her well-being by pursuing what she aspires to be, a lawyer, Selam wanted to advocate for the eradication of the *Dem melash* practice. She knew the consequence of this customary practice for generations, and she did not want this practice to continue. As she told me off the record, her father lost one of his relatives because of this norm, and her father's mourning and resentment was something she grew up listening to since her childhood. She wanted to help her community abolish this customary practice for two reasons. First, she thought she could be in a good position in the legal system to influence lawmakers in terms of this practice, because of her aspirations of being an influential lawyer. Second, it emanated from her spirituality that gave her the strength to forgive those who left a scar in her heart, and she wanted her community to learn the mercy of God by ending this practice. Her faith inspired her aspiration to improve the well-being of her community.

Similarly, Ermias's story affirms that spiritual faith helps the youth in this study to have a *good purpose* in their life. He explained, "the holy bible says, 'for it is God who works in you to will and to act to fulfill his good purpose.' So, I believe that when God puts the will in you, it is for a good purpose." For Ermias, aspirations should be for a good purpose. This *good purpose* is not only for individuals to improve their well-being; rather, to reach out to others as well. Thus, his faith in God gives him a purpose beyond his own well-being.

In addition to having a *good purpose* in life, including for the well-being of others, spiritual gatherings create the way for the youth to establish social relations that pave the way for them to their aspired future. Ermias story highlighted this significance:

I met [at church] with film professionals who came from Addis Ababa. They are evangelicals who are working in the film industry. They told me to record a short movie that can be submitted to a national film competition. I wrote a short story, in which I added my mother's story, and they gave me a letter of support that I can submit to the Ethiopian cultural and tourism center to get funding for the movie. But it was hard to get funding, and the timing was not good as there was political unrest throughout the country. I mobilized the social network I have to record the short movie. For example, I got someone who can help me by providing the camera, but I could not meet the deadline because of the political turmoil. I wish I could have done it as the movie focused on sex workers. It does not mean that it is the end of the story. I want to make it a full movie.

As indicated in Ermias's story, spiritual assemblies were a means of building "faith capital" (Dumangane Jr, 2017, p. 875), wherein young people got support to form and pursue their aspirations. Even though the film professionals did not give him monetary support, they at least led him the way on how to compete nationally in his area of interest. As such, spiritual faith helps young people to have a *good purpose* in life, thinking beyond personal well-being and also widens their social relations that can meaningfully contribute to their journey.

Discussion

The findings about these youths' capability and capacity to aspire challenge one of the dominant assumptions from previous literature, which portrays economically disadvantaged youth as having low aspirations, and thus, limited achievement (Bernard, Dercon, & Taffesse, 2011; Quaglia & Cobb, 1996). The participants in the study shared aspirations to improve their overall socio-economic well-being and the well-being of others, ranging from supporting one's parents and positively contributing to their

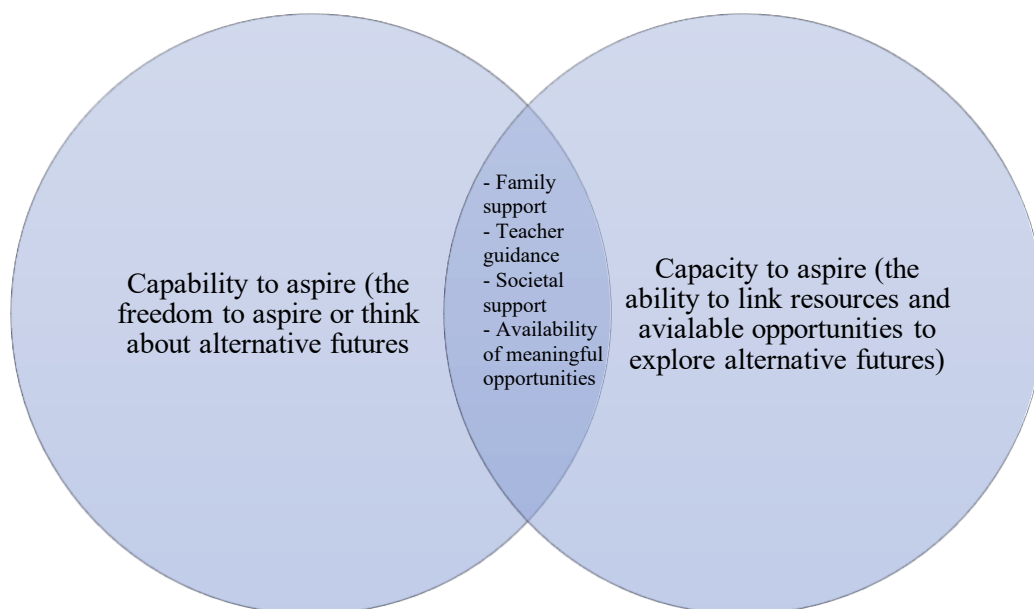
community. Thus, the study challenges the dominant narrative, which assumes aspirations as inherently developmental, claiming that when youth mature, they adjust their aspirations to match what is achievable considering their economic situation (Stockfelt, 2015). For economically disadvantaged youth, navigating between their past, present, and the future, their aspirations laid at the intersection of what is desired and possible (Gale & Parker, 2015). Nonetheless, this chapter also revealed that youth can strengthen their capability and capacity to aspire through family, social, and school support.

It is evident that economically disadvantaged youths, like Tsinat, constantly reflect on what they desire and what is achievable, showing how their capability to aspire is challenged without the appropriate family, societal, and school support. It also shows that aspirations are not always about the known pathways. Scholars like Nilsen (1999) argue that “the concept of planning is associated with a sense of being in control, to be confident in your present situation” (p. 181). Hence, aspirations are realistic as they are associated with plans, while hopes refer to areas of life beyond control of the youth. However, this distinction was not always true for economically disadvantaged youths, like Tsinat, as they contemplated the achievability of their plans because of their economic conditions. As Sellar and Gale (2011) explains, when it comes to economically disadvantaged youths “what is possible limits the desire to what is ‘realistic’” (p. 129) whereas for the elite, “what is imagined as desirable simply made possible” (p. 129). Similarly, in Bok’s (2010) study, it is mentioned how youth think that they do not need to pursue higher education because of their “perceived distance between their immediate lives and their futures” (p. 168). Likewise, Tsinat preferred to study in higher education,

but she chose not to follow that route in order to support her mother by working as a flight attendant. Thus, unlike the dominant narrative, which assumes that youths adjust their aspirations to match what is achievable, Tsinat's story shows that for economically disadvantaged youth, aspirations formation is a constant navigation of their desire and what they can achieve.

Another example that challenges the dominant narrative are Ermias's stories. Unlike the Young Lives study, which asserts poverty as having a strong impact on children's aspirations as they mature and understand what is achievable (Tafere, 2010), Ermias spent his time reflecting on what he is best at instead of what is achievable. Ermias's aspiration was not dependent on his past, which situated him to think about his daily survival rather than having a grand plan for his future. Despite his current situation, he imagined his future different from his past and present obstacles; Zipin et al. (2015) call this "emergent aspirations" (p. 236). So, Ermias reflected on what he wants to be and build concrete plans for his aspired future through the support he received from the theatre club. In doing so, he strengthened his capability and capacity to aspire through social relations. Figure 3 shows the inter-relationship of these two concepts

Figure 3 - *The inter-relationships between the capability to aspire and the capacity to aspire*



The findings also reveal that without the family, societal, and school support, youths from economically disadvantaged families sometimes lacked a strong capacity to aspire because they tend to have “general preferences” (Bok, 2010, p. 169) rather than exploring their pathways (see figure 3). For instance, Edel did not exactly identify what she wanted to be in the future. Rather, whatever she will be in the future, as she mentioned, she wanted to support those who are struggling in poverty if she is in a good financial situation. In other words, Edel’s aspirations were informed by her desire, rather than identifying the possibility of how to get there. Thus, aspirations are not limited to those who are wealthy. However, the capacity to aspire, which is influenced by economic, social, and other experiences, and the availability of *navigational information*, is not equally distributed (Appadurai, 2004). For youth like Edel, DeJaeghere (2019a) suggests that pedagogical practices should enable them to navigate their aspirations through exposure to knowledge and experience that can compensate what they have missed from their family and society. Such pedagogical practices that enable youth to reimagine alternative futures are more than raising aspirations for those youth; rather, it

includes understanding what they value and the constraints that the youth face and identifying social support or alternatives to enable them to pursue their aspirations (DeJaeghere J. , 2019a). Edel's English teacher, who helped her to ease her constraints and find alternatives, so that she could catch up with other students, exemplifies what DeJaeghere (2019a) refers to as a good pedagogical practice. Therefore, youth can navigate their future better if they are provided with knowledge and experiences that enable them to have a clear understanding of their pathways (Bok, 2010) such as the case of Ermias who got support from the theatre club.

Nonetheless, youth from economically disadvantaged families do not always lack the capacity to aspire as they use social resources to widen their *navigational information*. By preparing for the future using scarce resources and his networks, Solomon's story challenges Appadurai's assertion. Appadurai (2004) argues that "the better off you are, the more likely you are to be conscious of the links between the more and less immediate objects of aspirations" (p. 68). As seen in Edel's story, she struggled to explore her future because of a lack of resources and support from family and the community. In Edel's case, Appadurai's (2004) assertion that poverty diminishes her exploration of possibilities and options was true. In contrast, Solomon had a stronger sense of his pathways, because of his ability to use scarce resources and the social network that helped him explore his pathways and prepare for his future. As Gale and Parker (2015) stated, navigating the intermediary steps between past and future relies on the range of economic and social resources. Even though Solomon did not have the economic resources, he used social resources to navigate his future (e.g., the self-help psychology books that got from people in his circle helped him to reimagine his future).

Similarly, Ermias's story underlines the importance of fostering imagination of alternative futures for underprivileged youth through mentoring, discussions, and developing knowledge and skills to help them link the subject knowledge with their future as indicated by DeJaeghere (2018). Ermias cultivated his interest of acting and writing because of the support he gets from the theatre club. His participation in the club enabled him to develop detailed "mappings of alternatives" (DeJaeghere, 2018, p. 242) that he can consider pursuing what he wants to be. Likewise, Silvaa et al. (2018) claim that the capacity to aspire has three elements, including "envision a better future, formulate a plan, and implement steps in the plan" (p. 45). As such, it is essential to help underprivileged youth to visualize opportunities and alternative futures, enhance their ability of identifying and planning actions towards their aspirations as well as to enable them to take concrete actions to fulfil the aspired future. Likewise, Lopez-Munoz and Ingelaere (2021) asserts that navigating the map of the future contains "coordinates" (p. 407), which help individuals to locate what they are pursuing when pathways are blurred. These *coordinates* might include familial, societal, and teachers support, which enable young people to move forward to their aspired future. Thus, through mentoring, discussions, and exposure to experiences and role models in their area of interest, economically disadvantaged youth can have a wider "aspiration window" (Silvaa et al., 2018, p. 44), and hence, a stronger capacity to aspire.

The role of faith is another important theme that recurs in the narratives of the research participants, which is mostly absent from literature in international education and development. Extending Bourdieu's conceptualization of social and cultural capital, Dumangane Jr (2017) developed the notion of "faith capital" (p. 875), arguing spiritual

faith profoundly contributes to youths' educational journeys. In the study that focus on black male students who attended Russel group universities in England and Wales, Dumangane Jr (2017) study highlights aspirational benefits of *faith capital*, including preventing youth from leading a life with less positive outcomes and Churches as a source of skill acquisition (in volunteering in different activities) and support (in creating social relationships). Similar with Dumangane Jr (2017) study, this study affirms that spiritual gatherings were a means to broaden the youths' social relationships that can be useful to pursue their aspirations. In addition, spiritual faith helped the youth aspire beyond improving individuals' well-being. However, there is a dearth of research on faith's impact on youth's aspirations. Future studies can be done to understand in detail the relationship between faith and aspirations.

Conclusion

This chapter addressed how youth from economically disadvantaged families imagine and reimagine their future amidst supporting and constraining conditions. The stories reveal that youth from economically disadvantaged families have the capability and capacity to aspire with family, societal, and school support, and availability of meaningful opportunities, wherein absence of these supports influence them negatively. Furthermore, many disadvantaged youth were in constant negotiation between what is desired and what is possible. The findings further highlight the broad range of opportunities and constraints on the youth's aspirations process, adding new knowledge about the process of youths' aspirations within the Ethiopian context. The findings are helpful to inform policy makers in highlighting the barriers that influence youths' aspirations formation.

Having real opportunities to aspiring is not the same as having those opportunities to pursue and achieve aspirations; at least, availability of opportunities help youth to look beyond their daily needs and explore what they are good at. In other words, these opportunities enable youth to enjoy better freedom to aspire though it does not guarantee the ability to pursue and the achievement of their aspirations as the realization of aspirations depends on socio-economic conditions and individuals' agency. The next chapter will discuss the real opportunities and constraints that economically disadvantaged youth face to pursue and achieve their desired goals.

**Chapter Five: The Capability to Pursue - Availability and Ability to Use Resources
for Aspired Futures**

“The size of your dream must exceed your current capacity to achieve them.”

(Sirleaf, 2011)

After I took the grade 12 national exam and was waiting for the result, the Ethiopian airlines started recruiting flight attendants. I checked the criteria, and I met all of them. I had a clear vision of what I wanted to study for my first and second degree (law and human rights respectively) and what kind of job I wanted to pursue (in a local or international organizations in a position that would enable me to promote girls and economically disadvantaged students' education). However, I was uncertain if I would be able to finish my studies while supporting my family. Considering that I would not get support from the NGO that helped me throughout secondary school, I had no clue how I could survive in higher education to support my education. For weeks, I reflected on if I want to take the *shortcut* and apply for the flight attendant position rather than joining a higher education and study law for five years. Finally, I decided not to apply for the position. Instead, I enrolled in university and looked for other options for work to fund my study. My story illustrates that it is crucial to examine not only economically disadvantaged youths' capability and capacity to aspire but also their ability to pursue their aspirations.

In chapter four, I looked at how youth form their aspirations and the opportunities and constraints they experience when exploring and developing their aspirations. However, forming aspirations is not the end of the story. It is also important to examine if youth have the potential to pursue their aspirations, or the capability to pursue. Individuals might have the capability and capacity to aspire, but it does not guarantee that they have the potential to pursue and realize their aspirations. As the quote at the beginning of the chapter upholds, youth might have dreams that exceed their current

situation, but having a clear aspiration does not mean that the road to its realization is straightforward.

Throughout the chapter, I argue that not only the availability of resources, but also youths' ability to use resources matter so that they are able to pursue their desired future. Ability of using resources for desired future includes being in school, as one of their foundational aspirations and their educational aspirations beyond that. The youths' stories also reveal the multi-dimensional aspects (the combined effects of different personal, familial, societal, and school-related conversion conditions) affecting their capability to pursue their aspired future. Nonetheless, previous studies in Ethiopia focus on the availability of educational resources and students' outcomes (see Tafere, 2010, 2014), instead of examining *real* educational opportunities. To fill the gap in the literature, this chapter aims to examine the availability of resources and the youth's ability to use these resources to pursue their aspirations. It is not the intention to examine if the participants achieved their aspirations, as that cannot be known in the timeframe of this study. However, it is important to examine what kind of resources and opportunities youth have to pursue their aspirations, as these determine whether they hold the potential of leading a life they have reason to value. Specifically, this chapter aims to answer the second research question: How do in-school and out-of-school conditions support or constrain youth's ability to pursue their aspirations?

I organized the narrations into different themes, broadly dividing them into family and home-related, school-related, societal, and personal conditions. Awareness of similarities among these youth is a starting point to work towards strategies to support the youths in their path to pursue their aspirations. Towards this end, I first discuss the home

and family environment and how it affects the ability of the youth to pursue their aspirations. Then, I examine the in-school conditions, including resource availability, recognition, teachers' support, language barrier, labeling, and higher education environment. The third section of the chapter analyzes how the youth's social environment, composed of peers and the community more generally, supports or constrains their journey to their future. I end the chapter by looking at how personal effort, in collaboration with familial, societal, and school level support, nurtures the youth's interest to strive amidst obstacles.

Family and Home-related Conditions

After forming their aspirations and preparing for the future, youths' ability to pursue and realize their aspirations was influenced by many conditions, notably their familial environments. In the following pages, I elaborate on the various conditions of the familial environment, including family economic conditions, family responsibility, and family support and connect how these conditions support or constrain youth's ability to pursue or realize their aspirations.

Family Economic Situation: "I spend my time in class thinking of what I would eat after school."

The family economic situation emerged as one of the important themes that influence youth's ability to pursue and realize their aspirations. As the study participants narrated, family economic situations negatively impacted youth. Youth felt unable to learn or achieve in school because of starvation, inability to cover living and educational expenses, and engagement in income-generating activities, which resulted in missing classes or being unable to attend class attentively. Solomon explained below how his

inability to cover his basic needs constrained his focus in school and his ability to pursue his aspiration in general.

I lived on the street for a while. What makes me frustrated when I think about my future is starvation. Throughout my school life, my main challenge has been thinking of what I would eat after school. There are many days when I go to school with an empty stomach. It makes me not attend my class attentively as it fully occupies my brain. It makes me not know things that I have to know for each grade level because I was constantly worried about what I eat in the morning and where I would stay at night. To attend class attentively, any student should not be worried about what they eat or where to stay. I also have difficulty covering for my educational expenses, such as buying exercise books, notepads, and books that I want to read to learn more about psychology. Now I live with roommates and drive Bajaj [a generic name given for three-wheel cars] as a cover when drivers want to take a break. Since I do not have a driving license, I cannot get into a contract with Bajaj owners, and the only option I have is to have deals with drivers to allow me to drive the Bajaj whenever they need a break. So, food and shelter are the basic things that I wish I had in order to focus on my education fully.

Solomon's description of his inability to cover his living and educational expenses illustrates the difficulty of economically disadvantaged youth to attend class attentively in the absence of these basic needs. Using Solomon's words, thinking of where to get their basic needs occupied their brain and they struggled to attend class with full attention, let alone having the time to reflect on their future. Even for Solomon, who had a clear vision of what he wanted to be, poverty made it hard for him to access books and other resources to learn more about the field he was interested in. These kinds of constraints were mainly left unaddressed, as the government response put emphasis on in-school conditions, rather than considering the "beyond school problems" economic disadvantaged youth faced. Past studies examined household poverty as contributing to learning challenges (World Bank Group, 2014; World Bank Group, 2020). The stories in this study clearly show how many young people were the head of household without other family economic support.

As a second example, Aster's story (who wanted to be an accountant and was out of school at the time of the interview), demonstrates the impact of poverty in causing economically disadvantaged youth to not be ready for class and actively pursue their educational aspirations as finding their means of survival takes much of their time. She explained the situation as follows.

There were times where I slept in class. The home we used to live in is even worse than the traditional kitchen; even rural houses are much better. The floor was an abyss, not comfortable at all to sleep. Besides, the roof leaks when it is raining. When it was raining in the evening, I have to wait until it stopped, or I spent the night as I sat. I remember I slept while it was raining on me because I was tired and could not wait until the rain stopped. We did not have any other choice with the money we had at the time. We wanted to rent the house for the simple reason of not living on the street. I sometimes fell asleep in the class if I had that kind of night. Then, I went out and came back to class after I washed my face. I did not want to tell my friends why I am sleepy because they might laugh at me. Actually, some students slept in the class because they have to work in the evening or late nights to support their education; so, it is not unusual.

When I was about to finish grade 9, my mother became ill and returned to Dire Dawa. She was working almost 24/7 in a hotel as a cook, and because of the overwork, she became ill. When she came to Dire Dawa to take a break, everything loses its balance, and we ended up having no money to buy food. It was fine to stay without food for my older sister and me, but our younger sister was six and could not do the same. There were many times where we cannot have a meal three times a day. So, we ate brunch around 11 AM, and then we ate around 6 PM. But my younger sister struggled a lot as she was a child. Sometimes, I went to Kulbi [a place where her father lives] when we were in a difficult situation to survive, and my uncles from my father's side gave me barley, wheat, and other crops that supported us for some time. Compared to the time we spent on our education, the time we spent finding the means of survival was higher.

It might sound luxurious compared to the life I had been in, but I wish I could get support like a tutorial class when I was in primary school. I liked mathematics, and most of the time, I spent too much time working on mathematical calculations. There are private tutors who teach a small group of students after class, and they mostly come to your house or one of the student's houses. I wish I could get that support.

Aster explicitly admitted that she spent most of her time surviving rather than thinking about her education or her future. In her situation, thinking of educational advancement

and aspiration was secondary to surviving each day. Even though she wanted to have tutorial support to nurture her aspiration of being an accountant, she literally starved. Thus, as is the case for Solomon, Aster did not have the financial means to cover for food and shelter, and it occupied her brain and took much of her time. Therefore, she felt unready for the class and often slept in classrooms. Unfortunately, Aster implied that sleeping in class was the fate of many economically disadvantaged youth who need to work to support themselves and their family. Economically disadvantaged youth often come to class unprepared and thus, had little time to think about their futures.

Similarly, Edel's story underlines the importance of considering not only the availability of educational opportunities in schools, but also the students' ability to use these opportunities. She narrated her story as follows, questioning the importance of education while she struggled to survive.

Mostly, I missed many classes as my mother came home late and beat me. Since I slept only for two or three hours at night, most of the time, I could not wake up early in the morning, especially when I was in the morning shift. In the evenings, I had to wait for her until she came back home. Even if I waited for her until after midnight, she did not have mercy on me. So, the lack of sleep and the pain made me dizzy in the morning, and I missed many classes when I was in the morning shift. I tried to be awake until break time, but I could not focus mostly after that because I felt tired. There were many times where I slept in class. Even when I was in the afternoon shift, there were many times where I missed class, for my body was weak because of the beating and the lack of food. I also had a serious headache and nasal bleeding, which gets worse when I am stressed, and it was also another factor that I missed classes. So, there were many times where I decided not to go to class when I realized that I could not focus even though I was there physically.

I struggled to continue my education when I was in grade 9, and I finally failed the class. I could have continued in another school, but I could not pay for the administrative process. I need to have 150 birrs [around \$ 3 USD] to get my transcript from the school, and there is also a registration fee when you join a new school, and it might be around 30 birrs [60 cents USD]. It is not the main reason. I do not have anything to eat at home, and I always have a hard time covering my educational expenses. So, I dropped out of school this academic year because it does not make sense to repeat the class if I cannot focus and learn. If I start going

to school again without knowing how to address these things, it does not help me with anything, as I would spend my time in class thinking of what I would eat after school or what would happen when I get home. But if I would have to get someone who can help me fulfill these things, I am interested in continuing my education. But unfortunately, when I talked to people about my life and current situation, they assume that I am joking because it does not seem real. They even think that I am trying to get money or help from them by telling them fictitious stories.

Edel's narration demonstrates how poverty and home environment influence students' education. She did not complain about lack of resources at school during the three rounds of interviews. Rather, her story highlights that economically disadvantaged youth might not be able to use the available school resources if we do not consider out-of-school conditions, such as how family relationships and poverty impede them from using resources at school.

In addition, moving repeatedly from one location to another impacts students' preparedness for school. Selam, who had been working as a domestic employee for years, explained how the constant feeling of unsettlement resulted in her inattention in class and struggle to hope for the future.

When I was in grade 8, I was at points where I was exhausted from moving from one employer to another. I was constantly worried about where my next destination would be. It was stressful to concentrate on my classes without being settled, but I did not want to lose hope.

Similar to Solomon, Selam's comment shows that being settled, in terms of having a specific place to live, is an important condition that needs to be addressed so that students from low-income families can focus on their education, think about their aspirations, and pursue their dream. Unless economically disadvantaged youth had the economic support to cover for their living and school expenses, including shelter, food, uniform, exercise book, and other educational materials, they could not utilize in-school educational

opportunities like other higher-income students. This lack of support hampered their well-being freedom and made it harder for them to pursue their aspirations.

Family Responsibility

In addition to family financial situation, responsibility to family influenced youths' ability to pursue their educational aspirations. Family responsibility took many forms in the lives of these youth, including working to support a family business and family living expenses, household chores, and caring for siblings. Aster's story exhibits how youth feel responsibility to their families starting at their early ages.

My mother used to work in a local market in the morning, and she sold street foods in the late afternoon. I was the one who helped her in preparing everything that she needed. Even though I wanted to stay with her until she finished selling the food, she did not want us to be on the street. Sometimes, my older sister joined us; but most of the time, I am the one who bought potatoes from Kefira [the biggest market in Dire Dawa] and helped her prepare it and delivered it to the place where my mom sold the potato salad on the street. I was pleased to help my mother, but some of our neighbors belittled me for doing that, whereas others considered it a good trait.

Then, my mother and I started participating in the safety net program. The money came as a relief service to support those considered "the poorest of the poor," but the city administration decided that it should not be given as a free money. So, participants are expected to clean their neighborhood, and they are paid 60 birrs [around \$ 1.25 USD] per day. From the money you earn, they [the city administration] took a small proportion that goes to your savings. One family is allowed to work only for fifteen days so that others who fall in this category get an opportunity to work. They have a rule that students cannot participate in this program, but I begged them to allow me to cover my mother's place as she had to leave home early in the morning to work in the hotel as a cook.

I also do braiding whenever I am not in school. When I started braiding hair, the first money I received was 5 birr [1 cent USD]. I had many customers on Sundays. I went to my customer's homes to braid their hair, and most of the time, I got new customers from their neighbors. The NGO¹⁶ provided me basic learning materials; so, I tried not to burden my mother.

¹⁶ At this stage of her life, she was supported by a local NGO. The role of NGOs will be discussed later in this chapter.

Aster's story implies how economically disadvantaged youths focused on the immediate responsibilities to care for their family, which ultimately became their sole focus. As she narrated, she hustled to balance her responsibility to cover household expenses with schoolwork. She needed to assign her time between working to gain additional income, completing household chores, watching her younger sister, and going to school. It is crucial to acknowledge these students sense of family responsibility, as it distracts them from class and leaves little time to reflect on their future. Teachers, for instance, need to understand the hustle of students like Aster and the hardships they have endured to come to school, in order to create a supportive environment for economically disadvantaged students.

Family Support

As discussed, family economic situation and family responsibility constrain the youths' ability to pursue their aspirations or to even be in school. In this section, I present stories showing how the youth were supported by their family and how lack of this support constrain their ability to move forward. Edel narrated how simple care from her sister boosts her motivation to study.

I was ranked the last one when I passed from grade 7 to 8. When I was in grade 8, the happiest thing happened in my life. My sister promised me that she would give me a gift if I got up to the class's first 20 ranks. I was motivated more than ever and started focusing on my classes despite all the challenges I had. I had never asked for anything when I grew up like my peers, and even if I asked, I know that my family could not afford to buy me anything. I was motivated to study when my sister said she would buy me whatever I asked for if she could afford it. No one ever said something like that to me. But for the first time in my life, my sister asked me what I want to have because I got the 12th rank in the class. It gave me a feeling that I had never experienced. Then, I told her to buy me the Holy Bible. I was delighted. I will always remember that day. For days, I kept that bible with me even when I went to bed. Unfortunately, I failed the grade 8th national exam. I got 40 percent and the passing mark for that year was 43 percent.

Family emotional support encouraged youth to strive amidst adversities as it makes them think that their education is valued. Edel's story shows how attention from her sister motivated her to study and achieve a better result, despite the fact that her financial and material conditions remained inadequate.

Tsinat story also shows the influence of material and emotional support in helping youth to pursue their ambitions. She stated her feeling as follows.

Her [Tsinat's mother] love and presence give me hope to move forward. Whenever I shared my dream with her about having my own NGO, she affirms to me that I can do anything if I am determined. I could not imagine what my life would be if she is not with me. So long as she is with me, I am courageous to pursue my ambition of supporting her and also fulfilling my dream of having my own NGO and being a psychologist.

Tsinat received material and emotional support from her mother. Even at the time when Tsinat was on the verge of dropping out of school, her mother's emotional support kept her moving forward. Her mother's support inspired Tsinat to believe she can achieve her dream of becoming a psychologist and having her NGO. Her story shows the power of emotional support for youth in pursuing their aspirations. Nonetheless, despite the emotional support she has gotten from her mother, Tsinat asserted that she did not have any other choice other than dropping out of school and engage in income generating activities because of her economic challenges. However, she highlighted that in the long term her mother's emotional support was a strength that will help her pursue her dream of being a psychologist.

Tsinat's story also reveals the interconnectedness of different conversion conditions in influencing youth's ability to pursue their aspirations and how specific conditions can be constraining and supporting at the same time. Tsinat felt she must repay all the sacrifices her mother made for her, pushing her to take *the shortcut*. At the

same time, this support kept her sticking to her aspirations in the long term. As Tsinat mentioned in her interview, she would not have a hope to live, let alone to pursue her aspiration to be what she wants to be, without her mother's encouragement. Her longing to pay her mother back does not fully constrain her decision to pursue her aspiration. Rather, as she narrated, it will give her the courage to go back to school to study psychology and help other students from economically disadvantaged by forming a non-profit organization. Even though she was challenged by her current economic constraints, as she has longer term aspirations that might be constrained by her short-term goals, she was confident that she will return to school after she has a means to support her mother.

In contrast, a lack of emotional support from family, such as in the case of orphaned youth or those with absent parents, hindered youth receiving assurance about their future. Solomon's story shows how the absence of family emotional support impacts youths' educational path. He had watery eyes when he explained what he felt.

Not having a love of my parents affected my education and general upbringing. I am starved of love as I do not have any family member whom I rely on when I need support. I do not have full confidence in terms of achieving my goal. My current situations remind me that I cannot reach my dream, but looking back, what I have been through gives me the strength to do it. I am living in this contradiction.

Solomon compared starvation of love with starvation of food. This statement clearly connects the impact of lack of family support on his education and overall upbringing. His narration underlines the constant contradiction that youth experience when they do not get the emotional support that confirms to them that they can achieve their dream. Solomon personally had confidence to pursue his aspiration, but because of lack of family emotional support, he was uncertain when thinking of his future. He did not have anyone to rely on whenever he needs support, which resulted in ambiguity about his

future. Overall, family support is among the home-related conditions influencing youths' ability to stay in school and also to pursue their aspirations. The next section presents the availability of resources in schools and the youths' ability to use these resources to pursue their educational aspirations.

School-related Conditions

School-related conditions are among the most significant to affect youths' abilities to form and pursue their aspirations. This section presents school-related conditions, such as recognition, labelling, availability of resources, language barriers, uncertainty of ability to pursue in universities, and teachers' support, and examine how each condition support or constrain youths' abilities to pursue their aspirations.

Teachers' Support and Recognition

Teachers' support in transforming aspirations to capabilities allowed young people to pursue the desired goal. Teachers' support was manifested through emotional support to the extent of acting as a parental figure and material provision. Solomon explained how the words of his primary school teacher stuck with him until now. His teacher used to tell him that "hard worker children like you can achieve their dream." For Solomon, who used to live on the street and did many jobs at a time to cover for his educational and living expenses, this kind of emotional support enabled him to keep moving. Solomon further explained how teachers can motivate students and enable them to cultivate their aspirations.

I wish all teachers are considerate of their students' situations and tried to shape them not only in terms of transferring knowledge but also shaping their character. For instance, our Amharic teacher is unique in this regard. He brings novels written by both Ethiopians and translated books and reads it to the class every Friday. Most of the books' content focuses on characters who defeat life's

challenges and achieve what they dreamed of. It motivates students to have aspirations and to stick to it.

For Solomon, who wanted to be a psychologist, these books not only broadly cultivated his aspirations to stick with education, but they also supported his aspirations in psychology more directly. As shown, schools should be a place for these youths to compensate for what they could not have experienced outside of school and cultivate their aspirations.

Youth mentioned recognition by teachers as a vital component to pursue their aspirations. Ermias's story, as narrated below, explains the importance of recognition of and for the economically disadvantaged youth.

I think schools should be a place to nurture students' aspirations by recognizing their different backgrounds and helping them to understand, cultivate, and realize their potential. When we grow up, we started learning from different sources, and school is not anymore, the only source of our knowledge. For instance, if I am in the morning shift, I will spend the rest of my time in my neighborhood, which means students spend more time out of school than in school. When I spend my time in the neighborhood, I come across different people like unemployed youth, former students who have dropped out, hustlers who do any kind of jobs to survive, etc. For example, I know youths who do business by reselling stolen goods. When you asked them about their education, most of them dropped out of school in the early years, like in grade 5. When you go to school, you have all these things that you observed from your neighborhood in your mind. So, teachers should not expect their students to be disciplined and smart as they observed many things out of school that might affect their education. Let alone listen to what we have been through; some of our teachers did not even feel comfortable when I asked clarification questions. They answered that I would get the idea through time without taking a single effort to explain it to me. Then, I am not comfortable asking in classes after I know the teachers' behavior. Thus, if teachers insult students, it does not make their students any better. Sometimes teachers insult students for superficial reasons, like when they have side conversations. Then, they use this pretext to dismiss the class. They do not have the motivation to teach.

Teachers should be able to understand that we are not all the same and we have diverse backgrounds. If you take me as an example, I was not in school for the past three years. How would you expect students like me to know everything you teach in the class? Even though schools cannot support students from economically disadvantaged families financially, at least teachers should

understand the situation of students like me. For instance, in our school, some students come from the rural areas of Dire Dawa. They might do farm work before coming to school or walk a long distance to reach school. Others come to school late even though they live in their parents' house and it is their own fault that they are late. The teachers treat both of them in the same way and tell them to go back home because they are late. The poor youth come to class with an empty stomach, and the relatively better-off ones might come to class with a full stomach, but the school treats them both equally. These disadvantaged students can succeed by their perseverance, but they do not get any different treatment based on their economic status. But the economically better youth might focus more in class compared to the poor youth.

Let me tell you what happened to me. My history teacher in grade 11 does not write notes on the blackboard; instead, he gives us handouts. Sometimes the photocopy money might be around 10 or 15 birrs. He gave extra credit to those students who bring the photocopied handout, but I do not get that extra credit since I cannot afford to pay for it. I told him that I do not have money to pay for the photocopy and if I had that kind of money, I'd prefer to spend it on breakfast rather than coming to school with an empty stomach. I asked him if he can give me credit if I write down everything from the handout in my exercise book. I am not a student from a poor family; I am poor. I do not have a father or a mother; instead, I lead my life independently. But he refused. He said, "you are not unique compared to others." He might assume that it is a small amount of money, but I know how I struggle to get my money to survive the day. If I had decided to copy the handouts, I would have starved for days. At the end of the semester, I got a loan from my neighborhood friend and finally copied the handout and got a mark for it, but still, the teacher took some points from me.

By defining recognition in different ways, Ermias's story underlines points where schools should focus on supporting their students in pursuing their aspirations. The first form of recognition that is underlined in Ermias's story is knowing that students from different backgrounds have diverse experiences that may contribute to or impede their learning. Similar to Ermias who was afraid to ask questions for clarification due to fear of insult or labeling, Solomon described below how he felt uncomfortable to ask questions.

Some teachers do not understand the sacrifice we have made to go to school and do not treat us as such. Students like me are even afraid to ask questions fearing that teachers might beat them, and they [economically disadvantaged students] do not have anyone who can come to school to ask why teachers did such things happen to them.

Those who are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, as both Ermias and Solomon narrated, come to school with many difficulties. Assuming that these students are lazy because they did not do their homework or could not participate in classrooms like others cannot help them to overcome their challenges. Rather, teachers support should recognize the diverse abilities and various challenges of their students.

The second concept of recognition emphasized by Ermias's story relates to understanding the struggles of economically disadvantaged students. Ermias's story resonates well with the known human rights principle that treating unequals equally is inequality. As he clearly experienced, his teacher thought Ermias should be treated equally with other students and should not get the grade for handouts, rather than asking his struggle and why he did not bring the handouts. Using Ermias's words, schools should be a place to "understand, cultivate, and realize" students' aspirations by recognizing the diverse exposure and struggle of students and treating them in a way that supports their aspirations.

More than listening to their students' struggles, in some cases, teacher's support extended to providing material support for economically disadvantaged youth. Aster explains below how teachers' support helped her to continue her education at least until the end of lower secondary level.

Especially in Ethiopia, many students are in similar situations like mine. I saw people who are in a situation worse than me, and I assumed that I am relatively privileged. [In a secondary school] there were times where I directly reached out to my teachers when I did not have exercise books or pens or when my uniforms are worn out because I assume that most of them are kind enough to find ways to cover that. Most teachers gave me pens when I told them that I do not have any to take notes, and others would reply that they do not even have one for themselves.

Similar to Aster, Edel mentioned how some teachers took extra steps and helped their economically disadvantaged students get food or to catch up on what they had missed when they were unable to come to class. Edel and Aster, like many young people, conveyed this support was helpful at certain points, but they still were not able to stay in school, given the many other factors that affect their ability to use schooling as a resource for their future. Nonetheless, in collaboration with familial and social support, teachers' support assisted students in continuing their education and pursuing their aspirations.

Unavailability of Resources in Schools

The capability to pursue aspiration requires a range of resources to enable youth to have rich experiences that help them to navigate and pursue their aspired future (Bok, 2010) and practice what they have learned in classrooms. Ermias's story explains why schools should have resources and create opportunities for students to follow their aspirations.

Even though most of us figure out our aspirations by ourselves, we do not have enough resources to practice what we have learned in the classroom. I used to work in the school mini-media club when I was in Faith School [it is a private school, and the tuition is covered by the NGO]. I presented sports news and narrated short stories during break time. But this school's mini media does not have any programs; rather, they play music from tapes, and that is it. There is not even a strong literature-related club. I know students who want to participate in a theater club, but it does not match their schedule. Some of them work in the evening to support their education, and for others, their parents do not allow them to go to the theater club in the evenings. If we had a literature club at the school, we could have used the break time to share our works and get feedback from other students who are interested in art. I am not sure why the school does not have such kind of club. I am not sure if they assume it is not important or no one asks them to form the group. I do not know the exact reason. So, I participate in a theatre club out of school.

For students who are interested in art and literature like Ermias, no club in the school could cultivate their aspiration. Even if there was an existing club, they were not

functional and did not help students enhance their potential. It is important for schools to guide students in their paths, especially those from economically disadvantaged families, in addition to equipping them with adequate educational resources.

Similarly, Solomon's story also shows the necessity of the availability of resources in schools to navigate the future. He wanted to be a psychologist and explained how it is hard for him to nurture his interest because of the unavailability of resources at school.

We do not have access to computers or the internet [in primary school] until I join a secondary education. Even now, we cannot use the I.T. center whenever we want, unless we have I.T. classes. I wish I could use the internet room in the school to watch many videos about topics in psychology. So, I am going to internet cafes to watch these videos, but sometimes I do not even have anything to pay for the internet cafe.

Even though Solomon had a clear vision of his future, the absence of resources prohibited him from exploring his area of interest in depth. The availability of resources and opportunities, such as experiences to practice job-related skills or to view jobs that others do, is important to enable students to practice what they have learned in classes and explore alternative futures.

Language Barrier

The language barrier is another school-related constraint of economically disadvantaged youth. In Ethiopia, students learn in their mother tongue at the primary education level to promote access to primary education, and English is the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education. For the federal cities, i.e., Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, English is the medium of communication since grade 7, at least in principle, even though teachers tend to use the local language while teaching. Even though English is given as a subject until grade 7 (in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa) and grade 9 (other regional states), most private schools in Ethiopia assign more than one

class for English to make their students proficient in the language. For public students, who do not have a background in English, it is hard to catch up. The problem is exacerbated for economically disadvantaged families, as they do not have the means to buy other supporting materials that enable them to learn the language. It is unsurprising that the language barrier affected students' performance and their journey to achieving their aspirations in general. Aster explains the extent of the problem.

Every subject became in English once we are in grade 7, and it is hard to adapt to the change. When we were in grades 1 to 6, we learned English as a single class, and suddenly, when we are in grade 7, all the class materials are in English. I wish I could get a chance to learn English from private tutors before grade 7. Sometimes, I tried to reach out to ranked students in the class, but I do not know why most of them were unwilling to help other students. They made you ashamed for not knowing it. I like asking, but I do not feel comfortable when I do not get help while asking for help.

Aster revealed that students were left by themselves to navigate the transition from all Amharic classes to English. It was not easy, especially for those like Aster, who did not have time to study after school because of household responsibility and the need to engage in income-generating activities. She implied that support from teachers, such as arranging tutorial classes and creating a support system among students, could ease this transition.

Language is not only a barrier for these students to study their grade level; it also determines the field they are going to study when they join higher education institutions. For Selam, who wanted to study law when she completed grade 12, language was one of the main barriers between her and her aspiration. She explained the intensity of the problem as follows.

To study law, I know that I have to have a good result in the grade 12 national exam. I tried to study whenever I have openings, and the main difficulty I have now is the language barrier because the school materials are written in English.

Since I went to a public school, I did not have a base in English, and it takes me time to understand concepts when I study by myself. I told the school counselor about my difficulty, and she gave me a phone, which has a dictionary application. Whenever I do not understand a single word, I checked its meaning from the dictionary. I think the school should have a special session, maybe on Saturdays, for English class, for those who want to improve their English language skill besides giving it as a subject. I am thinking of taking a summer English class to improve my skills, and I hope it will help me to prepare well for the grade 12 national exam.

Despite her resilience to move forward, language emerged as a new barrier as Selam did not fully understand what she has learned in class. Students' difficulty in understanding the content because of language issues is significant beyond learning the subject matter. Language issues impact their school achievement and, in turn, their educational path eventually. As Selam shared, she could not be assigned by the Ministry of Education to study law unless she scored high grades in the national exam. In Ethiopia, students are assigned to specific fields based on their achievement in the higher education entrance exam. Even if Selam tries her best, her chance of getting into law school is slim unless she scores a good grade on the entrance exam. Despite choosing this field as a remedy for her past experiences and dedicating her time left from selling *kolo* at bars and restaurants at night to study, language was a barrier to pursuing aspirations. These theme was present in all the participants' stories. Ermias, for instance, explained how teachers did not care to explain to students when they asked them words and concepts they do not understand because the medium of communication is in English. Enabling students to understand the medium of communication in schools is beyond helping them understand the subject matter. English language proficiency also enables them to perform well in school and stick to their dream.

Labeling

Labeling based on academic performance and economic situation emerged in school and affected students' ability to pursuing their current education, which is a foundation for their aspirations beyond secondary school. Aster explained her experience with labeling.

Aster: As I told you, I was supported by different NGOs, and I felt humiliated when teachers called my name in class as a beneficiary of support. Whenever there was support, they came to class and called our names. The students talked to each other and said, "oh, she is the beneficiary," which makes me ashamed. Sometimes, I was even afraid to stand up and said "yes" when the coordinators called my name. I reacted that way because I saw how the students acted when the beneficiaries' names were called in class. It was even hard to start a friendship with them after they know that you are among the poorest of the poor. Instead, it would have listed merely our names and mentioned that they wanted to talk to us instead of calling us "the beneficiaries."

Hanna: You reminded me of my experience when I was in high school. I was part of a scholarship program that supports economically needy female students with good academic performance. The NGO discussed with the school principal regarding this issue and organized a club called Ambassadorial Girls Scholarship Program (AGSP). Whenever there is an announcement to us, they came to our class and said, "AGSP club students, there is a meeting in the afternoon." Some students wanted to join the club as most of them were outstanding students, and the teachers politely replied that they do not accept new students now and will let them know if there is any chance in the future.

As narrated above, labeling students based on their economic situation made them feel ashamed in schools and distracted them from focusing on their class. It was hard for the youth to start friendships with other students because of the labeling practices. Edel experienced a similar situation.

I have been lonely in class, and students call me by different names because I isolated myself. Some students think I do not want to assimilate with them because I have high regard for myself, but they do not know my situation. Some others insult me using words that belittled the extreme poverty I have been living with. They called me "daughter of a beggar" and said that is why I want to be lonely. To be honest, it is true. What makes me less than my friends is the fact that I was begging by going from home to home when I do not have a dime to buy food. Some people gave me worn clothes. I am even eating leftovers from the

garbage. I have done all those things for the sake of survival, but who wants a beggar friend?

Edel's narration shows that economically disadvantaged youth not only experience the burden of poverty, but were also affected by the labels relating to it. This kind of labeling made youth feel lonely as they are excluded from friendship because of this "difference."

Hence, it becomes as a

distraction not to use all their potential to pursue what they aspired to be.

Besides the labeling practice based on the economic situation, these youth experience labeling based on their academic performance, as shown below in Ermias's story.

There was a tutorial session for students who had less academic performance. But we did not want to be labeled as the "stupid guys" as this is the term, they referred to arrange the tutorial session. So, even though we were among those students who had less academic performance, we did not want to be called the "stupid guys," so we used to miss the tutorial session a lot. Since we attended the class with this hard feeling, our scores became even worse, let alone getting better. It should have been based on interest, or it should be given for all students and those students performing less academically will not feel labeled that way.

Ermias's disappointment shows that arranging supporting opportunities for students by itself is not enough. Students might develop a negative attitude towards learning, rather than being motivated. Rather, students should be treated in a way that recognizes their ability and supports them to pursue what they aspire to be.

Uncertainty in Higher Education Environments

The higher education environment, specifically in relation to the cost of studying at universities and the ethnic tension in university campuses, was also mentioned as affecting the achievement of aspirations. Tsinat, who wanted to be a psychologist, but

decided to work as a flight attendant rather than joining a university, explains this influence:

Another reason that makes me determined to work rather than joining a higher education is the Ethiopia's current state of universities. Because of the political condition, there is an ethnic tension on university campuses. Universities are closed most of the time, and students are in an uncertain situation. Because of poverty and the current tension on campuses, I prefer to work than spending my time in this uncertainty of whether I am going to have my degree or not.

In addition, the living cost to study in higher education is high even though universities cover tuition fees as part of the cost-sharing program. In primary and secondary schools, we wore uniforms, and that was fine. But, on campuses, students wear their clothes, and it would overburden her [Tisnat's mother] to buy me clothes and shoes while covering my living expenses. The living expense in universities is higher than the one that I need. Since I am at the age I can find a job, I do not want to be a burden on her; rather, I feel like it is my turn now to find a means to support her.

Besides the urge to help her mother, the university environment affected Tsinat's decision to consider dropping out of school. For the past couple of years, higher education institutions in Ethiopia have become a hub for ethnic tension and violence. As a result, it was not unusual to close campuses for days or even months. It has been a while since Ethiopians accustomed to news of university students' killing or injury that arises from ethnic-based conflict. Most students are not interested in going to higher institutions far from their home. Others consider different options in life such as joining private colleges in the same city where their families or relatives live.¹⁷ This uncertainty and the indirect cost of schooling in higher education institutions were additional reasons for Tsinat to consider the *shortcut* after completing upper secondary school to support her mother by engaging in income-generating activity. As shown, a range of family, economic, and school-related conditions were the reasons for Tsinat to change her route,

¹⁷ In January 2020, more than 35,000 students forced to quit classes because of unrest in 22 Ethiopian universities (Agade, 2020).

which underscores how conversion conditions are interrelated. Thus, focusing only on in-school conditions cannot fully enhance the capacity of youth to pursue and realize their aspirations, unless a holistic measure to support them taken into account.

Social Conditions

Besides family and school environment, the social environment, including social relations with adults and peers and societal perceptions, both nurtured and hindered youths' aspirations. In some cases, social relations and emotional and material support helped youth pursue their aspirations by creating the platform to cultivate their interests. In other cases, negative societal perception towards education, peer pressure, and lack of mentorship hamper youths' aspirations. This section discusses how social condition creates opportunities to pursue desired goals or impede the ability of pursuing aspirations.

Supportive Social Relations

Strong social relations emerged as conditions that differentiated the participants from each other in terms of using scarce resources. Solomon, for instance, created connections with people who trusted him to loan books. In turn, he developed his knowledge in his area of interest.

Mostly, I borrow books from my neighbors, which is how I developed my habit of reading books. Since they know my interest, they even bought me books or gave me money to buy books, and in this manner, I manage not to starve myself physically and mentally.

I have also come across people in my neighborhood who have been a parental figure in my life and support me in my struggle to survive amidst challenges, especially those police officers who work in the nearby police station where I lived on the street. A girl whom I know on the street told me about a business of selling eggs in the evenings at bars. I started helping her selling the eggs as she promised to give me some startup money if I found the business attractive. She is a bit older than me, and one day, she asked me to kiss her, and the police saw what I did. I had never kissed anyone, and I was at a young age to

understand relationships. They approached me the next day and advised me about keeping myself from unwanted and early relationships if I want to work hard and change my life, especially as someone who lives on the street. After I started selling eggs at bars, they kept the profit for me and gave me back later when I need it.

In addition to those policemen, a guy named Jonathan gave me a chance to work part-time in his garage and helped me a lot to keep going to school. He treated me differently from his other employees because I was the youngest of all and treated me like his young brother. Besides the weekly stipend, sometimes, he covered my food expense as well. Another person in my neighborhood, an engineer who understood how I lived, paid the four months of my grade 8 tuitions as I needed to pay tuition for the evening program even though it is a public school. He always encouraged me to keep moving and told me that my strength and dedication are better than those whose parents are wealthy. Such encouragement made me enthusiastic about the future. One friend of mine also has a diploma in accounting, and he is studying for a BSc in computer science. Even though he is at a higher grade level than me, he always tells me that the informal learning that I have from books makes me a better person than him. This kind of encouragement helps me not to be desperate.

By preparing for the future using scarce resources and his social networks, Solomon asserted that economically disadvantaged youth can have a concrete plan for their future if they get social support. Unlike Edel, who struggled to explore her future because of a lack of resources and support from family and the community, Solomon developed a stronger sense of his pathways. Solomon's ability to use scarce resources and the social network helped him explore his pathways and prepare for his future. Despite Solomon's reality, his surroundings helped him to imagine a future different from what his environment sets him up. People around him appreciated his effort and supported him to reach his goals, despite the severe poverty he faced. Support from his community helped him to buy books and the necessary materials that enabled him to learn about psychology, which in turn support his capability to pursue his aspirations.

Even in a neighborhood where people could not help each other materially, moral support played a vital role in helping youth to pursue their aspirations. Ermias claimed that his neighbors and friends are supportive of his dream.

I have support from my neighbors and friends to pursue my aspiration. When I had a performance, I invited my neighbors, and they came to support me. Sometimes our programs are broadcasted on the local television station, and they give me good feedback when we meet in the neighborhood. Besides giving me moral support, they also consider me as a role model for their children as I do not use vulgar words. It is common to use these words in my neighborhood. It is also common in Dire Dawa to chew khat [a stimulant drug], and they want their children to be friends with someone who does not have such a habit. They also appreciate me for continuing my education despite the desperate situation I am in. Their living condition is not that much better than mine, and the only thing they can do is share what they have by giving me a meal when I am starved and so on.

As shown in Ermias's narration, receiving feedback on his ability so that he would do better next time was a source of moral support from his social relations. These kinds of acts of encouragement inspired him to keep moving forward to reach his desired future.

Societal Negative Perceptions

The societal environment is not always a source of moral support and guidance. The negative societal perception towards education broadly, and what education can do for economically disadvantaged youth, influenced the youths' ability to pursue their aspirations. Selam, who used to work as a domestic worker for years, explained how it was hard for her to go to school while working as a housemaid.

After I moved to Dire Dawa, it was not easy, as I thought, to work as a domestic worker and keep attending school in the evening. Some of the housewives do not want to pay me properly as I attended class; some others did not care if I missed my classes by staying working on the household chores, and the rest did not like the idea of having a domestic worker who goes to school. I shifted from one house to the other, mainly because of the inconvenience of going to school. I swear in the name of God how diligently I work, but most of my employees had no interest in my education. I did not have time to study or did my homework after class. I tried to wake up late at night to read what I learned in class, but my body was tired by the time I was done with household chores. I remember when

one of my employers insulted me when she saw me writing my assignments before cleaning the dishes. When I came back home from school, mostly, I was tired, and I wanted to do the assignment first because if I cleaned the dishes first, I would not have the energy to work on it. At 8 PM in the evening, she told me to leave the house. Most employees exploit domestic workers assuming that they do not have anywhere to go. Fortunately, I know people from my classes; so, I had places to stay until I found another employer.

Even though Selam formed her aspiration, different circumstances influenced her ability to pursue it. Negative societal perceptions towards domestic workers and their education were among the main obstacles. As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, Selam was constantly worried about where her next destination would be as she was obliged to move from house to house after disagreements she had with her employers. Her situations prohibited her from having the time to study and inhibited her ability to come to school ready to learn. Instead, her mind was occupied by thinking about her next residence and her body was physically tired. Thus, it is crucial to recognize the multiple and complex nature of conditions that influence youth's ability to pursue and realize their aspirations.

In addition, the existing unemployment rate contributes to an unconstructive societal perception towards the education of economically disadvantaged youth. Edel explained her distress as follows.

Some of my neighbors said to me that "let alone you, who want to continue education with all these challenges, even those who learn in a good environment are unemployed." So, they told me that my fight to change myself through education is in vain. I want them to be ashamed by being persistent and change my current situation.

Edel's neighbors compared her with other students who attend school without many struggles and they assume that the return is not worth the struggle. This kind of perception discourages economically disadvantaged youth from pursuing their aspirations and push them to think of other *shortcuts*.

Peer Pressure and Lack of Mentorship

Peer pressure and the difficulty of finding a role model were other barriers mentioned by the youth. Ermias recounted his story.

The neighborhood is not always a supportive space as there is also peer pressure from friends that can distract me from achieving my aspiration. One of my neighborhood friends asked me to steal rather than being starved. She is older than me and knows how I live. When I told her I could not do such things from a moral and religious perspective, she tried to convince me at least to find a sugar mommy.

Ermias's story affirms that the social environment is not always supportive of youth's aspirations. As the story reveals, peer pressure distracted youth from pursuing their aspirations, specifically relating to taking *shortcuts* to escape poverty. To combat this, schools should be a place to counterbalance the attitudes or perceptions that they experience in the neighborhood.

Lack of mentorship is another challenging societal condition for economically disadvantaged youth as it is hard for them to find someone in their neighborhood who can guide them to pursue and achieve their aspirations. Solomon, who uses his social relationship to have access to books in his area of interest, also shared the times where he felt detached from his neighborhood because of lack of guidance.

I should not deny that the place where I grow up and still live is well-known in the city for the number of prostitutions, bars, and crime. Most people spend their afternoon chewing khat and drinking in the evening. I know a few people whom I can reach if I need advice; otherwise, it is hard to find a role model in this neighborhood. So, in the place where I live, it is hard to get someone who encourages education, and I feel disconnected from the society. Being a youth is difficult by itself, and if you do not have a connection with well-mannered people, you can easily be distracted from your dream. For example, there were times where I did not have good behavior because of the friends I had out of school. When they wanted to steal, they assigned me to look for police officers, and I gave them a sign to escape. As I was the youngest of all, they did not want me to be directly involved in the crime, but I was still part of it. The money that I received as a share of my participation in this bad activity helped me not to worry

about what I would eat at least for a week. It became even an addiction for me though I knew it was not right; but it helped me to survive.

Recognizing the transition to adulthood as a challenging experience by itself, Solomon affirmed that economically disadvantaged youth are at risk of being engaged in activities that they do not like, such as theft, to cover for their living expenses. Peer pressure also pulled them astray from what they want to do and achieve in and through education. His experience indicates the importance of mentorship in leading these youth to participate in activities that support their aspirations, like the story of Ermias, who found mentors in his theatre club.

Experiencing Sexual Harassment

Poverty also exposes economically disadvantaged students to sexual harassment in their communities. As narrated in the previous chapter, Selam and Solomon experienced sexual violence, and they changed their tragic experiences to grander ambitions. Selam wanted to pursue law while Solomon was interested in studying psychology. Exposure to sexual harassment and violence was one of the recurring themes that the youth experience. Aster's story shows the prevalence of this problem.

I am a bit outgoing compared to my sister; so, I have a good relationship with our neighbors. But one of our neighbors, who is married and a father, had a bad intention, and his wife was so nice to me. I got pissed off when I understood his bad intention; he even begged me to buy me learning materials as a way of attracting me to him. He tried to grab my hand whenever his wife was not around. Sometimes he offered me money, which I did not accept. I vividly remember what happened when I was in grade 8. One day I slept at home, and both my mother and sister were not there. Unfortunately, none of our neighbors were at home at that time. I think he had already checked that. When I woke up, he stood next to my mattress. Then I was freaked out and shouted at him and told him to leave the house immediately. I was worried as I did not know with whom I have to share this. If I told my mother, she would create a huge fight, and I did not want that to happen. So, I decided to tell one of our neighbors than directly letting his wife know. Then, I realized that he harassed her as well, but she did not tell

anyone. She told me to tell his wife. I did not tell his wife, but the harassment continued until we left that home and rented another one. I choose to be quiet rather than tell it to his wife because I do not want to disturb our normal neighborhood relationship. I learned later that all of our neighbors, except his wife, knew his behavior.

As shown, poverty caused economically disadvantaged youth to be vulnerable to sexual harassment. At the pretext of “helping,” Aster was exposed to sexual violence because of her position in society as someone labeled as “the poorest of the poor.” Her neighbor tried to compel her by promising to buy her learning materials. She was not the only one who experienced sexual harassment. Selam also mentioned that the perpetrator of the act came to the place where she rented and showed her his intention of making her his mistress while trying to impress her and promising to support her education. Sadly, these youth experienced sexual harassment and violence, as they cannot provide the basic necessities for themselves. This exposure to sexual violence constrained their capability to use education toward their aspired future by deterring their focus from their education.

Local Non-Profit Organizations’ Support

When examining the role of social conditions that support these youths’ capability to pursue their aspirations, it is inevitable to discuss the role of local non-profit organizations (NGOs) that aim to alleviate social inequalities. Recalling Ermias’s story narrated in chapter four, it is evident how these institutions help economically disadvantaged youth to reimagine their future by creating meaningful opportunities for them. Ermias dropped out of school after the passing of his mother and he joined a local non-profit organization that fully support children who lost their parents. The NGO provided accommodation for him; covered his educational expenses, including tuition at private schools and tutorial classes, and all living expenses. Even though Ermias had low

academic performance, he became a ranked student after joining the orphanage. This support enabled him to cultivate his interest in counseling youth. Similarly, Solomon narrated how his neighbors helped him to join a local non-profit organization that supported his education. As described, NGOs successfully collaborated with community members to support economically disadvantaged youth.

Besides providing educational materials, local NGOs also play a role in creating sustainable change for economically disadvantaged youth, as explained by Edel.

When I was in a primary school, the village committee helped me to join an NGO. They gave us food and shelter and provided us educational materials. I stayed there for six months. I learned crafting during my stay. Then, they gave us some money to plan a small business. Since I was underage, my mother was the one who took the money, and she spent it on alcoholic beverages while we did not have anything to eat at home.

The NGO created a platform for a sustainable change by training Edel to have a skill that can help her in a side hustle, so that she would keep going to school. Yet, she saw this as a means of pursuing her educational aspirations later and support her mother in the meantime. Providing educational materials for economically disadvantaged students is not enough by itself, unless there are means to support their living expenses as well. Without strong collaboration among NGOs, teachers, and parents, the NGOs do not always meet their aim, as they can exclude those who need help and include those who did not. Aster explained some of these malpractices, while recognizing the role of local NGOs in her education.

I received support from NGOs that collaborate with schools. I would have been dropped out of school early in my education if I did not get support from different local non-profit organizations and received all the basic supplies that I need for my education, including uniforms, exercise books, pens, pencils, and so on. The only thing I asked from my auntie was food. Sometimes, the support seems continuous, but after a couple of years, they told us that the program phased out. Then we did not get any help unless we got another NGO.

To be honest, not all beneficiaries of such kinds of supports are in need. I know students who sell items that they received through donations, even without their parents' knowledge. They are not in real need. These students get this chance through someone they know, while others who are in a situation even worse than me did not get the chance and forced to drop out of school. I contacted a couple of the recruiters to inform them that there are students who are not really in need, but no one paid attention to me. They rather tell me that I should be grateful to join the program by luck. I am thankful for all the supports that I get through the local NGOs. It helped me continue my education, but some of the things I observe make me uncomfortable.

Aster's story indicates the role of local NGOs in impacting the lives of many disadvantaged students to continue their education. As she mentioned, she would have dropped out of school at an early age if she had not to get support from different local NGOs that work with schools. Staying in school was Aster's main aspiration and she thought it would led her to her final educational aspiration of being an accountant. Unfortunately, Aster did not receive any support from NGOs after she joined a secondary education. Eventually, she dropped out of school, exhibiting the limitations of NGOs more visibly. In addition, her story shows the necessity of collaborating among family, community, school, and NGOs to support economically disadvantaged youth who are in real need in pursuing their educational aspirations.

Personal Effort in Nurturing Interest

Even though family, school, and societal environment influence the transformation of aspirations into real opportunities, the personal perseverance of the youth play a significant role in this process. With curiosity and patience to build one's character, youth prepared themselves for their future by engaging in different activities. Solomon recounted how he became self-taught in a field where he is interested.

The opportunity that I have to cultivate my interest is the access I have to a library. I think I got this level of maturity from history, novels, and self-help

psychology books that I have read out of school compared to what I learned in school. That is how I teach myself to nurture my interest in the field.

Another means that I develop my interest is through volunteer service. Mostly, I spend my time volunteering at the NGO, where I used to be a beneficiary years before. I like taking the time to listen to the beneficiaries' stories and counsel them in a way that gives them the strength to see their future and not to be desperate. Since I am also actively participating in the *Kebele* youth club, I got the chance to meet people and listen to their stories without judgment. I even helped many youths to reflect on the experiences they are facing.

I focus on things that will help me reach my goal. I follow Facebook pages that share self-help e-books and articles. I also watch numerous videos on topics related to psychology. Dr. Mihret Debebe is one of my favorite psychologists and motivational speaker. I have learned not only from his lectures but his personal story as well. He studied abroad but returned to Ethiopia to reach out to too many lives who need his help. I read all of his books. I also like Dr. Abush. That is how I teach myself to nurture my interest in the field.

Solomon's story reveals how youth from economically disadvantaged families prepare for their future using scarce resources and figure out how to navigate constraints. His participation in volunteer service at the NGO and the *Kebele* youth club enabled him, on the one hand, to advise youth to keep pushing to persevere despite obstacles and failures, and on the other hand, he also developed counseling skills. He further explained that participating in volunteer activities made him hopeful. He thought if he can help others to pursue their dream, he could surely help himself pursue and achieve his aspirations. Solomon's effort to prepare himself for his aspired future showed personal effort in nurturing interest is valuable, particularly if it was safeguarded by familial, societal, and school-related supports.

Digital technology was also another means the youth used to cultivate their interests. Ermias, who aspired to be a writer and an actor, explained how he uses social media to post his literary works. He created a Telegram channel where he posted short stories. He mentioned he added his stories when he wrote novels explaining that "when you write, you start from your own experience and the experiences you heard." At the

time of the interview for this study, he had written three short stories relating to the story of his mother, titled “የሴት ልጅ” [Son of a woman], and posted it on his Telegram channel. He underscored that he took posting his works on the Telegram channel seriously, as it supported his life’s calling. Solomon also used Facebook for his benefit by following pages that posted psychological e-books and articles. Although social media is frequently mentioned as an obstacle for youth not to focus on their education, these stories show how availability of resources in the community and the youths’ initiative to use them. These resources contributed to the youths’ ability of pursuing their aspirations.

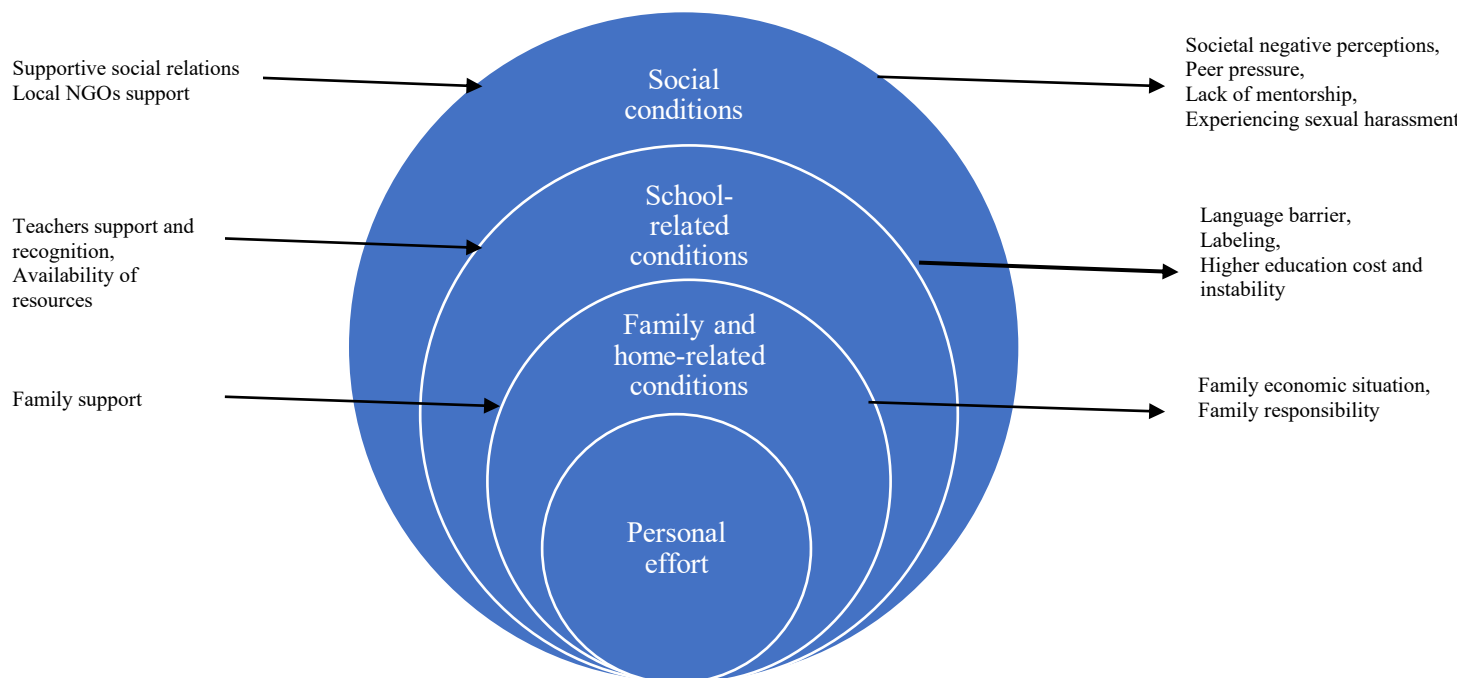
Discussion

Using the capability approach in this study helps to see beyond provision of educational resources and examine *real* educational opportunities, which considers one’s ability to use the available opportunities to become what individuals aspire to be (DeCesare, 2017). The youths’ accounts reveal the multi-dimensional aspects affecting the capability to pursue their aspired futures, including familial, school-related, and societal conditions as well as personal effort in nurturing interest (see figure 4). Because of the interconnectedness of these aspects and the diversity of the youth’s experiences, it is difficult to assess which of these themes had more influence on the youth’s capability to pursue. Family economic conditions seemed to affect them the most, but as can be inferred from the youth’s narrations, the absence of support from any one of these themes affected their journey to their aspired future. Tsinat, for instance, tried to navigate the paths to her aspired future, but economic constraints were her main challenge that extends her journey to her desired future. Selam, on the other hand, tried to find alternatives for her economic constraint by selling snacks and supporting her education.

But language barrier was another constraint affecting her capability to pursue of her aspirations, as she struggled to understand the subject matter. Negative societal perception towards domestic workers and their education was another barrier she experienced. Hence, government intervention to enhance the capability to pursue aspirations of economically disadvantaged youth should take into account not only school conditions, but also societal and familial conditions.

The youths' narratives further highlight that family economic conditions are mostly limiting, especially for youth from economically disadvantaged families, and societal and school support is crucial for individuals to pursue their aspirations. Sometimes, there is a double or triple burden on economically disadvantaged youths as being poor limits their abilities to go to school. Poverty also creates a societal challenge, as people do not expect them to go to school or get employment, and their situation is sometimes misrecognized by their teachers. It is evident from Solomon's story that personal perseverance alone is not enough as he lives in contradiction. Despite his perseverance to look for alternatives to survive and keep moving, his economic condition and his need for family love might be an obstacle for him to follow his aspirations. Through all this, he keeps moving forward to his aspiration because of his societal support. Thus, in addition to one's own perseverance or actions, societal and school supports are crucial to enable students, especially those from economically disadvantaged families, to pursue their aspirations. The figure below shows the multi-dimensional aspects influencing economically disadvantaged youth capability to pursue their aspired futures.

Figure 4 - *Multi-dimensional aspects affecting the capability to pursue aspired futures*



Besides societal conditions, teachers' emotional and material support enable students to keep pursuing their aspirations amid obstacles, as the findings highlight. Solomon's, Edel's, and Aster's accounts illustrate that recognizing the struggle of each student and trying to understand them as well as providing material support enable the youth to navigate their future and pursue their interest area. These findings echo DeJaeghere's (2018) study of disadvantaged youth in Tanzania, in which the youths received emotional and financial support from their friends, family, and community to continue their education and find a means of income. Besides, educators should be able to recognize students' different learning abilities, their diverse experience and exposure, as well as their struggle to attend school, which is a starting point to support youths to pursue their aspirations. This kind of recognition, similar to what DeJaeghere (2019a) found, indicates that it is not something held individually. Rather, recognition is nurtured through relations with others, so that youth will be valued equally in education and beyond schools. The findings also extend DeJaeghere's (2019a) point of valuing

economically disadvantaged students equally. Ermias' accounts show the necessity of treating them not only equally, but also differently to compensate for what they could not have experienced outside of school. For instance, Ermias's teacher assumed that Ermias should be treated equally with other students, and if Ermias could not copy the handouts, he should not get the grade assigned for it. Even though Ermias's teacher treat him "equally" with others, he did not take time to ask about Ermias's struggles and why he could not bring the handouts. Recognition that treats unequals equally will result in replicating inequality. Thus, teachers can redress inequalities by recognizing the vulnerabilities of disadvantaged youths. In collaboration with familial and social support (and even sometimes in spite of a lack of this kind of support), teachers' guidance and recognition assist students to continue their education and pursue their aspirations.

The study findings also challenge a prevailing assumption that economically disadvantaged youth have unrealistic aspirations that do not match their current situation and thus need realignment (Wellings, 1982). Even though the study participants mentioned how they had worked hard to chase their dream, some of them have changed their aspirations assuming that they cannot achieve what they want to be because of economic constraints. For instance, is Tsinat too ambitious, or does she identify what she wants to be but lacks the means to pursue and achieve it? In a study that examines the aspirations of youth in two secondary schools in Jamaica, Stockfelt's (2015) finding indicates that students from economically disadvantaged families indeed have aspirations and belief in the value of higher education, but the limited economic resources they have constrained them not to pursue their aspirations. Like those students, Tsinat also had the desire, but not the means to pursue her aspirations. Therefore, categorizing youth's

aspirations as ambitious (unachievable) or achievable runs contrary to the capability approach aim of fostering equality because it limits their ability to choose a life they have reason to value, and it puts the onus on the individual rather than providing supports to improve one's life. Forcing youth to think about their future in terms of its achievability limits their ability to untapping their potential. This is especially the case for youth who have a longer future in front of them. Rather, there should be mechanisms that enable them to transform their aspirations to capabilities than forcing youth to adjust their aspirations. Thus, these findings counter dominant narratives that assume youth from economically disadvantaged families are too ambitious; rather, they lack the real opportunities to pursue their aspirations.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that educational inequality cannot be addressed by only expanding resources, underlining the importance of familial, societal and school-related conditions in influencing the youths' ability to use these resources to pursue their desired future. As such, the findings confirm that having a clear map of their future journey is not enough for economically disadvantaged youth to be able to pursue and realize their aspirations. Even though the youth indicate the lack of educational resources, a more recurring finding was the extent to which youth are unable to use even the existing educational resources to follow their aspirations due to many conditions. Family economic situation, family responsibility, societal perception about the importance of education, and teachers' inability to understand the struggle of these disadvantaged students, labeling practice at schools based on academic performance, and language barriers are among some of the reasons mentioned by the study participants as

constraining. In a showing example, the participants mentioned how they lacked the attention to learn during class sessions as they are either hungry or sleep-deprived from the daily labor work they had to do to financially support their family. Moreover, there are also times wherein teachers and members of the society served as parental figure role by providing emotional and material support that enables the youth in their educational path. Thus, the widely held belief that education is a means to reduce poverty might not be realized without proper policies that look above and beyond providing educational resources for economically disadvantaged students. Interventions by governments should focus on enhancing supporting conditions and removing constraints so that youth can ultimately reach their aspirations.

However, pursuing one's aspirations is not without agency of the youth themselves as agency is the process of considering and taking action to pursue, make a change, or realize valued aspirations (DeJaeghere, 2018). So, it is crucial to examine whether the youth have the freedom to pursue what they value because not only the decision but also the process in which the youth come to the decisions (agency freedom) is also important. The next chapter will examine the youth's agency in terms of choosing, reshaping, and pursuing their aspirations.

Chapter Six: The Inter-relationships of Aspirations and Agency

After our first interview, Ermias and I went to the school cafeteria to have tea while conversing informally. He talked about his passion to be an actor and a writer with enthusiasm. I enjoyed listening to his adventures and funny stories related to his theatrical performances in public gatherings. I even planned to attend one of his public performances, but it was canceled because of Covid. He seemed assured that he could realize his aspirations and as discussed in the previous chapters, he has a clear plan for his path. Nonetheless, deciding to pursue his life goal was not easy. As will be discussed in this chapter, he needed to compromise his current well-being to pursue what he values for his future. Looking at the processes where youth came to their decisions is crucial to understand challenges impeding youths' ability to freely choose and pursue their desired future. That is why, in the capability approach, what is critical is how the agency is fostered and supported alongside aspirations.

As the stories in this chapter reveal, agency and aspirations are interwoven as agency is the process of choosing and pursuing the aspired future (DeJaeghere, 2018). The desired future also influences the ways in which youth act now (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016). However, agency is different from the capability to aspire and the capability to pursue. As discussed in chapter four, the capability to aspire denotes the freedom individuals have to think about their future; as such, it is part of the process of aspiring. Agency freedom is also part of the process of aspiring, but it goes beyond having the freedom to think about the future and includes individuals decision-making process in choosing what is valuable (whether they have the freedom to choose what they

have reason to value because “choice” and “preferences” are different).¹⁸ After forming aspirations, agency also influences the youths’ capability to pursue their aspirations. The capability to pursue focuses on availability of resources and youths’ ability to use the resources to pursue their aspired future (as discussed in chapter five), whereas agency in this case denotes the youths’ ability to act upon and choose among different alternatives, if any, either to pursue their aspirations or not. So, it includes taking deliberate actions to pursue and realize aspirations.

In chapter four and five, I presented how youth from economically disadvantaged families form or reshape their educational aspirations; and how different personal, familial, societal, and school-related conditions support or constrain youths’ ability to pursue their aspirations. This chapter examines youth’s agency in relation to making decisions and taking actions in choosing or pursuing (or not) their aspirations, including how they understood their options. Specifically, this chapter will address the third research question: How do youth exercise their agency to choose, pursue, or reshape their aspirations within supporting and constraining conditions? While stressing the importance of agency in converting resources to *real* opportunities, this chapter exhibits the myriad ways youth use their agency to form and pursue their valued future. Mainly, the youths’ stories underline that faith and their ability to have a clear picture of their future strengthen their agentic power. In contrast, economic constraints leave them with practically no options to choose from.

The chapter begins by discussing reflective agency, focusing on the agency freedom that students have to act and make choices in the years leading up to higher

¹⁸ “Choice” and “preference” are different, wherein choice shows what individuals actually pursue, and it might not reflect what they really prefer (Hart, 2012).

education from secondary school, as well as how they exercise their agency to use the scarce resources to pursue or reshape their aspirations. The chapter then discusses the role of faith in strengthening agency. Then, the chapter highlights the social embeddedness of agency examining how social relations are integrated with youth's decision-making process in forming, pursuing, or reshaping their aspirations. The last section of the chapter examined situations wherein the youths' agency is constrained by socio-economic conditions. The youth exercised these different forms of agency at different times based on the situations they were in.

Reflective Agency

In their life histories and interviews, it became apparent how the youth made decisions and took actions through critically thinking and reflecting about their lives. These deliberate actions in choosing their aspired future or in pursuing it manifested through different means, including through resistance and other times through finding alternatives. Specifically, as explained in detail in chapter two, youth exercised their agency while forming their aspiration if they have the freedom to think about their future (the capability to aspire) or after they form their aspirations (while pursuing their aspired future). This section presents how youth exercised their agency when deciding to form and pursue their aspirations, which is manifested in four ways. First, youths' agency was particularly noticeable at the time of conflicted aspiration, such as when they have a different aspired future than their loved ones chose for them. Second, a reflective agency is also manifested at the time of ambiguity when they are not sure what to choose as a life goal. Third, youth also exercised this type of agency while pursuing their aspirations by

finding alternatives. Finally, when finding possible options to pursue their aspired futures did not work, they used a reflective agency to strive in chasing their dream at any cost.

Acting at the Time of Conflicted Aspiration: “I wanted a different life for myself”

Acting at the time of conflicted aspirations or when their dreams were different from their family members’ plans for them, is one way through which youth exercised their agency at the time of forming their aspirations. Selam narrated how she refused to accept and fulfill her family’s expectations which were different from her aspired future.

My parents and I had a difference in perception towards education. To give you a simple example, my mother did not understand why I asked her to buy me a pen when I run out of it because she had never been to school. But my father studied until the end of secondary school, and he bought us [Selam and her siblings] educational materials without complaining or interrogating us.

My parents became interested in sending me to the Middle East to work as a domestic worker than encouraging me in my education. In my neighborhood, most of my friends and the girls, including one of my cousins, had gone to the Arab states to work as domestic workers. There are things that you want and cannot afford. When our parents see the girls send some money to their families, there is no way that your family does not want that privilege for you to send them money. My mother wanted me to go to the Arab states, but I hated to migrate and work as a domestic worker. She even indicated that I could go to Sudan by Metemma if I am not interested in going to the big Arab states. There were some women in the neighborhood who went to Sudan to learn some household chores, and then they eventually went to the Middle East. Most of them are illegal and many of them die on their way, but my mother did not see that. All she cared about was me going there and changing the life they have now, but I did not want to go.

When you are at that age, everyone’s eyes are on you, I mean for marriage, and elders from the neighborhood go to your family to ask for marriage. If your families are poor, they only see what the potential bride has rather than focusing on his educational background or other good characters. So, someone sent *Shemagles* [the village elders] to my parents’ house when I was 14, and the guy was around 25 or older approximately. He had a large farm where he grew sesame, which is very expensive, and he was rich, but he only attended school up to grade 10. Unfortunately, my family was in big economic chaos at that time. They sold two lands and kept selling their ox and cows and ended up with a single cow. Then, it was when the whole family moved into my uncle's house, which was across the street from where this guy lived. By that time, I dropped out of 7th grade. I did not want to marry, and I hated the guy, but I did not know why. At that time, I did not intend to get married; I wanted to learn because I hated that

lifestyle of getting married at an early age and being a housewife. I wanted a different life for myself. It created a gap between my mother and me, and it even affected the mother-daughter love we had. We started fighting all the time. She always wanted to find causes to argue with me, and I hated quarrels. I was so fed up with the argument that I used to wear big blankets to cover the sound out. My older brother did the same thing to me. My brother wanted me to migrate and make his life better and buy him a car that would make him very happy. But he did not want to go; I did not want to go too. My parents knew I did not want to marry him; but they pressured me. I never thought of the guy because I did not love him. Besides, I was young. I did not want to marry. They told me that I could continue my education even after I got married. They said he would teach me, but I did not think like that. I was a kind of honest person back then. Okay. Let us say I marry this guy, and I continue with my education, and I finally join higher education. I do not love him. Think about it. Can you be with someone you do not love? I can't. What if I fall in love with someone else? How would that make him feel? Just thinking about that made me not be interested in the marriage proposal. My friends kept telling me to marry him and live a good life, and after finishing my education, I can divorce him and marry someone I love, but I would not accept that. That is why I decided to flee to Dire Dawa, and it has been more than six years since I came to this city.

This is not my only experience relating to being forced to enter into an early marriage. There was a guy who is an in-law for my brother. It was in the same year, and I was 14. When I was at home, there was a lot of milk and other things, and I was beautiful back then. This guy tried to get to me; he became a close friend of my brother and stayed there for a long time. They used to come to our house, but for me, in my nature, I have this thing, like a psychologist, in which I can see you and understand what you want. I knew that he wanted to come into my life through my brother, but I was not interested at all.

The difference between Selam's parents' expectations and what she aspired for herself shows how she acted at the time of conflicted aspirations. Starting from a simple thing, her mother did not understand why Selam needs the school supplies that she asked for as part of her class. More importantly, her family expected her to get married to someone wealthy and able to support herself and the family. This desire was in total contradiction with her aspiration to be an educated woman. Her family expectation emanates from the norm and practices in the area. Child marriage is still a custom in some parts of Ethiopia even though it is illegal in the country since 2000. Selam was only 14 when her parents tried to convince her to get married to someone wealthy and older than her. Unlike the

common early marriage arrangements in rural areas of Ethiopia, Selam's parents did not force her to get married, but they pressured her to say "yes" to the marriage proposal. However, Selam persisted in saying NO to her parents' influence. She refused and expressed her agency as she saw a different life for herself than the one her parents imagined for her.

Selam's story also affirms youth are agentic to form and pursue their life goals barring conditions that constrain their agentic power. Selam chose what she wants to pursue even though her parents and peers insisted her to choose the other way. Her decision affected the relationship she had with her family and her interest to continue her education in this unfavorable environment, and eventually she decided to flee from the place where she was born and raised. Nonetheless, she persisted in working towards her plans for her future. Selam did not have anyone who would support her, but she first chose to escape the possibility of forced marriage, and then had to engage in work as a domestic worker to be what she aspires to be in the long term.

Acting at the Time of Ambiguity

Besides exercising their agency at the time of conflicted aspirations, the youth also exercised their agency at the time of ambiguity when they are not sure which way to choose or pursue as a life goal. Solomon, who had a dream of joining the military and taking a revenge against his stepfather who mistreated him, can be a good example of what acting at the time of ambiguity looks like.

At that time, my dream was to join the military and take a revenge against him [his stepfather]. Through time, especially from my readings, I learned that I could not win evil by evil, but by love. He even mocked me and said, "are you sure you will join secondary school before you die?" So, on my first day in secondary school, I went to his house in my uniform. He was shocked when he saw me in a school uniform because his daughter, who used to go to a private school, was

going to the same school as me now. I felt like I killed him with a silent gun. I have done all this because I learned what a real victory or success means from the books I read. Real success is living for others, not killing others. If your goal is to kill someone, you will not have a reason to live once you achieve that, and you spend the rest of your life with sorrow because you do not live the life you aspire to lead. But if your life's purpose is to live for others, you always have a reason to keep moving forward because your presence is helpful not only for you but also for others. That is what I have learned from life. That night, I went home and burned my diary, in which I recorded all my memories for a while. This experience makes me interested in [studying] psychology.

Before joining his secondary school, Solomon aspired to take revenge for his mistreatment that caused him a psychological burden. He was uncertain whether joining the military and revenging his stepfather should be his life goal, or if life had better options to follow. While living in this ambiguity, Solomon kept reading self-help psychological books, which helped him to be interested in psychology and choose it as an aspired career. Acting at the time of ambiguity to choose an aspired future is one way through which the youth exercised their agency.

Similar to Solomon, Aster also exercised her agency and acted at the time of ambiguity when she was uncertain about how to form her aspiration. She described her processes of solving this ambiguity.

Like most children, I wanted to be a doctor when I was a child because of my passion to help others. When I see people with different illnesses, I wished I could have helped them as a doctor. But I want to be what I can be. I realize that I have interests in business-related fields, and I have a good performance in mathematics, and I understand most mathematical concepts easily. I took time thinking of my potential. I believe you should be what you can, not what you want. I am better at business-related fields than medical-related ones. I joined the accounting program because of this reason.

Despite the economic constraints she had, Aster was able to explore her future by reflecting on what she was good at. As she stated, youth should be what they can, not what they want. However, this does not mean that she thinks youth should shape their

aspirations in relation to the constraints they face. Rather, she implied that youths should reflect on their talents and inclinations. In her perspective, their dream might be influenced by what the society labels as a good career, which might not be their interest, or they want to be something that they are not gifted at. Aster was comfortable in changing her early age dream of becoming a medical doctor to be an accountant, because she realizes that she is better at mathematics than other subjects that would prepare her to be a medical doctor. These two stories show how the youth exercise their agency when they form their aspirations. As detailed in the stories of Ermias, Selam, and Aster, some of the youth also continued to exercise their agency while pursuing their aspirations.

Acting to Find Alternatives: “What is my hope if I continue working as a day laborer?”

Acting to find alternatives is one of the means by which these economically disadvantaged youth exercised their agency to pursue their aspired future. Even at times where there seems to be no way, some of these youth found alternatives to pursue their aspirations and move forward. These included looking for paid work to support their living and educational expenses, as well as using every opening they had to read educational materials that supported their interests. Ermias, for instance, left the orphanage when he was about to reach 18 years old. The program donors sent money for the beneficiaries, so that they would learn some skills that would help them to survive when they left the organization. Unfortunately, tension ignited between the administrators of the NGO and the beneficiaries when the administration did not give them the money that was sent for them. Ermias needed to act to find alternatives to pursue his aspirations as he explained.

After leaving the orphanage and failing the grade 10 national exam, I started working as *weyala* [a supporter of drivers in a public minibus] while enrolled in a building and electric installation program at the Technic and Vocational college. Unfortunately, the job started at 6 AM and ended at 9 PM, and I did not attend and follow up on my education as planned. So, I decided to stop working as a supporter of drivers to focus on my class. My sister supported me even though she was not in a position to do so. For many days of the week, I ate *beso* [a food prepared from roasted barley] the whole day. Even my close friends mocked me that I might grow barley in my stomach. After six months, I was in a position where I could not continue my education and decided to drop out and find a day laborer job to survive. Since I love education, I reconsidered my decision. I was jealous when I saw my friends going to school. I kept asking myself, “what is my hope if I continue working as a day laborer?” I tried to have a driving license, but at that time, one of the requirements was to be 24 years or above. At least I could be a driver if I had a driving license, but I could not.

I was interested in continuing my education, but I needed to have a means of income to survive. My stepfather promised to help me if I decided to be a full-time student. In the next academic year, I rejoined the technical and vocational college to study drafting after quitting school for six months. My stepfather paid for my food expense for a week, and then, he ignored me. The college told us that all drafting students should take survey classes for two years, which was difficult for me as I could not be assigned on the field, especially in Dire Dawa weather conditions as I have anemia and a chronic ear illness. The college came up with this decision because only five students were enrolled in the drafting program. When the two of them transferred to the survey program, the college decided to close the drafting program after I have studied for six months. My sister advised me to study accounting while working. After failing the grade 10 national exam in the second year, I enrolled in the accounting program during the evening shift while working in the daytime. Since I enrolled in the evening program, I had to pay tuition. Then, I wrote a letter to the Kebele administration for support, and they agreed to pay 50% tuition; and I asked the NGO, where I used to live as an orphan, to cover some amount, and they agreed to give me 120 birrs [around \$ 2.50 USD] per month. So, I only needed to add 18 birrs [35 cents USD] per month to cover the tuition. It was a nice opportunity, but my ear illness worsened, and I could not work most of the time. Nonetheless, I kept taking the grade 10 national exam privately, but the passing grade was higher than those who took the exam in the regular program. After failing the grade 10 national exam for three consecutive years, I passed the exam and started grade 11 in this academic year [2019/20]. Currently, I participate in the theatre club while studying social science in grade 11 and attending an accounting diploma program in the evening at a private college, which I started two years ago as a backup plan if I did not pass the national exam.

Ermias strove to take reasonable actions to survive and continue his education. When he tried to engage in income-generating activities, he struggled to continue his education.

Yet, when he chose to fully engage in his schoolwork, he could not afford to survive. He needed to act to find alternatives to pursue his dream of being an actor and a writer while striving to survive amidst economic challenges. He worked different jobs, from running errands to being an assistant to drivers. Finishing secondary school was not as easy of a path as he planned. Even at times when he tried to take courses in the technical and vocational school, he tried to ensure he was on the right way to his vision. This constant dilemma made it hard for Ermias to progress toward longer term goals, because he always needed to attend to short-term issues. Nevertheless, he kept reconsidering his decisions, asking himself what would happen to him if he continued working as a day laborer? He decided to take actions that got him closer to his dream of becoming an actor and a writer and found different alternatives to help him to cover his educational expenses. Having a clear picture of his future strengthened his agentic power by looking for alternatives to his desired future.

Even at times when they did not seem to have alternatives, these youth persisted in looking for opportunities to pursue their education and hence, their aspirations. Selam, for instance, mentioned that the man who raped her used to come to a place where she was a renter. She realized that he intended to make her his mistress when he promised her that he would cover all her educational and living expenses. She refused, as it was not the life she aspired to have, and told him not to come back again. Instead, she kept working as a domestic worker. Selam realized that working as a domestic worker and living with her employers made it difficult to focus on her education. Alternatively, she decided to work as a domestic worker who did not stay overnight despite the economic considerations. For instance, domestic workers who live with their employers often

reduce their food expenses by eating with the host family. On the other hand, renting a house did not help her that much as she needed to cover her own food expenses. Then, she worked as a waitress, which made her vulnerable to sexual harassment by customers. She did not lose hope; rather, she started her own small business by selling beans, *kolo*, and boiled eggs in the evenings in bars while living independently by renting a house. This gave her the freedom to lead her life and engage in her education in a way she would like to do. Her determination to improve her and others' well-being motivated her to find alternatives for immediate challenges and pursue her aspirations in general.

Besides looking for alternatives for income-generating activities, students from economically disadvantaged families also tried to find options that would help them to survive their grade level. Although they had few opportunities, these youth filled every available opening to study and prepare for the class. Aster, for instance, mostly went to school with an empty stomach, which made her unable to learn well. Nonetheless, as narrated, she found ways to make herself ready for the lesson she was going to learn.

In most of my secondary education, I came to school late because I have to help my mother before school. If I managed to come to class earlier, I do not want to waste my time; rather, I did my homework if I am not done with it or read for the class. Then, I asked good performers in class if I did not understand the assignment. Sometimes I did not feel like I need to ask them because they might underestimate me or not be willing to help me. I usually tried my best to read in the evenings if I am not dead tired by the time, I was done with the household chores.

Aster's story demonstrates economically disadvantaged youths' agency in pursuing their education and aspirations, even though this agency is not enough by itself to reach such aspirations.

Chasing a Dream at Any Cost

When looking for alternatives did not seem to work, youths also prepared themselves for their dream and chased what they aspired at any cost. Ermias's story, exemplifies reasoned agency wherein youth choose and pursue their aspirations despite the challenges, even to the extent of going hungry to follow what they think is their life call.

The theatre club that I joined had training sessions in the evenings of Monday, Wednesday, and Friday; unfortunately, I had class the whole week in the evenings. I worked the whole day until 6 PM, and then I attended the accounting class in the evening shift. So, I could not join the theatre club as I used to. I asked myself what happened to my dream of becoming an actor and a writer if I keep living in this way. I felt like I was living in contradiction to my dream. Then, I decided to change the evening class program to the regular program. So, I started attending the accounting program in the day shift and practicing at the theatre club in the evenings. Surviving each day was a struggle. I stopped working as a day laborer. We perform dramas when national and local events are held in Dire Dawa, but the payment is too low considering the time gap it takes for another event to occur in the city. Most of the time, the theater club participates in any literature competition in the city, and if we win, most of the money will be for the club's administrative purpose, and we share a small amount of money. Since the members know my commitment to the art and why I stopped my job, they prioritize me and give me the chance to present in different stages and compensate me if the club got remuneration for the performance.

I prioritize the preparatory class for higher education [over the accounting diploma program] because I want to join Addis Ababa University art college and study theatrical art. If I complete grade 12, I can join the theatrical program for a B.A. degree, but the accounting course is in a Diploma program, and I need to get a degree in accounting to be competitive in the job market. I do not pay for tuition in the preparatory class as it is a public school, whereas I have to pay for the accounting program as it is in a private college. Besides, if I join a public higher education institution, the tuition is covered by the government even though I need to pay part of it as a cost-sharing arrangement after graduation. My friends at the private college shared the teaching materials with me on Telegram and informed me of exams. But I am not sure if I need to continue the accounting class.

Youth in this study demonstrated often demonstrated realistic (in consideration of their circumstances) thinking to pursue and achieve their goals instead of making impulsive decisions. When Ermias felt that he was living in contradiction to his aspiration, he

decided to pursue his dream at the expense of struggling each day to survive. He chose another route of enrolling in a regular program and attending the theatre club training in the evening. Despite knowing that he would be starved and lose the means of survival, he chose to pursue his aspirations of his choice. Even when it comes to choosing between his dream of studying theatrical art and his current study of accounting, he made an informed decision by prioritizing the social science class that prepared him to study theatrical arts when he joins higher education. In conclusion, all four types of reflective agency show how the youth critically thought and reflected on their desired futures but with different actions or routes.

Safeguarded Agency: The Role of Faith in Strengthening Agency

As discussed in chapter four, faith helped the youths in their aspirations formation process by enabling them to have a vision beyond improving their personal well-being. Religious institutions were also a means for these youths to develop social relations that helped them in their journey to their aspired future. This section elaborates on how the youth used their faith to strengthen their agency in three ways. First, youth used their faith to boost their confidence, trusting that God will make a way for them, which helped them to keep their eyes on their dreams and enhanced their agency. Second, youth used their faith to keep moving despite adversities. Looking forward for the future, youth thought that what happens could be turned into positive alternatives. Third, the youths turned to their faith to resist peer influence and unwanted behaviors. Thus, they made choices that align with their aspired future.

Youth often expressed sentiments that they resorted to their faith to increase their confidence in pursuing their aspirations, thinking that God will make a way for them, and

they will receive His¹⁹ protection. Ermias clearly connected how he used his faith to be optimistic about his future, believing that God will make a way for him.

I have the vision to create a better society through artwork, and I believe God supports me to achieve my dream. So, I stick with the decision to follow my dream. That is why I have never complained about my living condition because I cannot change anything by whining. If I am thankful, I believe that God gives me the energy to endure. Whenever I face challenges, I compare them with my dream, and I get the energy to keep moving. I had been through a lot, and I know I will also experience diverse challenges in the future. What I want to do is to decide wise decisions as a mature adult because irrespective of the challenges I have, I am young and have untapped potential in me. I picture myself in a good place where I can shape some societal perceptions through artwork. So, I want to make wise decisions that help me to reach where I want to be.

What makes me hopeful when I think about my future is believing that my future is in the almighty's hands. If God gives you the will, he will also guide you on your way. He is like both a father and a mother to me. God is my strength and my shield, who led me through all of these life phenomena. I believe that God does not make me pass through all this without a reason.

Ermias drew on this faith to persevere despite the adversities he comes across, because he believed that God is the one who works in him to desire, and he used his faith to act, pursue, and realize his aspirations, trusting that God will make a way for him.

Nonetheless, his trust in God's plan for his life did not make him stop doing what is expected from him to pursue his aspirations. Rather, he expected God's blessing while doing his part. For instance, he was active in the school mini-media club by presenting poems and short novels. Someone who noticed his talent helped him join a theatre group in which he is still actively involved. In Ermias's perspective, he received God's guidance through this person because he had trust in God, and he worked towards the will God gave him. This shows the agentic interplay between the self and God. Similarly, Solomon explained that he received God's protection through prayers, which helped him

¹⁹ Throughout the paper, I capitalize pronouns that refer to God.

to think that everything that happens in his life is for a reason. Hence, he kept moving forward no matter what.

Youth also turned to their faith to keep moving in adversities. Selam, a victim of sexual violence, recounted how she was tired of life and how her spiritual faith enabled her to recover from her trauma and look forward to the future. She explained:

Life is full of challenges unless God gives you wisdom on how to persevere. It [the rape] was the most disheartening experience, which is not even comparable with the suffering I had from moving from one place to another, working as a housemaid. Let alone getting motivation in my study; I lost interest in life in general. I spent most of the time crying. I was depressed for a long time to the extent of thinking to commit suicide, but the faith I have in God keeps me longing for the future. I was also on the verge of dropping out of school but took the final exam without any preparation. Fortunately, or unfortunately, it is not something I can discuss with others, and I talked to God through prayers and finally gained the energy to forgive and recover from my depression. I came to realize that God has a better plan for me unless I am lazy or do not do what is expected from me. So, it is the trust I have in God that helps me to revive and strive for survival.

Selam's faith supported her to keep moving among the adversities she has experienced at a young age. Because of the sexual violence she had experienced, she temporarily lost hope regarding her education and in life in general, to the extent of taking away her life. Reading the Holy Bible and putting her trust in God, as she stated, helped her to keep moving to pursue her aspirations. Her faith gave her the strength to forgive those who put her in this situation, and as discussed in the previous chapter, she used her faith to show God's mercy to her community by working on ending the *Dem Melash* norm. Her faith is not only restricted to helping her recovering from her past sufferings; it also gave her confidence for the future. She further explained: "He [God] helped me pass through all this because he has a good plan for me, and I trust him for anything that happens in my life." Nonetheless, she also recognized that she needs to do what is expected of her to pursue her aspirations and put her trust in God for the rest.

Besides using their faith as a motivation to pursue their aspirations amidst obstacles, the youth turned to their faith to avoid being influenced by peer pressure and to be protected from unwanted behaviors. Recalling Ermias's story narrated in the previous chapter, he refused to engage in stealing or having affairs with "sugar mommies," because of his moral ground and religious belief. He further explained that: "I know that the devil put so many challenges in your way, and unless you are aware, you might be trapped and diverted away from what you want to be." Similar to Ermias, Aster's agency was also influenced by her spiritual faith. She saw that girls at her age entered into an unwanted relationship with "*sugar daddies*" to get money for survival. Aster explained that God gave her the wisdom to evaluate things and choose what is good, and that is why she did not choose to get into an unwanted relationship because the faith she has in God made her believe that "this too shall pass." Faith for these youth was beyond a spiritual practice. Their belief in God provided a sense of assurance to keep their focus on their aspirations amidst constraining conditions and helped them make decisions that go in line with their aspired future.

Exercising Agency with Others and for Others

Similar to aspirations, agency is also socially embedded wherein youth exercise their agentic power with others and for others. In their interviews, the youth elaborated how they surrendered their agentic power to their beloved ones at will (transferred agency) and how they exercised their agency for the well-being of others (altruistic agency). Both transferred and altruistic agency show the social-situatedness of agency, emphasizing how agency is constructed through social relations. Nonetheless, a transferred agency emphasizes the role of social ties for youths' desired future. In

contrast, an altruistic agency shows how youth exercise their agency, not for their well-being but for the well-being of others.

Transferred Agency: Exercising Agency with Others

It is important to recognize that youth do not always decide for themselves; they also share the decision-making power with their loved ones, which I referred to as transferred agency or surrendering agency at will. Tsinat and Aster's detailed accounts imply that the process of reasoning through one's situation is central to agency as both acted in ways not aligned with their aspirations, but they reflected through the process, and they did it intentionally. While the decision may have been contrary to their aspirations, it is not only the final decision but also the process by which they came to a decision that matters (Crocker & Robeyns, 2009). Tsinat's story revealed times when youth surrender their agency at their own will, which is also one form of exercising agency.

The only thing I am waiting for is to complete grade 12 and have the certificate; then, I will find jobs to work as a hostess. Actually, the Ethiopian airline hires flight attendants if they complete grade 10, but I want to finish grade 12 because my mother wants me to complete at least this grade level. Considering the suffering that my mother has been through, I wish if she allows me to start working even now and support her; but she wants me to make her proud by completing the upper secondary level. It is not only mine but also her success. I do not want to take away this happiness from her. My mother can decide on my life no matter what. As much as possible, I tried to support her. Whenever I went to visit her for summer breaks, I sold French fries and other street foods so that my mother would not be worried about covering expenses for me for exercise books and other basic school materials. But I know that it is not enough. It is my turn now to support her. Whenever I saw some of her friends living a good life, I envy that to my mother. I will not have mercy on me if I stay in school and lose my mother before I am able to support her. That is the reason that keeps me motivated to work and change the life of my mother and others who are in the same situation as I am now, and then, I will get time to pursue my dream.

To be honest, I was eager to join higher education, but not now. When I got an opportunity to go to college and study psychology, I want to learn it in detail as I am passionate about it. I want to give it my undivided attention, but it is

not possible when my mother keeps doing the same job that she has been doing for years. My mother told me that she could cover my expenses if I decide to join higher education because she thinks what she can do for me for the next couple of years is easier compared to what she had been through. I know that if I am going to stay in university, the three years will feel like 3,000 years for me. I cannot let her go through the same suffering. I do not want her to worry anymore about supporting me. I want her to see the fruit of her sufferings by supporting her and others who are in similar situations like me. I know that [supporting others] will make my mother happy.

Surrendering agency to whom they consider significant in their lives, does not limit the youths' agency; rather it is a form of exercising agency indicating they have the agency freedom to do otherwise. For instance, in Tsinat's case, the only force that kept her continuing her education to grade 12 was her mother's eagerness for her to complete upper secondary level. Tsinat recognized that her mother had endured a lot to enable her to continue her education and her mother wanted Tsinat to complete at least the upper secondary school. Even though Tsinat wanted to drop out of school at any time to find a job to support her mother, she kept going to school to make her mother happy. Because of her mother's unreserved love, Tsinat gave her mother the freedom to think with her to make decisions and decided to finish grade 12, as she knew that it would make her mother happy. Her decision of staying in school was based on her mother's will, but still, she surrendered her agency at will.²⁰ Thus, surrendering agency at will discloses that, like aspirations, agency is socially situated.

Similarly, Aster's relationship with her sister also reveals the social embeddedness of agency. Aster's decision about her future is influenced by her sister's advice. When

²⁰ The focus in this section is Tsinat's decision of staying at school (until she completes grade 12) not about her decision of taking the *shortcut* to drop out of school and support her mother. I referred to the first one as a transferred agency as she reached to this decision by making her mother part of the process while her decision of taking the shortcut can be categorized as what I called altruistic agency, i.e., agency for the well-being of others.

Aster decided not to join grade 11, her sister insisted that she not to start working full time and she should continue her education in a regular program. Her sister promised her support to Aster until she graduated and secured a job. Even though this option did not work and Aster was forced to drop out of school anyway, it affected Aster's decision, at least at the beginning, to attend accounting in the regular program than enrolling in the evening. Another time when Aster was preparing to leave the town and work as a waitress in a different city, it was her sister's advice and begging that makes her change her mind. She recalled the situation.

I lied to my sister when she asked me why I did not go to school. I gave her many pretexts. Then, I got a job to work as a waitress outside of Dire Dawa. I was prepared to leave the city and move to a different place where I have never been before. I even packed my clothes. I told my sister after I decide for myself. She said, "we have been through a lot just for this?" I have never disappointed her. I have due respect for her, and I love her so much. She is more than a sister to me. Sometimes I feel like she is the one who birthed me, not my biological mother. So, when I told her that I am leaving, she said no. I told her that everything is ready, and there is no going back. Then, she took the house key when she went to the pharmacy where she interns. In that afternoon, I went to Addis Ketema [a city in Dire Dawa] to visit my auntie. That afternoon, after I stayed with my relatives, I went home late, and it was around 7:30 PM. My sister was waiting for me at the gate. She assumed that I had already left. Her eyes were red due to crying. Her face was swollen. I was terrified when I saw her in that situation. I vowed to myself that I would never leave her; instead, I prefer to starve with her, as her presence makes me feel alive. Then, I went to brokers, and they found me a job as a waitress in a coffee shop.

Aster was not forced to take her sister's advice. Rather, she made choices with her sister. Her sister reminded Aster to think about all the sufferings they had been through and pleaded that their sacrifice should not be ended by having a disintegrating family and dropping out of school. Aster, then, decided to stay with her sister and look for other options for survival rather than migrating to another state. The relationship Aster had with her sister is reciprocal in which her sister also decided on some matters in

consultation with Aster. When her sister was about to drop out of college, Aster insisted that she should not drop out and even sold her phone to pay for her sister's tuition. Aster also reached out to the *Kebele* administration to get a little support for her sister's tuition. That enabled her sister to change her mind and keep attending her pharmacy program. Aster exercised her agency freedom by deciding her future with her sister. Therefore, as can be inferred from the Tsinat and Aster's stories, agency is socially situated with the lives and aspirations of others, and the process of reasoning and intentionality are central to one's agency. This section discussed how youth exercise their agency with others and the next one focuses on how youth exercise their agency for others.

Altruistic Agency: Exercising Agency for Others

Youths' agency is not only connected to enhancing individuals' well-being; it can be exercised for the well-being of others, which I referred to as an altruistic agency. Solomon's story exemplifies exercising agency for the well-being of others.

After my father was in jail when I was four or five, I stayed with my father's relatives for a short time. But I did not live with them for more than a couple of months since our behavior cannot get along. I know that my older brother and my younger sister have been living with other relatives from my father's side, but I did not know their whereabouts for years. When I heard that my younger sister lived in a rural town not too far from Dire Dawa, I went there to visit her. She was almost eight by the time, and I was about eleven. She told me that our relatives mistreated her, and I decided to take her to Dire Dawa to live with me. But they called a police officer and warned me to leave the place; however, at least, I managed to convince them to allow me to visit her and to cover her educational expenses. I visited her every other day, and whenever I went there to see her, I brought her vegetables, clothes, or shoes. I started working three jobs to support her and my living expenses. I got five Birr [10 cents USD] every week from the garage work, and in the evenings, I sold *kolo* and boiled eggs. I got 200 birrs [\$ 4 USD] on average per week, and I paid 300 birrs [\$ 6 USD] tuition for my sister. Since she lived in a rural area, I made her enroll in a private school in the closest city, and I covered her daily transportation cost as well. She was doing good in her education, which motivated me to do any job to make sure that she is going to school. Unluckily, I did not pass the grade 8 national exam. I went to the nearest city and continued class in the evening shift; then, I passed the national exam with

a good grade scoring 67%. Then, I returned to Dire Dawa, but I could not continue my education for two years to support my sister's education. I could not have attended school while working two to three jobs and sending my sister to school at the same time. So, I had to choose. Then, I decided to work full time and support my sister's education.

Unfortunately, after my father's passing, I could not work hard like I used to, and hence, I could not support my sister's education. Then, our relatives forced her to marry three times without her consent. I used to pay for her tuition and bought her clothes and shoes. When I stopped the support, they said they could not help her anymore and forced her to get married when she was 15. I filed a legal action as she had not attained the marriageable age, then the court ruled for us. She continued living with our relatives, but they forced her to get married for the second time, and by this time, I was tired of all these things. She divorced her second husband as he forced her to have sex with him even though she said she could not do it because of health issues that her doctor told her about. I told her that I could not send her to a private school. So, she started going to a public school while I covered her learning materials and uniforms. She studied up to grade 9. Unfortunately, after her second divorce, she could not handle the societal pressure of being widowed. She married an engineer at her will and quit her education in grade 9 because she was pregnant. Even though her husband is educated, he is not knowledgeable. I mean, he cannot use his knowledge for the betterment of others. He does not encourage her to continue her education after giving birth; so, she is a housewife now. My father made me promise to look after my sister and support her education. Even though I felt bad that I could not keep my words, I am glad that she finally got married to someone she chooses.

Solomon's story illustrates how youth used their agency not only for themselves but also for others' well-being so that they achieve their desires. He was in a position where he needed to choose between his education and the education of his sister. He decided to drop out of school for two years to support his sister to keep her education. Dropping out of school diminished his well-being, but he chose to support his sister to improve her well-being. His story shows that youth exercise their agency not only for themselves but also for others' well-being to the extent that it diminishes their own well-being.

In addition, Solomon's story reveals that agency achievement, i.e., the ability to realize what individuals have reason to value (see Sen, 1992, 1999; Crocker & Robeyns, 2009), does not necessarily indicate well-being achievement, whether individuals

exercise their agency for themselves or the agency of the self in relation to goals concerning others. As described, he tried his best to support his sister even though his sister could not continue her education and *succeed* as he would like her to do. Even though his support did not result in his sister's *well-being achievement in a way that he intended to*, it does not mean that he did not have *agency achievement* because he realizes his ability to choose and pursue what he values, such as supporting her education. It is in line with Sen (1999) conceptualization of an agent as someone "whose achievements can be judged in terms of her (his) own values and objectives" (p. 19). Thus, Solomon had both agency freedom (freedom of choosing what he values) and agency achievement (freedom of realizing what he values), despite the fact that it did not result in all that he valued for her in terms of her education. Nonetheless, his agentic actions still were helpful at that time.

In addition, altruistic agency shows the social situatedness of agency wherein youth exercise their agency through social interaction. As discussed in chapter four, Tsinat formed her aspirations in relation to her mother. Her mother did not ask her for help; rather, she was even willing to support Tsinat in her education if she decided to join higher education. But Tsinat thought that it was not fair for her mother to keep doing the same kind of tiresome job for the next couple of years as she has already suffered a lot to support Tsinat. So, it was Tsinat's personal choice to help her mother by detouring from her vision of becoming a psychologist. She wanted to work as a flight attendant for some years and got back to education because she always worried that she might lose her mother before she could support her. Tsinat was indeed agentic, but she detoured in her aspirations for the well-being of her mother.

Constrained Agency: “The only alternative I had was to take the shortcut”

Youth are not always agentic, at least they do not enact it in the way they want to pursue their aspirations. For instance, lack of available economic opportunities put them in a position where they feel there is no real option to choose, and hence, constrain their agency. But it does not mean that they did not act to find alternatives. Sometimes, when they could not find alternatives, they chase their dream at any cost (as Ermias’s story illustrates) or their agency is truly constrained. In such kind of cases, there might be other alternatives but if they do not align with their goals, technically they do not really have alternatives to choose. Aster’s story epitomizes how youths’ agency is constrained to choose and follow their aspirations. Aster’s story discussed in the “transferred agency” section was about how she exercised her agency earlier in her schooling, but this section focuses on how she exercised her agency later when she was no longer in school.

I scored 2.2 and passed the grade 10 national exam [In the 2018/19 academic year]. However, I decided to take the *shortcut* as I do not have anyone who can support me. My sister is still working as an intern in a pharmacy. My father is not willing to support us continually. My mother has an illness, and she explicitly told me that I have to work and support my education as she could not provide for the family anymore. Fortunately, the technical and vocational school is tuition-free, and the only thing you are expected to cover is your living expense. Students should also prepare money for photocopying the learning materials and handouts. Even though there is no tuition fee for preparatory schools and public higher education institutions, we could not cover our living expenses. The only alternative I had was taking the *shortcut* and joining technic and vocational school rather than joining the preparatory school for two more years and then studying in higher education for three to five years. It is a long path. So, I thought if I joined the technical and vocational school, I could have my diploma within three years, find a job with my diploma, and continue further education while working.

I went to Kulbi to beg for money from our relatives to cover the technical college registration fee. I cried to my father, and he gave me 500 birrs [\$ 100 USD]. The registration fee was 70 birrs [\$ 1.40 USD]. I know that there is no tuition for technical school, but I told my father that there is tuition and asked him if you can send me 200 birrs [\$ 4 USD] every month. I was planning to use this money to cover our living expenses, but he said he cannot afford to do that and said I should consider starting grade 11 instead of joining the technical school.

Then I asked him if he can support me if I join higher education, and he said yes. I knew that he said that so that I would get out of his face. I knew that he does not even remember my existence after I came back to Dire Dawa. Then I registered in the technical college using the money that my father gave to me.

Most of the time, my sister and I had food at our cousin's house, but after all, it is not our house, and we do not want to burden her. So, how long can we stay in this kind of situation? How can I continue my education while I do not even know if I have food after coming back from school? We also have to pay for rent.

It [the vocational/technical schooling] is a full-time class. I have to go to school both in the morning and in the afternoon. Unfortunately, starting this year [2019/20 academic year], they require their students to wear a uniform, which costs around 600 birrs [\$ 12 USD]. They gave us a couple of days to have the uniform, but there was no way for me to afford 600 birrs for the uniform. Even the teachers gave us course materials that we have to read for the class, and sometimes it is too many pages, and the cost of photocopying is 2 birr [\$ 0.04 USD] per page. If I had a mobile phone, I could have taken a picture and read it, but unfortunately, I do not have a phone. Besides all those things, we do not have anything to eat at home. My older sister and I were the only ones who were at home. Then, I dropped out of school and started looking for a job.

Then I found a job. The lady owns the building and sells coffee on the first floor, and I helped her in serving the coffee to customers. It is a traditional coffee ceremony, not like the one that you make coffee by machine. I started the job by washing dishes, then I became a waitress. She paid me 800 birrs [\$ 16 USD] per month, and I eat my breakfast and my lunch there. I can get back home at 3 in the afternoon. I get peace, knowing that I am not a burden to my family. When I was in school, I cannot even focus on learning with an empty stomach and my heart was always burdened by our family's financial situation. I was always worried about tomorrow. Every night I used to say, "I passed today, and how will my family and I survive tomorrow?"

I wish I did not drop out of school; I am still in pain that I dropped out of school. Even quitting school for a year is difficult. You might not have the same motivation when you want to go back to school. But sometimes, you live what life chooses for you, not what you choose. You cannot do anything. I am glad that I am healthy, and I can work.

Aster's story reveals how economic constraints left her only with one option, to take the short cut, which was against her aspired future. Her father was unwilling to help; her sister was still in school; and her mother was ill; so, the only alternative she had was to take a *shortcut*. Taking the *shortcut* is not among the many options she had; rather, it was her only available option. She even underscored how difficult it was for her to continue

her education when she was not sure whether she has something to eat when she comes back from school. She decided to join technical and vocational college at a regular program to have a professional job, yet after two or three years she was unable to attend full time without generating income to help her and her family survive. Instead, she dropped out of school and started working as a waitress. She wished she did not drop out of school, but, as she stated, “people live what life chooses for them, not what they choose for themselves.” Economic barriers constrained Aster’s agency and forced her to prefer what is within her reach, not what she would have chosen if she had the *real* freedom to choose among different options. Thus, her story highlights that even though youths have aspirations, economic barriers might limit their ability to act towards their aspired futures.

Tsinat’s story is another example that shows how poverty leaves economically disadvantaged youth with no good options that will support them to reach their aspired future than to take their only option or the *shortcut*.

Nowadays, what makes me worried is that I need to take at least seven years gap if I decide to be a flight attendant. I heard that the Ethiopian Airlines makes flight attendants sign a seven-year contract, and if they [flight attendants] want to leave before the committed years are complete, they are expected to pay the training fee, which is hundreds of thousands. It makes the path longer for me to study psychology and be what I really want to be, but it is also the better path to support my mother and earn money, and that will help me to start my own non-profit organization. When I contemplate about the future, I think that if I work at least for four years as a hostess, I would be able to open my own business, and at the end of the seven-year commitment, I can open my own NGO and also, I can study psychology at a degree level. I do not have any passion for working as a flight attendant; rather, I want to use it to achieve my goal of supporting my mother and changing the lives of others. It is a worthy *shortcut*. Nothing can make me change my mind. I am determined to take the shortcut. I wish I could get a chance to fully concentrate on my education when I join a university but knowing that my mother is suffering to send me to school, I could not focus on my education.

Both Tsinat's and Aster's stories reveal that the youth acted to find alternatives to continue their education and follow their educational aspirations, but economic conditions influenced their freedom of choosing from available options. Economic conditions often left youth with choices that do not lead them to achieve their goal, and hence, technically, they do not have any option than taking what enable them to survive. Tsinat's story also highlights that having a clear map of their future journey was not enough for youths to exercise their agency because they often had to earn money to support their living expenses or their families, forcing them to choose options that delay any further study.

Discussion

The stories illuminate that youth are indeed agentic despite being from economically disadvantaged families. They acted agentially in objecting to advice that would lead to undesired paths or does not go in line with their aspired future. For examples, Selam opposed the idea of accepting child marriage and Ermias rejected the advice of getting in relationship with sugar mommies. They also exercised their agency by confronting challenges and looking for opportunities. They even became more agentic when they have a clear picture of their road map. As Ermias narrated his story, he compared his challenges with his dream, and the challenges become insignificant in his eyes as he has a bigger plan for his future. Thus, he made sure that every decision or choice he made now go in line with his aspired future. Similarly, DeJaeghere's (2018) study of youths' aspirations in an under-resourced community in Tanzania shows a connection between youth's ability to see their future with being able to take action towards it, which highlights the "dialectic relationship" (p. 238) between aspirations and

agency. The table below shows different forms of agency emerged from the youths' narratives, wherein the youth exercised these different forms of agency at different times based on the situations they were in.

Table 4 - Different forms of agency

Forms of agency	Manifestations
Reflective agency	Manifested through resistance (at the time of conflicted aspirations), acting at the time of ambiguity, finding alternatives, and chasing individuals dream at any cost.
Safeguarded agency	Manifested through turning to one's faith to resist peer influence and unwanted behaviors and make choices and take actions that goes with aspired futures.
Transferred agency (exercising agency with others)	Manifested through sharing the decision-making power with loved ones.
Altruistic agency (exercising agency for others)	Manifested through exercising agency for the well-being of others.
Constrained agency	When individuals have no real options to choose.

Even at the time of conflicting aspirations, the youth exercised their agency. As Drèze and Sen (2002) clarify "what is needed is not merely freedom and power to act, but also freedom and power to question and reassess the prevailing norms and values" (p. 258). As Selam's story highlights, she chose what she wanted to pursue even though her parents and peers pushed her to choose against it and to get married. It even cost her to migrate from the place where she was born and raised. However, she endured in her plan for her future despite losing her family's affection. She did not have anyone who could support her, but she thought she could support herself by working as a domestic worker and choosing this route to be what she wants to be. Thus, this finding contrasts with Hart's (2012) assertion about the level of aspirations and the degree of agency that individuals have. Hart (2012) argues that in conflicted aspiration, where individuals' aspirations do not agree with their significant others' aspirations, their agency decreases.

As can be inferred from Selam's story, conflicting aspirations between youth and their parents do not necessarily result in a low level of agency for the youths as they exercise agency to form and pursue their life goals unless other conditions constrain their agency.

Nonetheless, the youths' experience also provides insight that youth indeed have aspirations, but economic barriers might limit their ability to move forward to their aspired futures as it leaves them with no real options to choose from. As such, agency is also "economically mediated" (DeJaeghere et al., 2016, p. 3). In a study focusing on economically marginalized women in South Africa, Conradie (2013) stated that the participants' aspirations and agency were constrained by their economic position as they wanted to secure a sustainable income to fulfil the basic needs of their families whatever other aspirations they had. Similarly, Tsinat who aspires to be a psychologist, but decides to be a flight attendant and Aster who aspires to be an accountant, but working as a waitress in a coffee shop acted to find alternatives to continue their education and follow their educational goals. Yet this work hindered their ability to stay at school, as Aster dropped out of school, and Tsinat was on the verge of dropping out. Focusing on the decisions made by the youths did not tell us the full story of whether they had the freedom to choose otherwise. School records, for instance, only show that students dropped out of school, but it does not tell us whether they are forced to drop out of school because of having no alternatives, like Aster, or they prefer to drop out of school by their own will, choosing another alternative they think is better than education. Shah (2016) explains the importance of context and getting the fuller perspectives:

It is not sufficient to learn about an individual's ability to make choices by only looking at their life choices and outcomes. It is necessary to deeply consider the

context and conditions under which they exercise their agency. Further, we need to go beyond descriptions of context [...] to examine how contexts themselves change as a result of agentic action (p. 99).

This dissertation contributes deeper understanding of the context, conditions, and processes under which youth exercise agency. Selam's story, for instance, showed the importance of learning about the context than simply looking at their life choices. Even though Selam continued her education, it was not easier for her to do so; rather, she rejected her parents offer of getting married to an old guy or migrating to Arab countries. It even affected her relationship she had with her family. By looking at her decision in more depth, one can see that she was pressured by her parents to either to get married or to migrate because of economic reasons and societal expectations of young girls to be wives and mothers. Thus, taking a more nuanced look at the context enables a more thorough understanding of the conditions in which youth exercise their agency. Armed with this knowledge, one can tackle familial and societal conditions that constraints youths' ability of making choices.

The stories further show that youth might exercise their agency for the well-being of others to the extent that it might diminish their own well-being. This contributes to the debate between international development and education scholars who question why agency freedom still matters even without well-being achievement. However, living a life that an individual has a reason to value, whether it ends up in enhancing own or others well-being, by itself matters. Still, it is important to note that individuals might have conflicting values. Solomon, for instance, valued his own education as well as the education of his sister. Even though he valued both, he was in a position that he needed to

choose and he chose to support his sister's education instead of pursuing his own. As Crocker and Robeyns (2009) explain, agency has both "intrinsic value" (for its own sake) and "instrumental value" (as a means to good consequences) (p. 83). As such, agency achievement is about realization of goals that individuals have reasons to value and pursue whether or not it is related with individuals own well-being (Sen, 1992). Crocker and Robeyns (2009) further explain that "a person's agency achievement is his or her deciding and acting on the basis of what he or she values and has reason to value, whether or not that action is personally advantageous (p. 75). The question is not about whether the act is being advantageous for the individuals; rather, it is about if they make choices or take actions based on what they value. Solomon decision of supporting his sister education than his own, for instance, resulted in diminishing his own well-being. However, it showed agency achievement, as he was successful in pursuing and doing what he thought was valuable. Thus, agency achievement does not necessarily indicate well-being achievement for the individual, as it takes into account well-being of one's family or community.

Another point to note in the stories is how faith plays an important role in making the youth more agentic, believing that God will make a way for them despite facing adversities. This finding contends with some researchers' arguments who claim that "believing God as an active agent in one's life requires relinquishing a sense of personal or internal control" (Jackson & Coursey, 1988, p. 399). However, Liu and Froese (2020) indicate a positive relationship between agentic power of youth and the secure attachment they have with God. They further argue that believing in divine control compensates for the social and economic constraints that individuals have by creating emotional closeness

with their God, which imitates the closeness one has with friends and family. For instance, for Selam stated that she trusted God in anything that happens in her life. Her faith in the supernatural power helped her to come out of depression and become eager for the future. As such, she gets emotional help from faith through this process. In the stories, it is evident that the youths assign God as a co-pilot in their life and get emotional encouragement because they believe their God is “looking out for their best interests and assisting them in navigating personal challenges” (Ellison & Burdette, 2012, p. 16). Similar to the findings in this study, participants in a study assessing how Christian students at English universities formulate their aspirations for the future articulate a dependency on God’s guidance, but also claim that “it is fully freeing, and it is also the center point” (Guest & Aune, 2017, para 7.2). The youth’s agency is not restricted by their inter-dependency with God’s guidance nor it makes them reluctant to do what is expected from them. Rather, through prayers, the youth’s engage with God “as a relational conversation partner” (Guest & Aune, 2017, para 7.4), in which they receive assurance about their future goals if it is for *good purpose*. In addition, the findings highlight how faith keeps them from being influenced by peer pressure or distracted from their desired future by unwanted behavior. Like Ermias, participants in a study focused on black male students who attended Russel group universities in England and Wales emphasized the role of faith as form of protection from challenges within their communities including abstaining from destructive behaviors that do not match with their aspired futures (Dumangane Jr, 2017). Nonetheless, the role of faith in strengthening agency is not well assessed in comparative and international education literature, but this

finding implies that future studies should be done in this aspect to learn more about the interconnectedness of faith and agency.

Conclusion

This chapter investigates how economically disadvantaged youth exercised their agency to choose and pursue what they aspire to be. Agency is not a question of the end result, but the process of freedom the youths have in forming and pursuing their aspirations. The youths' stories underline that they are certainly agentic, wherein their ability to have a clear picture of their future strengthens their agentic power. In contrast, economic barriers limit their ability to pursue and realize their aspirations by making it practically impossible to have another option other than choosing what is reachable. It is true that not all youth preferred to join higher education. However, those who wanted to pursue their education, but were forced to choose other options should be supported. This analysis provides insight on what conditions constrain or enhance the agentic power of youths to make choices and take actions in forming and pursuing their educational aspirations.

In the final chapter, I draw conclusions from the analysis of the findings in the previous chapters and present recommendations for policymakers and educators and implications for international and national development agencies and researchers.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Implications

In Ethiopia, high drop out and low completion rates of economically disadvantaged students widen the educational inequalities in the country. The government of Ethiopia has sought to allocate resources to narrow the educational inequality, but the policy framework is not based on the capabilities of students or their ability to utilize resources to move forward to their aspired futures.

In this dissertation, I examined how secondary school age youth from economically disadvantaged families in Ethiopia imagine and navigate their future amidst supporting and constraining conditions, and how they exercise their agency towards pursuing their aspirations. Focusing on the life history of six participants (Selam, Solomon, Tsinat, Ermias, Edel, Aster), I analyzed their capabilities and capacity to aspire, the conditions affecting their ability to pursue their aspirations, and their exercise of agency to pursue their educational aspirations. The study intends to show the story of many youth from low-income families in Ethiopia through the stories of the six research participants.

Chapter four focused on how youth from economically disadvantaged families imagine and reimagine their future amidst supporting and constraining conditions. The findings challenge the dominant narrative that claims that economically disadvantaged youth have low aspirations or adjust their aspirations when they grow up to match their economic situation (Stockfelt, 2015). The stories highlight that economically disadvantaged youth do aspire to improve their overall socio-economic well-being and the well-being of others, such as supporting their parents and positively contributing to their community. Nonetheless, they might be constrained in their capacity to aspire

without family, teachers, and societal support and availability of meaningful opportunities that enable them to pursue what they aspire to be because they are in a constant negotiation between what is desired and what is possible. The findings further reaffirm the relational nature of aspirations as the youths form their aspirations with others, not only for themselves but also for the well-being of others. These findings also demonstrate how the presence or absence of familial and societal support affects one's navigational capacity and inspiration to move forward. Furthermore, the role of faith and religious institutions is an important theme that recurred in the participants' narratives. The youths used their faith and religious institutions to aspire beyond improving individuals' well-being and broadening their social relationships. In general, this chapter fills the gap in previous studies by highlighting economically disadvantaged youths' aspirations formation process amidst the broad range of opportunities and constraints, adding new knowledge about the topic within the Ethiopian context.

In chapter five, I described the conditions that supported and constrained the youth's ability to pursue their aspirations. Using the capability approach to analyze economically disadvantaged youths' opportunities and constraints allowed me to examine the availability of opportunities and the youths' ability to use these opportunities for their aspired future. The youths' accounts reveal the multi-dimensional aspects affecting the capability to pursue the aspired future, including familial, school-related, and societal conditions. The findings in this chapter further highlight that personal conditions, especially family economic situations, are mainly limiting, and societal and school support is crucial for economically disadvantaged youth to pursue their aspirations. Furthermore, in collaboration with familial and social moral and material support (and

even sometimes despite a lack of this kind of support), teachers' guidance assisted students in continuing their education and pursuing their aspirations.

In addition, the findings challenge a prevailing assumption that economically disadvantaged youth have unrealistic aspirations that should be realigned. The stories rather emphasize that these youth have desires, but not the means to pursue their aspirations due to many conditions. Participants shared this was the result of many conditions, including their family's economic situation, family responsibility, societal perception about the importance of education, teachers' inability to understand the struggle of these disadvantaged students, labeling practices at schools based on academic performance and economic status, peer pressure and lack of mentorship, and language barriers. As such, focusing only on in-school conditions cannot fully enhance the capability of youth to pursue and realize their aspirations unless a holistic measure (including familial and socio-economic conditions) to support them is taken into account. Therefore, this chapter fills the gap in previous studies that exclusively focused on constraining conditions and examine both supporting and constraining conditions as well youths' ability of using resources to pursue their aspired future.

Chapter six explored how youth exercise their agency to choose, pursue, or reshape their aspirations within supporting and constraining conditions. The youths' experiences also provide insight that youth are indeed agentic, but in some cases, economic barriers limit their ability to pursue and realize their aspirations. This is because these barriers leave them with no real options to choose from. The youths' experience furthered the conception that agency is socially situated, which is manifested by surrendering agency at will to their loved ones and exercising their agency, not only

for themselves, but also for the well-being of others. The stories also underscore how faith plays a vital role in making the youth more agentic. Youth believed that their creator will make ways for them despite adversities and keep them from undesired behaviors that would distract them from their dreams. In general, this chapter provides new insights about the interrelation of aspirations and agency \missed in previous studies in Ethiopia, by underlining conditions that constrain or enhance the agency of economically disadvantaged youths in forming and pursuing their aspirations. The youths' stories highlight the importance of looking at the processes youths make decision about their aspired futures to understand challenges impeding their ability not to freely choose and pursue what they want to be.

Implications of the Study

Implications for Theory

Epistemologically, the study contributes to the growing body of literature in the field of international development and education centering youth's educational aspirations and agency from the capability approach perspective. Specifically, the study examines important concepts of the capability approach, aspirations (the capability and capacity to aspire), agency, and conversion conditions through an empirical investigation in an Ethiopian context. In doing so, this dissertation adds to the scholarly work on the capability approach and youth in the global south by centering youths' experiences in the Ethiopian context. In addition, the study contributes to the emerging knowledge on faith, aspirations, and agency by explaining the different ways youth use their faith to form and pursue their desired futures.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the significance of narrating life histories using multiple rounds of interviews in providing more complete pictures of the youths' lives by looking backward and looking forward and considering different connections of their lives (familial, social, and school) as opposed to one-time interviews.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy

Applying the capability approach, the findings emphasize the opportunities and constraints experienced by economically disadvantaged students in forming and pursuing their aspired futures. One of the significant policy implications of this study is the need to incorporate economically disadvantaged students in the General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP) in its definition of equity. The program's current definition of equity excludes economically disadvantaged students by only focusing on children with disabilities, pastoral students, and students in emerging regions of the country. As such, it fails to highlight the educational disparities experienced by students from economically disadvantaged families as narrated in this study. Including these groups to the list would enable economically disadvantaged youths to get the focus they need to pursue their desired futures. Thus, the conceptualization of equity should be broadened to incorporate these groups as it is the base for other policy and practical measures.

Education policies that focus on achievements on tests also undervalue the impact of socio-economic constraints on youth from economically disadvantaged families when they strive to pursue their aspirations. There is a need to shift the emphasis from equality of resources and equality of outcomes to equality of capabilities (real opportunities). This includes considering familial and socio-economic conditions

influencing students' education because education policies should not only be about education in its academic sense but would rather include students' general well-being, including checking their ability to engage in learning. This study also reveals that the absence of support from one of these conditions affects their journey to their aspired future. In other words, the widely held belief that education is a means to reduce poverty might not be realized without proper policies that look above and beyond providing educational resources for disadvantaged students. In doing so, policies can address the socio-economic impediments better to enable the more efficient use of available educational resources. Hence, government intervention to enhance economically disadvantaged youths' capability to aspire should take into account not only in school but also in societal and familial conditions by enhancing supporting conditions and removing constraints so that youth can ultimately reach their aspirations.

This study is an invitation to policymakers to incorporate the concepts of the capability and capacity to aspire in education policies so that intentional strategies will be designed to support students in imagining and navigating their future. It might include incorporating these concepts in teacher training policies and programs so that teachers will get pedagogical training on how to cultivate their students' interests, helping them in connecting dots in their path to their aspired futures, and trying to solve their barriers.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

One of the study's practical implications for practice is the need to provide career guidance and mentoring for economically disadvantaged students to strengthen their capacity to aspire. It might be done by training and assigning teachers for this purpose, and each student will have a mentor teacher. This kind of mentoring and guidance will

enable underprivileged youth to develop the knowledge and skills they need to navigate their future better and enhance their ability to identify and plan actions towards their aspirations. This can also be a means to compensate for what they did not get from their family or society because of economic constraints. Further, the stories also highlight the need to provide psychological support for youth who experience different forms of abuse, which can be a good start to help them to aspire to a future than being discouraged by their past. Besides psychological support, guidance and mentoring can include understanding the constraints that the youth face and identifying supports to pursue their aspirations. In addition, mentoring increases the youths' agentic power in helping them to act and take decisions that align with their aspired futures, as can be inferred from the youth's stories.

If possible, schools should go beyond understanding the students' financial burden and try to create a means to support them so that they can focus on their school. In collaboration with local non-profit organizations and private funders, schools can arrange scholarship opportunities for economically disadvantaged students. As the youths' stories disclose, covering students' educational expenses may not be enough for some students unless there are ways to cover their living expenses. Scholarship opportunities and small grants from non-profit organizations, business partners, and private funders could be one way to create the means for economically disadvantaged students to support themselves.

Another practical implication that can be gleaned from the youths' stories is the need for school-feeding programs in public schools. Most economically disadvantaged children spent their time thinking of what they would eat and struggled to attend classes with full attention. For some of them, it was a reason that pushed them out of school.

Recently, Addis Ababa City Administration has launched a school-feeding program and provision of school uniforms and utensils in public schools to reduce the absenteeism of economically disadvantaged children and increase the enrollment rate. This practice should also be applied throughout the country to enable children and youth to attend classes attentively, and hence, get a chance to reflect on their future. Furthermore, the provision of uniforms and learning materials for students who cannot afford to buy should be a focus area as the stories in the study highlight how these students struggle to cover their educational expenses. Nonetheless, these strategies should be important areas for targeted government funding to make it sustainable (e.g., widening the tax base, encouraging corporate social responsibility, and so on).

As alternatives to the mentioned strategies, schools can also think of creating flexible learning arrangements for students who need to engage in income-generating activities to support themselves or their families. For example, arranging accelerated sessions than attending regular classes can be one way of creating flexibility.

The youth's stories also underscore the impact of family and home-related conditions on their ability to pursue their aspirations. Hence, creating a relationship between home and school will enable teachers to understand more about supporting and constraining conditions at the familial level and better support their students as they strive to transform their own and their family lives through education. The home-school-community cooperation can be established by inviting well-known people from the community to school based on the students' interest area, so that they will learn from the stories of others. However, it is important that this kind of partnership is approached with

an emphasis on building meaningful relationships and understanding families resources, needs, and priorities so that it will not be perceived as surveillance on families.

Forming and equipping different activity clubs in schools is another potential implication of the study. The youths' highlight how these spaces are important for them in having concrete plans for their future and lack thereof impact them negatively. Besides, the narrated stories implicate that students should not be left by themselves to explore the transition from all Amharic (or other local languages) to all English classes, as language ties with their ability to understand the lessons and hence, their move towards their educational aspirations. Arranging English language tutorial classes for those who need support is one way to lessen the impact of language as a barrier.

Implications for Future Research

This study was not intended to provide all forms of aspirations of economically disadvantaged youth; instead, it focused on educational aspirations of the youth. As such, the study scope was limited to examining in-school and out-of-school conditions influencing youths' educational aspirations formation and their ability of pursuing their valued educational functioning. However, the study did not intend to explore the well-being achievement of the youth i.e., whether the youth achieve their aspirations. Instead, it sought to examine the process by which opportunities and constraints influence their educational aspirations. Further studies could use a qualitative longitudinal methodological approach to examine whether youth are able to achieve their aspired futures. This will help to identify conditions that continue to influence the youths' ability of pursuing their aspirations in the long term.

In addition, it was not the intention of the study to draw differences between women and men participants. However, there appear to be some differences in their agency as girls' agency were more constrained and men pursued their alternatives at any cost. This can be an area for further exploration.

Besides, the study was limited to examining how youth exercise their agency to choose, reshape, and pursue their aspirations and it did not assess the role of formal education in strengthening the agency of the youth. Further studies can examine not only the agency freedom that the youth have to reflect and make choices about their educational aspirations, but also how education (being educated) enhances their agentic power.

The study also reveals the relationship between faith and aspirations formation and youths' ability to exercise their agency. Future studies can explore in detail the role of faith in the aspirations formation process and how it affects youth's ability to pursue their aspirations. The interconnectedness of faith and agency is another aspect that can be explored in detail in future studies as the topic is not well assessed in comparative and international education literature.

Concluding Reflections of the Researcher

Working with the research participants, whom I referred to as “conversational partners” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 14), was simultaneously an exciting opportunity and a stressful experience. As someone who had struggled in poverty to go to school, I had many shared connections with my *conversational partners*. We all were thinking of taking a *short cut* and engaging in income-generating activities, at some point in our lives, to support ourselves and our families rather than going through the formal

educational path, which takes years to succeed. Even though sharing similar stories with them gave me easier access to their lives by getting trust, the personal attachment I developed gave me in a deep connection to them. One of the participants even told me about her experience of sexual violence that she had never shared with anyone. I became emotional while listening to their stories, and I could not stop thinking of the stories they shared with me. After returning from fieldwork and working on the translation and transcription, I relived those moments. Even at the analysis stage, when I refer back to their stories, I think back to the moments and remember the feelings they exhibited in their faces during every part of our conversations. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that researchers must “fall in love” with their participants, but I would say that you should not “fall in love” with them to the extent that it affects you where you cannot detach emotionally. Writing reflective notes after conducting interviews helped me not to be fully immersed and have a balanced etic and emic perspectives.

Leaving the fieldwork, I felt helpless for not doing something significant to change the lives of my *conversational partners*, even if I tried to help them in the small ways I could. I did not want to be a researcher who appears in their lives to collect data and disappears as if they are simply the “subjects” of the study. I continue to connect with them. They are not just “subjects” of the research for me. We became friends, and sometimes I saw myself in them when they told me how they strive amidst obstacles. Their stories matter to me truly; not only do I share a similar story with them, but also their stories reflect the many lives and struggles of Ethiopian youth. I am deeply indebted to them for sharing their experiences openly, hoping that telling their stories to the world would have some practical and policy impact. I share their hope!

Prologue

It has been more than a year since I interviewed the youth. Unfortunately, life does not get easier for some of them because the global pandemic and the ongoing war in Ethiopia²¹ has further affected their schooling. So, it is crucial to update on the current statuses of the youth.

Solomon, who dreamt of being a psychologist, joined the Ethiopian military force on the ongoing war in Ethiopia. The last time I checked him, he was in an army training center, and he told me that he thought he did not make the right choice but confirmed his interest in getting back to school after the war ends.

Selam, who aspired to be a lawyer, got a job as a janitor in a government organization. Her supervisors gave her a flexible schedule that could go along with her school time. She took the grade 12 national exam in November 2021 and is waiting for the result.

Ermias, who aspired to be a writer and an actor, took the grade 12 national exam in November 2021 and is waiting for the result. In the meantime, he started work as a driver of Bajaj (three-wheel vehicle) to support himself.

Tsinat, who aspired to be a psychologist, and also to work as a flight attendant for a short term, dropped out of school when the schools were closed because of the global pandemic. She is currently working as a cashier for one of the interstate roads in the Eastern part of the country, and helping her mother.

²¹ Since November 2020, a civil war has been ongoing in Ethiopia between the government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

Edel, who dropped out of school at the time of the interview, got back to school in the 2021/22 academic year (grade 9), but she is struggling to cover her living expenses, and her relationship with her mother has not improved.

Aster, who aspired to be an accountant and dropped out of school at the time of the interview, continues working as a waitress in the local coffee shop. I could not reach her recently, because she does not have her own phone and I used to reach out to her via her sister's number, but the number is not working currently.

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Appendix A

Youth Consent Form

Dear Participant,

You are invited to be participate in a research study of youth's opportunities and constraints in pursuing their aspirations. Please read this consent form and let me know if you have any questions before agreeing to take part in the study. This study is conducted by Hanna Wedajo, a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative and International Development Education Program at the University of Minnesota. This study is overseen by Prof. Joan DeJaeghere, Professor at the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development at the University of Minnesota.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to understand Ethiopian youth aspirations and to examine the constraints they face and the opportunities they have while pursuing their valued future. I am interested in your viewpoints in this subject.

Study Procedures

Your participation in this study is absolutely voluntary. If you do not agree to participate, it will not affect you in any adverse way. If you agree to have be part of the study, you will be interviewed by the researcher, Hanna Wedajo, at two different times during the semester. In the interviews, you will be asked questions about your aspirations, constraining and supporting factors that influence your aspirations at school, family, and community levels. I will also ask how you exercise your agency amidst constraining and supporting factors to pursue your aspirations. The two rounds of interviews will take a total of three to four hours approximately. I will also have an observation to the resource center that you frequently visit, and the resource center might be different clubs in the school or any center out of the school. With your permission, I would also like to interview one of your family members. I will schedule an interview at a time and place that is convenient for you. All aspects of your participation are voluntary, and it may be discontinued at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Participation

This study involves no significant risk to you because the purpose of the research is to understand the lived experience of youth's in pursuing their aspirations. You will not

be asked sensitive questions but if you think any of the questions are too personal or if any issues of emotional pain emerge through the questions, you do not need to answer them, or you can end the interview at any time.

This study is not intended to benefit individual participants. However, the interviews are a chance for you to reflect on your educational path by looking backward and forward, which may influence your commitments to your aspirations. Your participation will also contribute to the field of comparative and international development education.

Confidentiality

All information you provide will be kept confidential. I will not share your interview responses with anyone. Your record will be maintained in an anonymous form and only accessible by the researcher. Your name will not appear on the information you provide; rather, I will use an ID number to identify your information. This list and the research records will be destroyed at the time the IRB approval for this project expires.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You can decide whether to take part in the study or not. If you decide either way, it does not affect you in any adverse way. If you decide to participate, you are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, and your decision will not affect your relationship with your school.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Hanna Wedajo. If you have any questions about the study, please contact Hanna Wedajo at wedaj002@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. SE, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; 612-625-1650.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information, and I consent to participate in the study.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Signature of the researcher: _____

Date: _____

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix B
Research Questions and Data matrix of the Study

Research Questions		Sampling decision	Data collection methods		Data analysis
What do I need to know?	Why do I need to know this?	Where did I find this data?	What kind of data did answer these questions?	Whom did I contact for access?	How did I make sense of the data from these sources?
1. How do youth from economically disadvantaged families in Ethiopia imagine and reimagine their future amidst supporting and constraining conditions?	- To understand the youth's aspirations and how the opportunities and constraints they experience influence their aspirations.	Participants who are selected from the school charity club list based on criterion sampling (those who are from economically disadvantaged family and at the risk of dropping out of school while considering the gender balance) (2 female and 2 male students) Participants who are already dropped out of school for economic reasons (2 participants)	Three rounds of in-depth interviews with the youth	- Bureau of Education - School principal - Head of the school charity club	- Transcription of an audio recording of interviews (Categories emerge from CA approach and from the participants) - Memos - The three-dimensions of narrative inquiry analysis
2. How do these conditions may support or constraint the youth's ability to pursue their aspirations?	- To understand the causes of the manifested educational opportunities and constraints of the youth and how family, societal, or school-related conditions contribute to or impede the youth's educational path and their aspirations	4 in-school and 2 dropped out students	Three rounds of in-depth interviews with the youth	- Bureau of Education - School principal - Head of the school charity club	- Transcription of an audio recording of interviews - Memos - The three-dimension of narrative inquiry analysis

3. How do youth exercise their agency to choose, pursue, or reshape their aspirations within supporting and constraining conditions?	- To understand how the youth use their ability to choose, pursue, or reshape their aspirations considering different conversion factors.	4 in-school and 2 dropped out students	Three rounds of in-depth interviews with the youth	- Bureau of Education - School principal - Head of the school charity club	- Transcription of an audio recording of interviews - Memos - The three-dimension of narrative inquiry analysis
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Appendix C
Interview Protocol (Youth - in school)

[Before turning on the audio recorder]

Thank you for your willingness for the interview [Then, I will ask them a few warm-up questions such as how their day or class is going.]

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I am a Ph.D. student at the University of Minnesota in the United States. I am conducting interviews to learn about the opportunities and constraints of youth to continue their education and pursue their aspirations.

Before we start the interview, I would like you to know that your participation is absolutely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you can choose to stop at any time or to skip any questions you do not want to answer, and your response will remain confidential. Please feel free to share with me your experience as there is no right or wrong answer to the questions.

[Check if the participant signs up the consent form or brings the consent form signed up by his/her parent/guardian]

Ask permission for recording: *Is it okay if I record this interview?*

[After starting the audio recording, state the date and the interview number]

Part 1

First-round interview

Introductory questions

- What is a nickname you would like to use for this research?
- Would you please tell me where you were born and where were you raised?

- Please tell me about your family (parents, siblings, extended family).
- Please tell me an important story about your childhood.

Part 2

Second-round interview

Conversion factors related to educational institutions

1. Looking back, what did your typical day look like when you were in a primary school?
2. What comes to your mind first when you think of your primary education?
 - What was your best memory in primary school?
 - What was your worst memory in primary school?
3. What aspects of your schools were/still is important to you, and why?
4. What was your relationship with your friends like when you were in primary school?
5. Describe your relationship with your teachers.
 - Who was your favorite or least favorite teacher?
 - What was your favorite or least favorite class? Why?
 - What were your teachers' expectations of you?
6. In what kind of extracurricular activities or responsibilities did you participate while you were in a primary school (e.g., work/sports/theater/etc.)?
7. How did you do with your homework and grades in primary school?
 - Did you ever miss a class? How often? Why?
 - Did you ever repeat a class or not continue for a while?
 - What accomplishments in school are you most proud of?
8. What were your biggest challenges when you were in primary school?
 - What or who supported you to overcome these challenges?
9. What are the best things about your school? What about the worst things that should be improved?
10. How was going to primary school different from secondary school?
 - What transitions or turning points did you experience as a teenager that affected your education?

[Ask the above questions (No. 1 - 9) again to learn about their experience in secondary education]

Part 3

Third round interview

Aspirations and agency

1. When you were a child, what did you want to be?
 - Who were your role models?
 - Does your aspiration changes through time? Why?
2. Looking back, what or who was your biggest challenge to pursue your aspirations?
 - Can you please describe this situation to me?
 - How did you confront the challenges?
 - Who helped and supported you, and how?
3. Do you remember a time when somebody or something really helped you to pursue your aspirations? Can you please tell me the situation?
4. What is being educated means to you?
 - Why is it important to you?
 - What is your view of the role of education in a person's life?
 - How does your aspiration relate to your perception of the educated person?
5. Looking forward, how do you see yourself in the future?
 - What would you like to achieve so that you think your life is fulfilled?
 - Why is this important to you?
 - Who or what shapes your aspirations the most?
 - What do you feel when you think about your future?
 - What gives you the most hope when you think of your future?
 - What fears do you have about your future?
 - What are some of the things you are doing to achieve your aspirations?
 - What are the opportunities for possible success in achieving your aspirations?
 - What are the constraints for possible failure in pursuing your aspirations?

- How will you feel or react if you fail?

Personal conversion factors

6. What do you think is your biggest strength that keeps you motivated through these challenges? [Recall some of the challenges the youth mention, if any]
7. What were the crucial decisions in your life in relation to your education (if you do not have already told me)?

Family-related conversion factors

1. Would you please tell me what your typical day looks like at home?
 - What do you do?
2. What were the conversations you had with your family at home about your education?
 - Did you talk to your parents about your classes? How often?
 - Did they check your academic performance and other school activities?
 - Did you talk to them about your academic challenges, if any?
 - Did any of your family members help you with your studies?
3. Please tell me something significant about your family related to your education.
4. Is there a time when you were disciplined in relation to schooling? Why? What happened?

Social conversion factors

1. What was growing up in your neighborhood look like?
2. What does your typical day look when you do not have class?
 - Who do you spend your time with?
 - What do you do?
3. What is the societal perception of education?
 - Does going to school make you an educated person, or are there other things you need to learn? If yes, what are these things? From whom you can learn them?
4. How do your neighbors and people in your community support your education?
5. Is there a time when you think people in your community are obstacles to be what you want to be?

These are all the questions I have for you. Is there anything else you would like to tell me, or do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for your time!!

Appendix D
Interview Protocol (Youth - out of school)

[Use the above questions in appendix C and add the following questions. I will skip some questions that do not apply to them in “conversion factors related to educational institutions” sub-section.]

1. Please tell me about the incident that forces you to drop out of school.
2. What feelings come up when you recall your drop out of school?

Please tell me what you think your life would have been if you were in school