



“I have dropped out three times”: Why Young People in Ethiopia Often Repeat Years in School

This policy brief draws on qualitative research relating to young people in five communities (both rural and urban) who are part of the Young Lives longitudinal study of 3,000 children and young people in Ethiopia.

It shows how difficult children and young people have found it to complete their education without repeating one or more years, dropping out temporarily or leaving school early, and the impacts on this of location, economic background and gender.

Key research findings

- This study shows that students have experienced slow school progression at all levels. Many young people who repeated grades have either dropped out altogether or are still in school as adults.
- Four out of five have experienced one or more interruptions in their school lives.
- The Young Lives longitudinal survey shows that by age 15, about 65 per cent were over the intended age for their grades.
- Only one of the 29 young people included in this qualitative study has moved on to university.
- The main causes of interruption are poverty, heavy workloads, illness or injury, or school-related problems such as failing exams or lack of interest caused by poor teaching.
- Prolonged educational trajectories mean female students are susceptible to marriage before finishing school.
- This raises policy issues, including the need for comprehensive social protection, how to enable students to combine school and work, and the need to improve the quality and equity of education.

Introduction

The Ethiopian education system

The 1994 Education and Training Policy shapes the educational system in Ethiopia. Formal education starts at age 7 with primary education from Grade 1 to Grade 8 (first cycle 1–4, second cycle 5–8) followed by secondary through Grades 9–12 (general Grade 9–10 and university preparation Grade 11–12). Examinations are taken at Grades 8, 10 and 12. Grade 8 regional exams aim at certifying the completion of primary education. The nationally organised Ethiopian General Secondary Education Certificate Examination (EGSECE)¹ at Grade 10 aims to certify the completion of secondary education and to select students who qualify for preparatory education for universities.

Those who fail the EGSECE can join vocational education and training (TVET), colleges of teachers' education (CTEs) or private colleges. Students who pass the EGSECE can continue their schooling in Grades 11 and 12 as preparation for higher education. If they then pass the Ethiopian Higher Education Entrance Certificate Examination (EHEECE), they are eligible for university.

Schooling in Ethiopia is generally characterised by slow progression, caused by students repeating school years or dropping out of school temporarily. Grade repetition and dropout influence the completion rate. For example, in 2014/15 the completion rate of Grade 8 was as low as 51 per cent (MOE 2015).

Young Lives

This policy brief is based mainly on data from the 29 young people in the qualitative study who were still in education in 2019. They were asked about their educational aspirations, learning experiences and schooling routes, as well as the situations influencing their trajectories.

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty and transitions to adulthood following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India,² Peru and Vietnam) since 2001. It aims to provide high-quality data to understand childhood poverty and inform policy and programme design.

In Ethiopia, Young Lives follows 3,000 young people from two cohorts (2,000 in the Younger Cohort, born in 2000/1 and another 1,000 in the Older Cohort, born in 1994/5). The study focuses on 20 communities drawn from five regions: Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) and Tigray. Since 2007, there has also been a qualitative study of 100 children and their caregivers from five communities. To date, Young Lives Ethiopia has carried out five rounds of surveys and five qualitative waves.

The study communities

The five study communities featured in this brief include three rural communities – Tach-Meret in Amhara, Leki in Oromia and Zeytuni in Tigray – and two urban ones – Bertukan in Addis Ababa and Leku in the SNNPR.³

The rural communities have access to public (state-run) schools although these provide a low quality of education. The students from rural areas have to go and stay in towns to access secondary and higher education. Tach-Meret, however, is close to a town, and young people have better access to educational institutions such as public TVET colleges and private colleges. Some of the young people in the study have attended these institutions for skills training or college education.

Children from poor families in all communities start working for income in early childhood, which affects their school trajectories. In the rural sites of Tach-Meret, Leki and Zeytuni, people earn a living through agriculture, complemented by small trade and daily labour. In Leki, vegetable growing, fishing and private flower production provide employment opportunities for young people (Pankhurst and Tafere 2020; Tafere and Chuta 2020).

Main findings

More than half the students do not finish school

The Young Lives longitudinal survey data indicate that by the age of 22, more than half the Older Cohort had left school without completing secondary education. As Box 1 outlines, young people experienced slow progression through school and further or higher education.

Box 1. Educational levels of the Older Cohort in 2016

At age 22, a third of the Older Cohort were still in education. Of these, 41 per cent were at university, 22 per cent in vocational training, 15 per cent at the preparatory stage for university (Grades 11 and 12), 12 per cent in lower secondary school (Grades 9 and 10) and 11 per cent in primary school. More urban than rural young people, and more girls than boys were attending vocational training college or university. Among those who were in education, 78 per cent of those from the richest households were either in vocational training or at university, whereas 58 per cent of those from the poorest households were still in Grade 12 or below, meaning that they were over-age for their grade.

Source: Pankhurst, Araya and Woldehanna (2017).

1 The Ministry of Education has announced this year that this exam will no longer take place. However, the official policy document is not yet available.

2 In the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

3 The names of the sites and the respondents are pseudonyms, in order to preserve anonymity.

The qualitative data from the 29 young people reveal slow progression (see Figure 1). More females (12) than males (9) reached secondary school or above. There was little disparity in location, although urban children were more likely to be in secondary school and attending TVET college or university than those in rural areas.

Many students are over-age for their grade

Slow school progression is clearly indicated by the fact that many of the young people still attending school are over-age for their grade. By age 15, children are expected to complete primary school and join lower secondary education (Grade 9).

However, the Young Lives longitudinal data for the Older Cohort show that among those who were in school, 65.4 per cent were over-age for their grade. Disparity was visible with regard to gender (63.2 per cent male, 67.6 per cent female), location (70.7 per cent rural, 58 per cent urban) and wealth (81.3 per cent of those in the bottom quintile and 43.8 per cent of the top quintile) (Woldehanna and Araya (2016).

Four out of five of those in this qualitative study have experienced one or more interruptions to their schooling. They have dropped out of school either through poverty, or because of a heavy workload, illness or injuries, or school-related problems such lack of interest caused by poor teaching.

Injuries and illness affect schooling

“I have dropped out three times. Three years ago, I interrupted school because of an ear problem. Last year, I quit school because of toothache which led to a serious headache. I could not eat for some days. My parents did not have enough money to take me to a health centre for treatment. That led me to quit school for the second time. The illness was the main reason for my school dropout in both cases.”

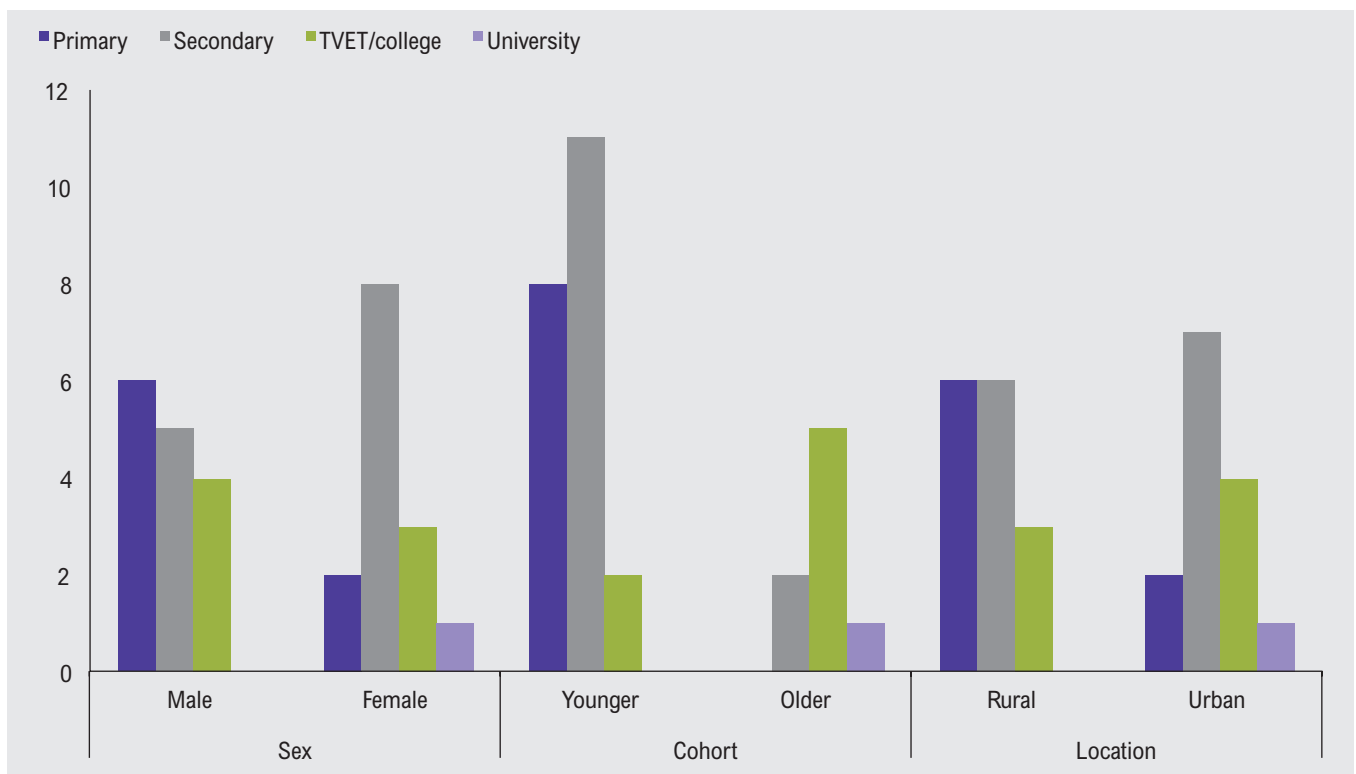
Negassa, 18, Grade 7, Leki

In the absence of access to healthcare, injuries or illness can be serious enough to keep young people out of school. Working children are more likely to be exposed to injury. Seven young people have repeated or interrupted grades once or more because of illness or injuries. Rural children are more prone to injuries. For example, Yibeltal, from Tach-Meret, is the 18-year-old son of a farmer and herds cattle. He interrupted his education in Grades 1 and 4, in the latter case because he broke both his legs while trying to collect animal feed from a gorge. He is in Grade 8 and hopes to complete Grade 10 before moving into farming.

Heavy workloads often interrupt education

Rural children in particular are likely to interrupt their education because family agriculture or paid work makes demands on their time from a young age. The work and schooling history of Kebegna, from Leki, illustrates how work has affected his education.

Figure 1: Educational levels of young people in education at ages 18 and 25, by age, sex and location (2019)



Source: Young Lives fifth-wave qualitative sub-sample (N=29)

Box 2. Kebegna's story

“ I am in Grade 1. I protect the crops and also fetch water. Sometimes I collect firewood. I also look after the cattle. The work may affect my education if it forces me to repeat [grades]. ”

Kebegna, aged 7, 2008

“ I am not attending school this year because I have to look after the cattle and I have to plough using a pair of oxen. ”

Kebegna, aged 10, 2011

“ I am in Grade 8 but overloaded with family and paid work. I worked on an irrigated farm for wages. It is only recently that I began my own vegetable growing. ”

Kebegna, aged 18, 2019

Almost all the young people included in this qualitative study have done some paid work. A number have been pressured to leave school because of their workload. The survey data also show that by age 19, 38.5 per cent of the Older Cohort were combining school with work, leading to a third (38 per cent) leaving school because of heavy workloads (Woldehannna and Araya 2016).

Some have benefited from work in terms of income and gaining skills useful for future life. Ayenew is one of these.

“ For the last two years, I have been working in a garage. I work in the opposite shift with schooling and on weekends. I am working in a garage to learn the skills. Then I will have my own business with the skills I gained. Of course, I am paid 100 birr per week as a wage. But my purpose is to learn skills, not earning money ... I want to continue my education up to Grade 10. Then, I want to start my own business. ”

Ayenew, 18, Leku, 2019

School-related problems discourage children

Some young people report that failing an exam delayed their progression. In rural communities, schools provide a low quality of education and many young people find it hard to pass exams. For instance, in Leki three of the Younger Cohort who are currently in Grade 7 reported that they repeated grades because they did not pass the exams. Mitiku failed twice, Negassa joined school late and then dropped out for a while because of illness and the poor quality of the teaching, while Mulualem repeated once. Mitiku and Negassa have moved to towns to attend better schools. However, Mulualem's parents were too poor to support such a move. She fears she is now at risk of marrying before she finishes her education.

Tsega, 24, from Leku, is currently in Grade 10. She dropped out for three years when she was in Grade 8. When asked why she quit school, she replied: "It was because of myself that I have dropped out of school. I didn't have any interest in education; I was bored with education. It was because

I couldn't find everything as I expected in school. For that reason, I decided to discontinue my education."

Students find that teachers lack motivation, and it discourages them. Negassa dropped out of school temporarily when he was younger. He said:

“ Teachers are usually absent from school. I hate the school when teachers are absent. For example, we have not learned social studies in a semester. Only one teacher teaches all the subjects all the time. In other schools, I was told that different teachers teach different subjects. I like being taught by different teachers. This may help students to acquire good knowledge. In my current school, the teacher does not teach more than two or three subjects daily. ”

Negassa, 13, Leki, 2014

The link between aspiration and achievements

This study indicates that many young people were unable to fulfil their childhood educational aspirations. But the longitudinal survey data show a clear correlation between higher educational levels and continuing high aspirations (Favara 2017; Tafere 2014). Successful young people continue to dream of university education, a dream shared even by some of those from rural areas. Frezer is in Grade 10 and dreams of becoming a doctor after university. When he was in Grade 2, he said: "When I grow up, I will be a doctor. I want to treat patients". He continues to dream, and his parents support him by relieving him of his workload and helping with his schooling.

“ As there is no family workload, I am attending my education properly. ... They [my parents] do not want me to be absent from school. I never missed school ... After I complete my university education, I want to be a doctor. I need to attend my education properly and achieve a good result. ”

Frezer, 18, Tach-Meret, 2019

Location also matters for school progression. Those who live in urban areas and can afford the fees have better opportunities to join private colleges if they fail to get into public universities or TVET colleges. For example, Netsa, 24, from Bertukan, said: "I wanted to join public TVET to get training in hairdressing or cooking. But I was not allowed. So I had to join a private college to study nursing." Netsa was lucky to have this option. Public TVETs are only open to those who take the EGSECE at Grade 10 but fail the exam, and not to those who passed the EGSECE and went on to Grades 11 and 12 but then did not pass the Grade 12 exam to go to university.

Among the 29 children and young people in the study, only one has successfully transitioned to university. Yordi, from Leku, is a fifth-year engineering student at a university. She went to a private school up to Grade 2, but following

the death of her father, she moved to a state-run school as her mother could not afford the fees. In 2007, she reported that the change of school had affected her performance as the public school provided a lower quality of education. In the subsequent interview rounds, she continued to report that her dream was to be an engineer. In 2019, she was in her fifth year of a civil engineering degree at a university in SNNP region. She said: “I chose civil engineering because I was good at mathematics. I remember I was saying ‘I want to be an engineer’ when teachers were asking us in Grade 4 but I don’t know the reason for that.”

Yordi has had good results during her degree and is planning to go abroad for postgraduate study.

However, she seems to be an exception. In general, this study has shown that many young people are unable to achieve their childhood educational aspirations, or they are a long way from achieving them. Different factors contributed to their irregular educational trajectories, with disparities based on location, gender and economic status.

Policy recommendations

We have seen clearly from this study that the majority of children and young people struggle to follow a linear path through school, and that many repeat grades or drop out entirely before finishing, particularly if they live in rural areas and come from poor families. This is often despite high aspirations and a real wish to complete their education. The Ministry of Education is trying to address these issues but challenges persist. These recommendations are focused on what can be done to improve this situation and allow young people to access high-quality education and stay in school.

1. Ensure comprehensive social protection and healthcare

Both the survey and the qualitative data show that children from poor families and rural areas are prone to dropout, grade repetition and being over-age for their grade. We believe that a comprehensive social protection programme is needed for children from poor backgrounds. This could include school feeding, healthcare and support with educational materials.

Illness and injuries were strongly associated with school dropout. Children who were unable to get immediate and proper healthcare were forced to stay at home or use

traditional remedies. It is vital that schoolchildren have access to suitable healthcare so that they do not interrupt their education.

2. Support children and young people to combine work and schooling

Workload seems to affect rural children and those from poor families in particular, and may impact schooling in two ways. First, working children may miss classes or have no time to study. Second, work may expose them to injuries or illnesses that force them to drop out of school.

We noted that child work often had a negative impact on children’s educational trajectories and achievements. On the other hand, we also found a number of working young people who were able to fund their school and even their college education themselves. Some of those in private colleges were also covering their costs through their earnings from work. More importantly, some young people used work as a route to new skills. We therefore suggest that, while children should not be exposed to hard or excessive work that affects their schooling or health, they should not be discouraged from combining schooling with work.

3. Improve the quality of education

The poor quality of education in public schools, especially those in rural areas, has discouraged many young people. Some have left school, while others who could afford it have transferred to private schools. In line with the Ethiopian Government’s commitment to UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG),⁴ the Ministry of Education needs to work hard to deliver good-quality education at all levels for schoolchildren, irrespective of location and economic status.

4. Ensure equity

Equity in terms of the quality of education could be reached by reducing the gap between the poor and the rich, rural and urban areas, and boys and girls (SDG 4). Prolonged educational trajectories are making some female students susceptible to marriage before finishing school. Efforts by parents, children and the Government to improve girls’ education can only be valuable if girls finish their schooling and find employment. Following SDG 5,⁵ education should ensure gender equity to make girls and young women equal citizens in society.

4 Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all.

5 Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.



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