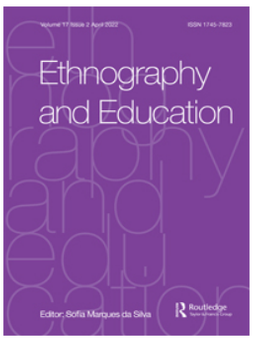

Ethnography and Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reae20

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To cite this article: Elizabeth Ngutuku (2022): Education as future breakfast: children's aspirations within the context of poverty in Siaya Kenya, Ethnography and Education, DOI: 10.1080/17457823.2022.2071591

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2022.2071591

Published online: 10 May 2022.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2022.2071591

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Education as future breakfast: children's aspirations within the context of poverty in Siaya Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on ethnographic data to explore children's aspirations through education within the context of poverty and vulnerability in Siaya Kenya. Since several children reported eating *onge* (nothing) for breakfast, they hoped that education would enable them to eat and enjoy a good future. I demonstrate that aspirations as orientations towards desired futures have affective dimensions [Huijsmans, Ansell, and Froerer. 2021. "Introduction: Development, Young People, and the Social Production of Aspirations." *The European Journal of Development Research* 33: 1–15]. Consequently, in drawing from Deleuze [1988. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights] that affect is a capacity to affect and to be affected, I argue that children's aspirations in Siaya are an assemblage of personal, relational and non-human factors of poverty, orphanhood, HIV/AIDS and other forms of marginalisation. This assemblage fuels a desire for alternative futures, and/or modifies their aspirations in complex ways. While children's desired futures might look impossible, their aspirations are also affective becomings [Salazar. 2017. "Speculative Fabulation: Researching Worlds to Come in Antarctica." In *Anthropologies and Futures: Researching Emerging and Uncertain Worlds*, edited by Juan Salazar, Sarah Pink, Andrew Irving, and Johannes Sjöberg, 158. London: Bloomsbury], and schooling and education are sites for alternative futures, in Siaya's continuing present.

KEYWORDS

Poverty; aspirations; education; affect; becomings; assemblage

Introduction

> We rarely take breakfast in the morning and other people take breakfast as we watch. My mother tells me to work hard in school so that one day we can be like other people. I am working hard in school so that we can one day take breakfast and with my mother live in a big house. (Naomi, 12 years)

In this paper, I explore children's imaginaries of a better future through education by drawing from my one-year ethnographic research in Siaya, Kenya, that explored children's complex experience of poverty and vulnerability. The above voice of one of the

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research participants, Naomi (like all names utilised in this article, this is a pseudonym) represents the challenges and the sacrifices by learners, but also their aspirations through education. For example, because of food insecurity in Siaya, hunger is part of children's quotidian experience of poverty and vulnerability that affects, but also co-constitutes, their experience of schooling. Children often go to school without food – or what emerged during my research, as eating *onge* (nothing) for breakfast. In tandem with the focus of the special issue, I use eating *onge* as an exemplar of the suffering and sacrifices children make as they pursue these desired futures.

Taking arguments by various authors that aspirations involve processes of imagining or realising desired futures (Collins 2018; Huijsmans, Ansell, and Froerer 2021, 1; Newman 2020), Naomi's voice and similar views by other children, represent not only a desire for eating well in the future but also their other imaginaries of a better future through education. Such aspirations as I explore them in this paper manifested as their hopes, dreams, expectations and were connected to notions of good, but also an alternative life they hoped for (Dost and Froerer 2021, 111; Ibrahim 2011, 3; Frye 2012).

In acknowledging that aspirations as orientations towards the future have affective dimensions as noted by Huijsmans, Ansell, and Froerer (2021, 13), and putting into consideration Siaya's context of poverty, I am therefore interested in the affective resources children and their caregivers draw from in imagining and positioning such futures. In thinking this way, I am guided by Deleuzean understanding of affect as a change in bodily state, as bodies interact, and as a force or an intensity, and therefore as a capacity to 'affect and to be affected' (Deleuze 1988, 123). I am also interested in not only how such futures are positioned but also lived and negotiated (van Stapele 2021, 132).

Various scholars have theorised children's aspirations in contexts of poverty and vulnerability. For example, Frye (2012, 1566) who researched girls' aspirations in Malawi argues that girls persist in education even when their 'circumstances afford them few realistic opportunities for success' because they draw on the cultural model of what she calls 'brighter futures'. She notes that such models are avenues for self-transformation that enable girls to transcend their current circumstances. Ansell et al.'s (2020, 31) research on young people's aspirations in Lesotho, Laos and India reveals the disconnect between young people's desired futures through education and the possibilities in their day-to-day contexts. They argue that achieving these aspirations remains fictional because such education is linked to the desires of global capitalism. In explaining such impossibilities, Berlant (2011, 24), while she does not focus on young people, would see such attachments to hopes for a good life when the reality of achieving it is difficult, as forms of 'cruel optimism'. She further argues that people are attached to such impossible futures, which she also sees as fantasy, because of the fear of the loss of the fantasy itself, as well as the attachment to it (Berlant, 2011).

While taking these arguments as a point of departure, several other authors have inspired me to deepen our understanding of children's aspirations. I draw from Cole (2012, 550) who argues that we should not standardise our understanding of the role of affect in education, but we should use evidence to modify or improve our theoretical perspectives. Locating my arguments in Siaya's context of poverty and vulnerability, modified by HIV/AIDS and other forms of state marginalisation, is also inspired by the view that different ethnographic contexts enable different productive exchanges between theory and evidence (Biehl 2013, 575). Exploring children's aspirations in

such a context is also influenced by my extensive work with vulnerable children and the discomfort I felt with the closure that comes with reading children's aspirations in the Global South too quickly and as an impossibility or a form of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011). Seen this way, my arguments are what St. Pierre (1997, 186) calls a 'responsible response' to other researchers who have theorised children's aspirations in similar contexts. Guided by the philosophical approach that informed my larger research where I explored children's experience of poverty as complex and non-linear (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), Siaya's complex context, which I describe next, enables me to explore children's aspirations beyond explanatory linear models and therefore as an assemblage.

Locating children's aspirations in Siaya through the lens of affect

As observed by several scholars, aspirations as affective orientations to the future and as part of the experience are bound in contexts (van Stapele 2021), 'situated in particular histories and places' (Huijsmans, Ansell, and Froerer 2021, 7), and are 'grounded in the situational points of intensity under scrutiny' (Cole 2012, 553).

Siaya has some of the lowest indicators of child well-being in Kenya and children's experience of education is entangled with various challenges. Livelihoods are not only insecure, but Siaya is also one of the most food-insecure counties in Kenya (World Food Programme report 2018, 4; Runguma 2014). Siaya also has a high HIV/AIDS burden and in 2015, it was estimated that one in four people in Siaya was living with HIV/AIDS (GOK 2015, ix). An ensemble of HIV/AIDS-related vulnerabilities and mortalities and the associated worldviews, as non-human factors, therefore, fold through Siaya's material and social-relational context, to engender specific affective resonances with children's aspirations through education. Indeed Roy (2003, 159) sees affect this way as a relational force that implicates both human and non-human bodies, with such interactions producing new modes of being for all the bodies in that relation or leading to what other authors have called the process of intensification (Blackman and Venn 2010, 24; Goodley, Liddiard, and Runswick-Cole 2018; Massumi 2015, 4).

Supporting the view by Kanngieser and Grindon (2013, 3) that affect moves beyond the individual or community and 'through and across events, bodies, spaces and experiences', children's aspirations in Siaya are also influenced by the national educational policy and design. This is because while the government aspires to have all learners complete basic education through a free education policy, learners are required to pay other levies and fees (Oketch and Rolleston 2007). These extra levies are unaffordable for most learners from poor backgrounds and therefore affect children's hopes of attaining a better future through education.

In staying with the view that the education system can be a site for affective encounters that influence aspirations, the secondary school system in Kenya is tiered like a pyramid, with a tiny minority of prestigious but expensive national schools at the top, a larger minority of County schools in the middle, and a majority of district schools at the base serving poor children (Oketch and Somerset 2010, 15). Such schools face various funding and infrastructural issues, influencing children's aspirations for better futures. However, in reading children's desired futures in a non-linear way, I also explore the

affordances of such schooling, which in different ways enable children to live their future as present and re-imagine themselves (Simone 2017; Muñoz 2013).

Researchers like (van Stapele 2021, 132; Frye 2012, 1599) have argued that children's aspirations through education are navigational tools and avenues and tools for alternative futures. Influenced by Deleuze, I further position these navigational tools as a 'sense of becoming', or strategies that people use to come to terms with difficult conditions of their existence (Deleuze 1995, 170), but also how the daily struggle to afford education co-constitutes children's day-to-day imaginaries of a better future. However, as we shall see in the discussion that follows, such struggles also produce other temporal orientations and alternative futures, and children's aspirations through education in Siaya, are also 'affective becomings' (Salazar 2017, 158). Such becomings, according to Roy (2003, 77), point to the root of the difficult conditions of children in Siaya and are not a movement from one point to the next. I also reveal what such futures as 'becomings' through education look like in their quotidian and the everyday.

The article is structured in two parts. In the first part, I explore how children position education as a route to a better future. I also show how these aspirations are co-constituted in this context, exploring HIV/AIDS and the desire to break free from identities associated with poverty and vulnerability as some of the affective resources that children and their families draw from in imagining their future. In the second part, I map the day-to-day textures of children's imaginaries of a better future through education by providing examples from children's experience from one family, supplementing this with the experience of other children. I conclude by reflecting on the forms of responsiveness required in addressing children's realities.

Methodological considerations

The arguments in this paper draw from my one-year ethnographic research in 2016–2017 in Siaya that explored children's lived experience of poverty and vulnerability at home, the school and the programmes of support. Drawing from the image of a rhizome as an indicator of complexity and connectedness, adopted in the research, I positioned children's experience in these spaces as non-linear (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Without making a distinction between education and schooling, and by locating these in context, I argue that the schooling experience is also enacted at home, for example, when children go to school without food, or as shown through how poverty at home affects how children and their caregivers imagine specific futures.

I carried out the ethnography in three sub-counties in Siaya and interacted with over 300 children aged 1–24 years, and their caregivers. I use the term 'children', by locating it in Siaya's context of childhood and youth where there was no age-based distinction and they were all known as, 'Nyithindo' (children), the plural for *Nyathi* (child) so long as they were in school. I encountered about 145 children in eight schools and through programmes that were providing education support to children. Since there was no one-to-one translation of a poor and a vulnerable child, these were children known as Nyithindo *machandore* or 'children who were not living well'.

In mapping children's experience, I used an innovative methodology that I called 'listening softly' to explore the different dimensions of children's voice beyond what they said. I used essays and creative drawing activities as the first steps to enable children

to represent their experience of poverty and vulnerability without labelling them as poor. To ensure a sustained engagement with children's experience and draw from issues emerging in these initial encounters, I further worked with children from 45 households.

To capture children's voice and reality as it unfolded, I used other, phased and emergent methods. These included observations and continuous conversations with children at various spaces, photo diaries with older children in two sub-counties and some children keeping a diary of their day-to-day experience at home and in school. I also had conversations with caregivers and teachers. Inspired by Biehl (2013, 580), that ethnographic 'returns' aid in staying connected to people's lived experience, discussions also draw from my physical return to the field in 2019 and continuous communication with children and caregivers in one of the sub-counties, where I was hosted during the earlier phase of the research.

Data analysis was continuous during the research. My field notes were first opportunities for data analysis where I reflected on the emerging issues, and transcription of the audio-recorded conversations were avenues for 'whole body listening' and attention to children and caregivers' body language (Kuntz and Presnall 2012, 740). I established the silences in the conversations as well as hesitations, sighing, breaks and tonal variations, which were imbued with affect, but also enabled a perspective on the diverse dimensions of children's voice beyond what they said (see James 2007). My diaries as reflections on various encounters each day were also data. For example, I took note of day-to-day metaphors associated with poverty, like the repeated assertions by children that they will eat breakfast in the future. The diaries also enabled me to inhabit the vitality, hopes and joys of children and their aspirations for a better life through education (see Huijsmans 2018, 12). In my final analysis, I did not code data but instead, diffracted it. Drawing from Barad (2007, 25), diffraction involved reading various data insights through each other, and through theory to obtain quantum messy nuances. Such analysis does not condense data into themes but diffracts to reveal diverse perspectives.

In terms of positionality, I see research as a 'space-time' where the researcher interacts with different bodies to influence realities (Ringrose 2011, 614). I have for several years worked on programmes for poor and vulnerable children. These engagements inspired the design of my larger research that was guided by the need to explore children's experience as complex and non-linear. Such a positionality also influenced my interactions with children during the research, a positionality I weave into the discussions, as part of the affective resources that young people drew from in their aspirations. My affect however was not just empathy with children but was part of the 'collective social force of "humaning" which my body [underwent]' during my encounters with their aspirations (Clarke 2019, 228). This for example included hoping together with the children that they would transit to the next level of schooling and advising those children who wanted to succeed in the future and get a PhD like me by supporting them in achieving specific milestones, like passing exams. These interactions were also emotionally difficult. Aware that affect can also destroy (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 284), I occasionally took breaks from the field when children's suffering as an affective force made me emotionally vulnerable. In the next section, I begin my analysis by exploring how children positioned education as not only an antidote to hunger but as a route to a better future.

Education as a route to a better future

One of the key themes in children's aspirations was the desire to eat in the future and especially when children noted they go to school without eating breakfast. For example, in our day-to-day conversations, children used various descriptors to position schooling challenges within the context of hunger. They talked about 'going to school with butterflies in the stomach', 'going to school just like that' or 'eating small food that cannot satisfy anybody'. They, therefore, used education to justify or minimise and overcome the negative physical effects of hunger. For example, some children in their essays revealed that instead of thanking God before they eat food, as is the practice in these contexts, they thanked God for the day in the future when they would eat after working hard in school. I have elsewhere called these divine modes of affect 'praying away the state-citizen contract' (Ngutuku 2018, 24), hoping to claim it in the future.

This is illustrated by one research participant, Cecilia, who was living with her grandmother, and saw education as her future 'food'. Through her essay, she detailed the challenges of schooling, since they could barely afford school levies with the proceeds of selling sugarcane in the local market. In her diaries, she also noted how she went without food, sometimes taking only a cup of tea and hoping that things would change in the future. For example, she made this entry in her diary in 2016; 'At 11:30 am, tea was ready, even though there was no escort (only plain tea), we took it with happy faces'.

Similarly, Pascaline (nine years old) had lost her father when she was eight months old. Like in similar research elsewhere, see (Ansell et al. 2020; Dost and Froerer 2021), she demonstrated the collective appeal in Siaya of a better future as achieved through hard work. As she noted in her essay in 2016,

> We go to school without breakfast because my mum can't afford … Some of my friends say that they take tea and bread in the morning … I often ask, what kind of life am I leading? My mum tells me to work hard in school so that one day we can have a good life.

Diffracting her views, my day-to-day interactions with children and through the lens of affect as hope, or as a temporality of that which is yet to come (Massumi 2015, 2–3; Simone 2017, 77), offers nuanced insights. This hope, embedded in hard work, collapsed time and space and does not equate to optimism since it acted as the sustaining force and helped Pascaline and other children to overcome their day-to-day challenges.

Children's views that they were working hard to excel may also be drawing from the discursive assemblage in Siaya and in the rest of the country, where they are expected to work hard and achieve the national aspiration of becoming good economic citizens in the future. Within the context of hunger, however, my day-to-day interactions with children revealed that the flows from the assemblage of poverty in the household interacted with those at the school to curtail such expectations. Indeed, a headteacher in one of the participating schools noted that learners couldn't perform well in school when they had eaten 'onge' (no-food). He evocatively likened this to 'expecting a radio to perform without cells' (field notes). Ansell et al. (2020) make a similar comment on such moral, economic and (often) global expectations in respect to education that are often oblivious of the lived contexts of learners.

Education was not just positioned as eating in the future but also as a route to good material life in the future including living in better houses. Pascaline added this in her essay: 'Our house is grass thatched, and when it is rains our roof leaks, and we don't have peace at night [it bothers us]. I am working hard in school so that my future can be different'.

Within the context of overwhelming poverty, education was also positioned through another evocative metaphor of a 'Saviour'. This is illustrated through Donald's experience, who acted as a caregiver to his siblings because his father was not supportive as he noted in our conversation; 'I have been suffering in this life, … even in high school. My life is all about suffering and education will save us from all this'.

A better future through education was also presented in relational terms (cf. Dost and Froerer 2021, 111), as collective benefits to the family and the larger community. This can be illustrated with the example of Ben, a 14-year boy who was a co-caregiver with his foster mother. After the death of their parents from HIV, Ben and his three siblings, including his six-year-old sister Ayo, were fostered by a widowed relative. In a photo narrative interview, Ben told me that he wanted to excel in school and help his siblings. The view of wanting to excel to help siblings in the future was commonly expressed by children who were caregivers to their siblings. Naomi who aspired to a better life of eating well and living in a big house with her mother also wanted to help her clan in the future without discriminating against anyone (Naomi essay 2016). At first instance and in relational terms, Naomi's aspirations support van Stapele research (2021) that belonging to a poor community meant that she was also expected to support them in the future. However, in diffracting her views further, her desire to overcome poverty through education and subsequently help others without discrimination goes beyond the existing notions of education as embedded in the national Policy as a vehicle for capital development (see also Caddell 2005). Her voice, like that of Pascaline, is an expression of a different optimism through education, enfolded into affects and an education that affords egalitarianism and concern for one another. The transformative potential embedded in children's views serves as an alternative to Berlant's (2011, 24) perspective that investments into specific scenes of futures (like education) are less about these futures and more about the affects people 'keep magnetized to them'.

Education was also positioned as the *Key* that would open doors to the future. For example, Gabriel, who was 16 years old and living with his foster grandmother noted the following in his essay: 'If I look at my background, we are poor … education is the key to my life. I am working hard in school to improve our situation'. In the immediate, such a key would also open the doors to a better life for his poorly step-grandmother who did not have children of her own.

Bringing in the education policy as part of the affective assemblage in children's aspiration, the failure to afford school levies meant that children's aspirations for a better future sometimes involved setting lower targets by positioning this future in terms of finishing or completing education, meaning at least high school. This is what Newman (2020, 6), in her research on the educational aspirations of girls in Senegal, would call 'judicious optimism'. To achieve such targets, religion and the intransigent hope in divine possibilities as nodes in the assemblage of children's aspirations kept children moving on (see also Ahmed 2017). In our day-to-day interactions, they used phrases like 'if God does not come for us, we will not finish education' or 'with God all things are

possible'. Beyond faith in God and in locating the affective dimensions of their aspirations as processes of intensification, such divine positioning of their aspirations is what Massumi (2015, 45) would call living intensely in the moment and thereby leaving no room for any doubt. Their hope for a better future enabled them not to be enslaved by their situation (Massumi, 2015, 6), but also to live that future as hope in the present.

As the discussions in this section have revealed, children hoped for a better future through education by drawing on their context of hunger and other forms of marginalisation. But such challenges also revealed other forms of becomings through education and schooling. In the next section, I explore how children drew from their marginalised context to position education as a process of becoming different.

Education and schooling as a process of becoming different

Several learners like Gabriel did not just talk of *finishing school* but also talked of 'sky being the limit' and hoped to attain a PhD. Wanting to do a PhD could be a perspective that draws from the existing discourses that position a PhD as the ultimate achievement in education and where teachers in the schools I interacted with were encouraging children to aim for the sky. Indeed Ringrose (2011, 602) has noted that schools are 'affective assemblages' with discourses of success in school shaping the 'affective capacities' of learners. Similarly, Ansell et al. (2020, 28) in their research on children's aspirations in Laos, also noted that teachers often pushed students to work hard including giving them dreams of becoming someone different in the future.

I however also diffractively analysed the aspirations of 'sky as the limit' beyond the discourse by teachers by mapping how this aspiration materialised differently and through processes of intensification through our encounters, as noted by Roy (2003). For example, some children said that they wanted to do a PhD like me and as they explained, this desire was shaped by the ineffable affect of qualities espoused by a highly educated person. It was expressed in terms like 'education that makes one different'. For them, attaining a PhD would be a materialisation of the virtue of hard work and tenacity in overcoming odds. The sky as an image of a better future also collapsed time and space to position a better future as infinite possibilities or the transcendent potentials of education. While Appadurai (2004, 69) noted that poverty condenses the possibilities for aspiring that are available for people, children's desire in the above case contradicts this view. Aiming for the skies as a poor child not only held within it the potential of becoming different, through education, but was imaginatively becoming different already.

Redeeming oneself from suffering in the future was also tangled with redeeming oneself from specific identities associated with poverty. For example, Donald's desired future was connected with the need to redeem himself from the image of his poor father. In our first conversation, he depicted his father as poor and struggling, but later in the conversation, he revealed that his father was not providing for the family and was an alcoholic. This resonates with Hart's (2016, 329) argument that avoiding certain futures is important in imagining 'desired possible selves'. His father was also a barrier to his becoming different through education. As Donald narrated to me, in a conversation in February 2017, 'My father burned my sibling's school uniform and books …

I was affected because I am the one who had bought them'. In reflecting on this through my diffractive diary that evening, I remembered Donald's pain during our conversation where he not only contrasted himself with his father but also distanced himself from his father's attempts to eviscerate these objects of schooling: namely, his siblings' books and school uniform (Dernikos et al. 2020).

Another research participant, Gabriel, who was in primary school was not just working hard for a PhD or to support his grandmother, but also to become different from his irresponsible father. In our first conversation in their home, he told me that his father 'was not there', which I understood to mean that his father was dead, since this is how death is spoken about in Siaya. However, through his essay, Gabriel later explained that his father had abandoned his mother, and this was the case for several other children. Gabriel attributed his father's behaviour to lack of education, writing in his essay, 'I hope to do well in my exams and join a good secondary school to become different from my father who only studied up to grade one'. Being in school for Gabriel was therefore not just a step towards ending intergenerational transmission of aspiration failure but was becoming different already. This is in contrast to Ibrahim's (2011, 16) research on aspirations in Egypt within the context of poverty.

Similarly, girls benefitting from one education project saw schooling as a process of becoming different. During photo narrative sessions, they displayed their photos wearing school uniform and doing what they called, *Kupiga mastory*, slang for talking with friends and the sense of camaraderie engendered by being in school, and a sense of belonging. This was the case for Purple, whose aunt noted: 'When I told Purple I would support her education, she was happy and said, I have been out of school for long and did not know that I would ever wear school uniform'.

Folded through children's experience of poverty, the school uniform as part of the affective assemblage in children's aspirations, therefore, did more than distinguish learners from non-learners or serve as a sign of becoming educated, as revealed in Caddell's (2005) research in Nepal. School uniform was a non-human and corporeal agent of affect that enabled entry to a space where some children were formerly excluded. It served as a sign of being a 'learner child', with the protections and affects magnetised around such a category making them feel special. Diffracting further and thinking with Barad's (2012, 48) perspective that matter not only feels but desires, the school uniform acted as an object of desire for a better future and a fulfilment of a short-term better future of interacting with others.

Like in Dost and Froerer's (2021) research, learners also noted that schooling enabled them to grow in multiple ways, or what the younger ones in pre-school called learning 'new things', or other aesthetics of schooling like speaking with confidence. Schooling was also a form of respite from hardship. This was the case for some in high school, who benefitted from the school meal, as well as for children in one pre-school centre, who told me the main reason for going to school was that the school provided fortified porridge, the only meal for the day in some cases. Okwany's (2013) research on schooling for girls in Kibera slums in Kenya, where girls noted that schooling enabled them to alleviate suffering, supports this view.

As evidenced above, the views by children demonstrate that schooling and education are imagined through not only the lens of a distant future but also a future as a becoming that meets the daily needs of children including repositioning their identity. In the next

section, I explore how HIV/AIDS and death as another assemblage in children's context interacted and/or influenced their aspirations to reveal other non-linear forms of aspirations.

Death and HIV AIDS as a mobilising force in children's aspirations

HIV/AIDS and death as both a social-relational and non-human agent of affect in Siaya influence children's experience of schooling and their desire for alternative futures. For example, in a conversation in August 2016, Oketch, who was 20 years old and in high school, attributed his delay in school to the death of his nine immediate relatives as he noted; 'I would have finished schooling a long time ago, but my dad died in 2007 and my mum in 2010'. He also revealed that his four maternal aunts, stepmother, grandmother and his cousin, all of them his subsequent caregivers, had died.

During our various discussions, Oketch expressed the collective pain of Siaya and children's day-to-day struggles occasioned by the death of caregivers while sometimes using the struggle for education as strength. In one conversation in September 2016, without enlisting my sympathy, he drew on the collective suffering of children in Siaya to justify his tenacity in education and said, 'it is everybody going through this [suffering through education]. … this makes me focus on my studies'. I also obtained his perspectives through his other 'forms of bodily knowing' (Blackman and Venn 2010, 18) including his emotions, tone of his voice and posture as affective tools (Huijsmans 2018, 3), as well as through my observations. Diffracting his views this way revealed that despite his perspectives on Siaya's pain being supported by similar affective registers on my part as I daily encountered the graves that dotted the landscape, his bodily expressions were not a resignation to these collective forms of affect (Jakimow 2020, 17). Instead, they communicated the aspiration of aliveness of spirit during life's difficult moments. Oketch often drew from such vitality to position himself as a 'hardworking child who loves school' since he had not given up under these circumstances. Such a virtue reflected his will and that of other children to transform these precarious ways of being through education. Such vitality generally, and the tenacity displayed in pursuit of education despite the odds that characterise Siaya childhoods, is already a change that gives meaning to children's lives, in the temporalities of Siaya's continuing present (see Huijsmans, Ansell, and Froerer 2021; van Stapele 2021).

Death as an object of affect had a differential role in Naomi's aspirations. In some cases, she framed her father's death in 2015 as an absence and through lack, for example, when she said in her essay that her father left her mother with nothing for school fees. She also framed his death as a presence, arguing that the constant awareness that her father was dead made her work hard in school. She revealed that when her schoolmates taunted her, she thought about her father, as part of her essay below reveals:

> [My] school uniform is worn out and other pupils, laugh at me. [We]often work in people's farms to get money for school or uniform. Sometimes people refuse to pay because we are poor, and we can go hungry even for two days. [I] don't take this to heart because I know where my father is[dead]. And [I] work hard to support my family in future.

HIV/AIDS interacted with children's and caregivers' hopes for a better future through education in complex ways, affirming that relational aspects of aspirations also enter into

an assemblage with non-human objects (Roy 2003). For example, within the context of existential uncertainty, some sick caregivers framed a better future as the event of their children completing school, as a change in itself. To illustrate this view, both of Pius's parents suffered from HIV/AIDS, and consequently, he would spend several days at home due to a lack of school levies. During one of my visits in late 2016, his mother, drawing on the affective intensities of our interactions during the research (Ringrose and Reynold 2014) looked up, and appealing to me as a sister and as a mother like her, enlisted me not only in her children's suffering but also her aspirations for them. She said 'sister, I will be happy when my children finish school. I don't know when God will take me and how they will live'. She, therefore, held a short-term view of a better future, as death after her children had completed school, a view that gave meaning to her difficult life (Biehl and Locke 2010, 321). This view was both an aspiration and change since investment in her children's schooling sustained her hope, but also her redemption through her children's education, which would be a triumph over her HIV/AIDS objected body.

Similar temporalities of the future were further illustrated by their neighbour, mama Allister, who was blind and suffering from HIV/AIDS and had no secure livelihood. In one of our conversations when I had visited, she presented her children's education as a solution to their challenges as she noted: 'I told my son that all my hope is on him … His success in school can bring light to this family'.

Expressions of hope for a better future within the context of death through HIV played out differently for Cecilia, earlier discussed. When I asked her poorly grandmother about her children, she directed me to the graveyard, and resignedly told me, 'they are there, the disease (HIV/AIDS) took them away. I am hoping someone can support my child (Cecilia) in school so that she can help me in the future' (Field notes, 22 November 2016).

Guided by the Deleuzean argument that desire flows through human and non-human bodies and assemblages in complex ways (Ringrose 2011, 600), I have explored how death and HIV/AIDS serving as an absence, a worldview and a difficult present in Siaya, interacted with children and caregiver's desires to define diverse temporalities of a better future through education (Roy 2003, 159; Massumi 2015, 3). While such a context, can be limiting, specific worldviews (like the ones associated with HIV/AIDS and death) can also open spaces for positive aspirations. In the following section, I revisit the experience of some of the children earlier discussed, to map their non-linear trajectories as they pursue education and their desired futures. This exploration responds to gaps identified by Frye's (2012) research in Malawi, by showing how the temporalities of waiting for the future through education look like in their quotidian and how they might evolve.

Unfolding temporalities of a better future

To explore children's unfolding aspirations, I return to Oketch and take the experience of him and his sister Stella as a starting point, while drawing from the experience of other children. These examples hold an 'affective force' (Ringrose and Rawlings 2015, 4) which show the messiness of children's aspirations within specific contexts of precarity.

Oketch's experience was complex, replete with engagement and disengagement from school and alternative paths. After completing primary school in 2012, he worked in a

motor vehicle garage for two years because he could not afford a secondary school education. However, through his essay, he noted that even though he was his grandmother's caregiver, he still wanted to go back to school and that, 'his mind was not in work'. In further revealing the relational nature of aspirations (van Stapele 2021), after working for a year, a customer encouraged him to go back to school where he repeated a grade. Yet again, he stayed at home due to a lack of school fees, until the headteacher in the village secondary school admitted him without school fees and as he noted, the school became his caregiver.

His then 12-year-old stepsister Stella, who had told me she wanted to study up to the university, was staying with their cousin during the early stages of my research. Stella's aspirations were however affected since she was forced to go back to stay with Oketch because her cousin, who was paying her school fees died. Before being fostered for education this way, Stella's education was supported by a small village children's centre. After the death of their cousin, Oketch had requested the centre to re-admit Stella, hoping that the centre would support her education in the future. In analysing Oketch's behaviour through Berlant's (2011, 2) argument that optimistic attachments involve returning to the scene of fantasy, one can argue that Oketch did not only have optimism in education, but also in the 'the children's centre, where the goal of education was situated'. This was the optimism that several children demonstrated, as they sought educational support from these organisations that have made themselves visible in Siaya childhoods. In one of my visits in November 2016, Stella refused to go back to the centre and as I noted in my field notes argued; 'It was false hope, they do not support anybody after primary school … It is not worth the sacrifice of eating undercooked cabbage there'. Stella's refusal to go back to the centre, counters Berlant's (2011, 28, 116) arguments that cruel optimism hinders the subject from resisting the exhaustion embedded in certain attachments.

In 2018, Oketch moved from home to live with a teacher. A worker in his school told me that Oketch was frequently calling in sick and had eyesight problems. They thought he was bewitched by his extended family, who was jealous of his education. The fear of witchcraft was a new affective node in my understanding of his sense of becoming in education.

After high school, in 2018, Oketch did not achieve the points required for university entry, and this was the case for several learners in my research. Indeed, together with the learners and like Dernikos et al. (2020, 17), who see exams as a scene for desire, we 'ached with hope' but also fear, as we waited for the examination results. This is because while exams were a potential passage or a blockage toward the desired futures for all children in Kenya, exams had a differential force on poor children's aspirations (cf. Tafere's 2014 research on children's aspirations in Ethiopia). Oketch eventually repeated a grade in high school in 2019 and scored good grades, finally obtaining admission to an engineering college.

In 2021, I followed up with Oketch, who had deferred his college studies because yet again he could not afford the fees. However, his affective orientation to the future as a becoming exhibited the resilience of a rhizome that, as noted by (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 9), might be shattered but still thrives. He took a job in Siaya town, not as a revision or abandonment of his aspirations, but to secure money for his college fees, even as he worked to support his sister. His continued aspiration towards a better future also

supports Massumi (2015, 3) view that affect as hope is not necessarily linked to the future or larger utopian picture, but it can be understood in relation to the small steps that make that future possible or the present liveable.

This same non-linearity in children's aspirations was revealed in the life of Oketch's sister, Stella. In 2018, like many other children fostered for education in Siaya, Stella had moved home (and school) for the fifth time to stay with another great aunt who was supporting her education. At 17 years in 2021 and five years behind her grade, Stella sat for her primary school exams where she scored 213 points out of the maximum 500 and was not assured of a place in high school. As part of the assemblage in children's aspiration, I had already promised to support her with school uniform if she got a position in high school. Oketch and Stella's situation helps us to see, as noted by Frye (2012, 1610), how collective aspirations towards a better future are 'moulded by individually specific experiences', but also by the singularity and messiness of such trajectories.

I have continued following up with the other children by calling them or visiting to see 'what is happening in the meantime', as noted by (Biehl 2013, 580) and guided by Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 284) that we need to know the capacities of bodies in space and time.

For example, in 2018, Cecilia repeated a grade in high school and became a professional musician and moved from her grandmother's home to stay with her music sponsor who was also supporting her education. In 2018, Ben, who wanted a better future to help his siblings, was fostered by a neighbour in the village. His former foster mother told me that the new caregiver was paying for his secondary school education in exchange for his domestic labour. To demonstrate how transitioning to primary school is part of an orientation to the future in Kenya, when I visited in 2019, Ben's younger sister Ayo, at nine years of age, was still in pre-school. But she was wearing the school uniform that is worn in the village primary school, as an object of desire for transitioning one day.

Likewise, Purple, whose school uniform had signalled a better future, was no longer in school in 2017, and the reason was not clear to me. However, her auntie had earlier complained to me that she had supported Purple's older sister in school, and instead of working to support the family, she had got married. My research however revealed that girls got married prematurely due to complex issues interacting with schooling, as I have discussed above (cf. Newman 2020).

Returning to Gabriel, when I visited him in 2019, he had joined a small secondary school in the village because he could not afford the fees for a better school. He however still held the aspirations of the 'sky as his limit' and refused the nudges by my research assistant to revise his 'lofty' dreams. Being in a small school was not a revision of his dreams but part of his becoming a PhD, and where becoming is not just steps in series of a whole, but a change in itself that produces the new (Robson and Riley 2019, 6).

These examples reveal that children's experience of schooling and their aspirations are unfinished, because of the way their experience unfolds. These examples show that it is not just the personal factors that are associated with their aspiration and their movement, as revealed in Frye's (2012) research, but an entanglement of issues. For Oketch, this desire seems to be stuck at different moments. However, seeing his life as stuck would

be ignoring the alternative temporalities in their aspirations, or what Fast and Moyer (2018, 12) call the 'affective intensities that animated the meantime of[their] everyday' of schooling, as earlier discussed. I shall revisit the discussions and address the various issues that make it difficult for children to attain desired futures in the concluding section.

Conclusion

Guided by the ethnographic cartographic and diffractive methods which call for alternative readings and seeing reality as complex, I have revealed that children's aspirations through education are not linear, but are more of an assemblage, where context-specific affects are mobilised. In addition to poverty, they draw on other affective resources, including death and HIV/AIDS, which is a defining context in Siaya, as well children's desire to become different.

From a social justice perspective, I have also revealed that schooling and education as currently organised in Kenya may not provide the desired futures imagined by Naomi and other children. The paper also supports arguments by Tafere (2014, 2), whose research on young people's aspiration in Ethiopia challenges the dominant assumptions that children's aspirations in poverty and constrained contexts are unrealistic and need to be reoriented. Instead, answerability by the state is required to address the challenges they face.

I have demonstrated, finally, that children's affective orientation to the future can materialise futures of diverse temporalities, enabling them to overcome their day-to-day challenges and opening spaces for living the future in the present and for other fluid becomings (Ahmed 2017, 2; Berlant 2011, 14; Robson and Riley 2019). Children's 'audacious sense of hope' (St. Pierre 1997, 176) is political. Their hopes of attaining a better future, the pain, sacrifice and anxiety enfolded into such desires, reconfigures actors at diverse scales, who need to respond to children's wait for breakfast as a better future.

Acknowledgements

Financial and other support during the writing of this paper was provided by the Centre for Public Authority and International Development (CPAID) at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education [grant number BC8938 PHD 2015-2019]; Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) [grant number ES/P008038/1].

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