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INTRODUCTION



## Losing or securing futures? Looking beyond 'proper' education to decision-making processes about young people's education in Africa – an introduction

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### ABSTRACT

The education of young people in Africa has been receiving increasing political attention due to expanded schooling and, as a result, an expanding number of unemployed educated youths who challenge governments. While many studies have described young people in Africa as being in a stage of 'waithood', this special issue looks at decision-making processes in youths' education. The articles, which are mainly based on anthropological fieldwork, show how fears of 'losing' the future and ideas of 'securing' it guide decisions about young people's education. Economic, political, moral, gendered, and religious factors are decisive in educational decision-making processes. Moreover, the status and prestige attributed to various forms of education impact those decisions. By looking beyond ideas of 'proper' education, which often reduce it to public schooling, this issue gives insight into the educational landscape in Africa and its connections to those of other continents that shapes young people's lives and futures.

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Education has always built upon a specific conception of humanity and the future. Whether in 'traditional', Christian, Islamic or 'Western'-style schooling, we have found no notion of education that does not relate to an imagined future. This intimate link between education and the future was a starting point for the working group 'Learning for the Future - Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Knowledge Transmission in Africa and Beyond' organised by a team of scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds (Social Anthropology, General and School Pedagogy, Psychology) at the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies in the winter semester of 2017–2018.<sup>1</sup> Our study of education and its link to the future was embedded in the Bayreuth Academy's research topic 'Future Africa – Visions in Time', within which we could not dispute the hypothesis that education always refers to an imagined future.

Questions about education and the future are attracting growing political attention both in Africa and globally. Education was Target 2 in the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, while Number 4 of the current Sustainable Development Goals (2016–2030) is to 'ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning' (United Nations 2015). Likewise, in its Agenda 2063 the African Union envisions an 'integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens' (African Union Commission 2015). Young people play a central role in this

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Agenda since in many African countries today unemployed educated young people take to the streets to demand political change and jobs (Honwana 2019).

The recent literature about young people in Africa often characterises them as being in a stage of ‘waithood’ (Honwana 2012), during which young people ‘wait’ to reach adulthood while searching for ‘proper’ jobs. Waithood and schooling are ultimately linked: ‘Western’-style schooling promises development, social mobility and a bright future, but the mass expansion of schooling, as well as neo-liberal transformation, grant these imagined futures only to a few. While some youths become successful adults and others find jobs but continue to struggle to make a living, a huge number of them cannot turn their school credentials into ‘proper’ jobs and remain unemployed. This leads to the characterisation of African young people as in a stage of ‘social moratorium’ (Vigh 2006). The precarious situation of youths trying to turn their educational credentials into jobs has been studied in various contexts across Africa and the Global South (Durham and Solway 2017; Stambach and Hall 2017; for Asia see Naafs and Skelton 2018; for urban Africa see Mains 2011; Steuer, Engeler, and Macamo 2017). According to studies on young people in Africa, images and imaginations about the future play a crucial role in how they and their families try to shape the future in the present (Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016).

Images of the future inform decisions about education, but – in contrast to previous research – ours does not focus on these images or on the precarious situation of youths in realising their imagined future. Instead, we look into *practices* of future making. Education is always future oriented and aims to shape the future positively, but the future is uncertain and so is planning for it (Hänsch, Kroecker, and Oldenburg 2017). Nevertheless, educational decisions have to be made in the present and to try to influence the future of children as well as is possible.

Looking into these decision-making processes, we critically analyse how fears of ‘losing’ the future and ideas of ‘securing’ it through various forms of education inform decisions about education. This focus on decision-making processes opens a perspective on various forms of education that exist in Africa and beyond. The contributions in this issue examine young people’s pathways along and beyond the dominant narrative that it is ‘only’ standardised ‘Western-style’ schooling that leads to employment, economic independence and adulthood.

Neoliberal narratives promise that (higher) education leads to economic success. This narrative builds upon the idea that ‘proper education’ leads to ‘proper jobs’ and a secure future even though the reality of unemployed youths falsifies this correlation. The narrative of economic success linked to ‘Western’-style schooling contributes to the idea of a standardised ‘modern’ (‘Western’) life course that is formalised through schooling (Kohli 2007). However, this life course ideal competes with a plurality of notions of ‘proper’ life-courses that exist outside of schooling.

Working with a broad definition of knowledge transmission, we integrate education by parents and relatives, as well as moral and religious education, into our study. These forms of knowledge transmission might be institutionalised, as in Qur’anic and initiation schools, but when we speak of schooling in what follows we are referring to state-controlled ‘Western’-style schooling while using ‘education’ as a generic term for various forms of learning and teaching that include but are not limited to schooling. Froerer and Portisch (2012) show, in their special issue, a wide range of educational and work environments that link education and livelihood and may lead to social mobility. Acknowledging this variety of learning environments (see also Abidogun and Falola 2020), ours looks at educational decisions during the life stages of childhood and youth when decisions about education are crucial for the life path – even though education is a lifelong process.

Policy papers very often use age as a criterion to define youth. In Africa, 60% of the population are currently under 25 years of age (United Nations 2019, 13) so by that standard children and youths constitute the majority of the population. Besides biological or numerical definitions of age, another criterion to distinguish between youth and adulthood is social and economic maturity: a person often gains adult status and social maturity through economic independence. As Durham (2017, 5) argues, we acknowledge that adulthood is more than being a financially independent person. Marriage, starting a family and acting as a socially related person who

shows responsibility by taking care for others are often criteria for being accepted as an adult person in society. Because they are excluded from the formal labour market, many young people in contemporary Africa achieve social adulthood in the sense of becoming mature and being able to start a family and care for a household of their own at a later age. Following this definition, 'young people' appear as a social group whose members are often not (yet) economically independent, even if they are in their thirties or forties. In this issue, case studies from Ethiopia, Ghana, Lesotho and from transnational contexts Senegal and the US and The Gambia and the UK show how educational decisions are embedded in uncertainty, the life-courses of children and parents, different actors' interests and multiple forms of prestige attributed to various ways of attending or leaving educational opportunities.

### Notions of 'losing' and 'securing' futures through education in Africa

The educational landscape in Africa involves many stakeholders, which provide various forms of secular and religious, formal and informal, and private and public education. Given the variety of educational opportunities, historic experiences and contemporary challenges, youths in Africa have to deal with expectations of relatives, societies and nation states, as well as with their own future prospects in a general area of uncertainty. Against this background, we have observed that discussions about education often become very emotional. These emotional aspects of education have so far received little attention in the study of education in Africa.

The cases studied in this issue show enchantment with education (Coe 2020), fears of survival (Duney and Ansell 2020), anger and disappointment (Abebe 2020), stigma and belonging (Hoechner 2020) and pride (Newman 2020), as well as emotional distress because of separations between parents and children in transnational contexts (Kea 2020).

The hopes and fears that educational issues trigger are expressed differently – and at times contradictorily – by different actors, including the state, parents, men, women and youths. Therefore, our guiding question for this issue is: who considers what type of education, at what time and place and for whom to be 'proper' in trying to prevent 'losing' children and to 'secure' the future?

By *losing* we mean a number of different things, including demographic loss through young people's migration from rural to urban areas or international migration; losing the labour of young people in household-based economies and a sense of moral loss due to a failure in the transmission of valued religious, cultural or moral knowledge. By *securing* we refer to discourses that address promises of a brighter future, like improved wellbeing, social upward mobility, individual and national progress, the fulfilment of citizen's needs, and aspirations formulated by children, youths and their kin regarding their future. Formal education such as schooling is also sometimes depicted as 'saving' children's lives.

The ideal conception of for what a moral human being should be educated has changed throughout history. In defining a good life and a morally proper person (see Appadurai 2013, 290–291), 'Western'-style education seems to be much more future-directed, while Islamic education, for instance, might be more process-directed. Furthermore, in every historic present ideals of education – which are often shaped by formal institutions – compete with experiences of the social and economic environment.

(Inter)national education policies have built on the idea that education constitutes a decisive factor for development and economic growth, a paradigm that has spread globally through, for example, the United Nation's 'Education for All' programme. In a neoliberal world, education still has a certain impact on social mobility, so projections and imaginations of education as a means of advancement remain powerful (Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016; for Ethiopia see Maurus 2016; for Ghana see Coe 2020). Intertwined with hopes for personal and social advancement, education appears as a 'passport to modernity' (Richards 1996, 136). In Appadurai's terms, people in Africa try to engage with educational opportunities in the framework of 'politics of possibilities' (see also Stambach and Hall 2017), holding on to the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2013, 289).

Educational decisions are, at least, guided by the aspiration that education may help secure a future in which young people can find paths ‘out of waithood’ (Carling 2015) and ‘jobless cities’ (Ferguson 2016).

Nevertheless, the idea of securing a good life through education is characterised by a ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011) that takes the ‘capacity to aspire’ as a possibility for everyone, even as the politics of probability often show increasing inequality (Appadurai 2013). Thus, in contrast to ideas of social upward mobility, studies stress the continuity of social inequalities in the access to schooling in a globalising world (Johnson-Hanks 2016; Künzler 2008). Further, education (in Africa) is becoming increasingly commercialised (see Dilger 2017 for religious schools; Coe 2020) and may thus reproduce socioeconomic inequality.

‘Western’ schooling has become a social fact and constitutes a globally expanding institution with a hegemonic ‘western’ curriculum (Meyer, Kamens, and Benavot 2017), a process which we can observe in Africa. Nevertheless, globally-driven debates on universal education encounter local diversity in its implementation and adaptations and constraints in how it provides access to schools and to the job market (Newman 2020; for creative adaptations and further developments of ‘traveling’ educational institutions at the local level see Anderson-Levitt 2003; Camilleri 1986; Künzler 2008; Stambach 2000).

Already in the 1970s, some economists were warning that the job markets in many African countries could not employ the high number of school and university graduates, which the expansion of schooling would produce (Dore 1976; Wolf 2002). Thus, policies that aim at securing the future of youths and the future of states through an expansion of schooling can have paradoxical outcomes. As Tatek Abebe (2020) shows, unemployed educated youths in Ethiopia claim to be losing their futures because of national politics and elites’ land-grabs. The youth protests in Ethiopia reveal a strong connection between youths’ fears about their futures and state policies such as educational models and government decisions about land-use. In this case, the most striking fact is that, despite the investments in and the large expansion of schooling and higher education institutions during the last decades, many educated youths are discontented with their present precarious situations. Therefore, they oppose the state’s governance, demanding more political and economic participation and a share in a brighter future.

We build on the argument by Stambach and Ngwane (2011), who describe schooling in Africa as a ‘fascinating set of paradoxes’, since

on the one hand, people should place their hopes in schooling even as they recognize its limitations, and, on the other hand, the globalization of the signs and practices of schooling is universal and yet also entirely local (Stambach and Ngwane 2011, 299).

In these juxtapositions, Stambach and Ngwane trace how schooling in Africa has been studied through the frameworks of development, post-colonialism and global networks. These frameworks reveal paradoxes in the educational landscape in Africa regarding hopes and limitations, as well as juxtapositions of local and global ideals and practices of education.

African students and their parents know that the promises of schooling hold true for only a few who have the possibility of pursuing expensive higher education *and* then manage to access the formal job market through social relations (Johnson-Hanks 2016; Laube 2016; Stambach and Hall 2017). Nevertheless, the understanding of ‘Western’-style schooling as a means to develop, become cosmopolitan and have a prosperous future remains an important criterion for making decisions about education.

## Looking beyond ‘proper’ education

In many countries, the precarious situation of educated unemployed youths shows that a growing number of school-educated young people remain without formal employment due to economic and political conditions, population growth and struggle in addition with a loss of farmland. The

promises of universal schooling and of development plans to provide 'proper jobs' for everyone have failed (see Abebe 2020). Thus, schools 'promise the world and yet alone cannot deliver' (Stambach and Ngwane 2011, 310).

James Ferguson and Tania Li plead that we look beyond the 'proper job' in 'thinking about all the other ways in which people make their way in the world' (Ferguson and Li 2018, 1). This is equally true for education. We argue that we have to look beyond 'proper education', which is often reduced to 'Western'-style schooling, and think about all the other ways in which young people get educated and 'make their way in the world'. We thus follow Ferguson's and Li's approach:

To get there we have to abandon both grand narratives and negative or residual framings: we need to know what is actually there and why it is so, not what is lacking, or why the expected outcome has not yet emerged. (Ferguson and Li 2018, 20)

For us, looking beyond 'proper education' means looking beyond normative narratives of schooling that often marginalise and stigmatise those who have not been to 'Western'-style schools or who attended these schools for only a couple of years. To overcome negative framings, we look into processes of how various actors decide between different forms of 'formal' and 'informal' education. Therefore, Ferguson and Li's approach of 'looking beyond proper jobs' applies not only to economic studies, but also to the study of education. Our methodological framework of decision-making processes reveals multiple understandings of what 'proper' education means depending on the social, economic and political context as well as gender, age, class and religion, among other factors.

We take it for granted that multiple understandings of 'proper education' exist, although the 'Western'-type schooling controlled by the state is quite dominant. This offers credentials and therefore often claims to be the 'only right way' of educating children that will lead them into the future. Nevertheless, (informal) apprenticeship and religious (Islamic as well as Christian) education – as well as transnational education where children are educated by various relatives and teachers in different countries – aim to teach the younger generation skills and values that will help them become capable and morally 'proper' people.

The idea of saving children's future applies to education in general, as shown by examples from Europe, the US, Gambia and Senegal. Hoechner (2020) and Kea's (2020) contributions clearly indicate that in different situations, education in the 'home country' or in the 'migrant country' may be perceived as the best option for children, whether to teach them correct moral behaviour (e.g. with regard to the authority of elders and religious values) or to protect them from experiencing racism and getting involved in crime and gang life, which might hinder their college access. Growing up transnationally, children experience how their status changes in different countries.

Alongside institutionalised public and religious schooling, parents and relatives have always educated the young generation in various skills that enable them to make a future as, for example, farmers, pastoralists, or craftsmen and craftswomen (cf. Spittler and Bourdillon 2012).

To capture the wide field of education in Africa, we look, as is common in the field of anthropology, at a diversity of educational contexts in which young people learn. This approach is finding increasing attention in educational studies. For example, Clemens and Biswas (2019) recently argued that scholars should pay more attention to the plurality and simultaneity of education, since various forms of learning and teaching take place outside school and happen parallel to or contrast with schooling. Focusing on educational decision-making, the plurality of ideals and practices become obvious: they are at times paradoxical but constitute a crucial concern in practices of future making.

## Educational decision-making as practices of future making

Education always refers to an (imagined) future: its aim is to equip the learner with skills, practical and theoretical knowledge, and, last but not least, with a valuable resource to shape the future. Given the existence of multiple modes of education and learning in Africa alongside 'Western'-style schooling, this special issue addresses how various actors try to influence the future through individuals',



households' and/or societal educational decisions. In contrast to rational-choice theory, the ethnographic focus of this special issue aims to trace educational decision making as a complex, socially-embedded practice. This is why we emphasise the historical, economic, political, and social context of decisions concerning education, which are always made in the light of an uncertain and unpredictable future. Thus, looking specifically into decision-making processes, we deal with issues of uncertainty, the shaping of life courses, differing interests among involved actors, decisions to leave school and, finally, multiple prestiges of education.

### *Uncertainty in decision-making*

Uncertainty is often defined as a lack of knowledge. However, as Hänsch, Kroeker, and Oldenburg (2017) show based on research in medical contexts, having more information does not necessarily reduce uncertainty in decision-making: 'The more information that comes to light and the limited options available results in making the decision-making process more difficult' (Hänsch, Kroeker, and Oldenburg 2017, 7).

Analogously, Pamela Kea (2020) shows how migrants from The Gambia living in the UK deal with uncertainty and try to avoid risks and create opportunities by deciding where to send their children to school in a transnational context. Parents try to maintain room to manoeuvre in a complex field of different migratory regimes between the UK, the US and The Gambia. In an unpredictable, sometimes changing, (inter)national framework, we see how parents are steadily under 'pressure to evaluate potential outcomes and decide for 'the best' option, according to culturally defined parameters' (Hänsch, Kroeker, and Oldenburg 2017, 13). Kea's ethnography of Gambian migrants living in the UK points out how their decisions about the education of their children start with planning, for instance, in which country to give birth to children (e.g. in the US, if possible). This way, they not only entitle their children to a certain type of citizenship but also try to ensure their children's place of residence and their study and work possibilities, as well as their own future (as they plan to live with their children in old age). Citizenship and education are two considerations in puzzling out parents' and children's futures in transnational contexts, where decisions are 'both highly strategic and, at the same time, dependent on chance and circumstance' (Kea 2020).

Aware of the difficulties in obtaining jobs on a competitive and uncertain labour market, Dungey and Ansell (2020) show how parents and teachers 'equip young people with skills, values and practices that might be relevant for the unstable job market'. Dungey and Ansell dramatically show why children in Lesotho say: 'I go to school to survive'. They describe different dimensions of survival, such as economic survival in terms of income, moral survival in terms of preventing the deterioration of values, and physical survival and safety exemplified through violence and death. Conditions in Lesotho are further marked by high uncertainty due to the HIV/Aids pandemic and economic conditions that often require labour migration to South Africa. Dungey and Ansell illustrate how decision-making about education has a strong impact on the various dimensions of survival. When people are preoccupied with day-to-day survival, decisions about education are made as strategically as possible for securing a future, as they might be forced to migrate for labour rather than being able to make a living farming or to get a well-paid job.

Working with a broad definition of education, the articles in this issue look at moments in which individuals and household members decide, in light of an uncertain future, which investments in and forms of education seem promising for which child in order to secure his or her future as well as that of the household, while at the same time allowing both to make a living in the present. The education of the young generation may be understood as an uncertain investment into an unpredictable future. This idea becomes more crucial, as the presence of schooling is shaped by various experiences of waiting, including waiting for money from family members to pay school fees, waiting for teachers giving classes (Dungey and Meinert 2017), waiting for examination results, or waiting for a proper job after graduation (Honwana 2012; Mains 2011). These hours and years of intermittent waiting and struggles for and in education are endured in the hope for a better future and the ideal of

finally making a living on the basis of one's education, the hope that one day the suffering may turn into success, prestige and/or economic independence.

Pamela Kea (2020) describes waiting as a tool of domestic moral economies within migration regimes, which effects parents and children, educational decisions, and the making of a future in transnational families. Nevertheless, Kea also shows how waiting is interpreted as central to the domestic moral economy, in which the care for children maintains intergenerational relations transnationally. She highlights also the 'activism that takes place in waiting' (see also Conlon 2011, 356), as when grandparents raise their grandchildren as well as they can in the absence of the parents. This example shows also that decision-making about education concerns the lives of several people with whom theirs are intertwined. Therefore, educational decisions shape the life-courses of several people.

### *Educational decisions throughout the life course*

People who make decisions about their own or others' education are entangled actors who are deeply interconnected with social and material concerns throughout their life-course (Wingens and Reiter 2011, 198). In her research in Togo, Tabea Häberlein is studying educational decisions among a large group of siblings. After the parents' death, three older siblings supported two of their younger brothers by paying for school and university fees and their daily needs. This support model worked well until the older siblings' own children reached school age: when they, one after the other, started attending school and needed financial support, the parents gradually reduced their support for their younger brothers and finally stopped completely. At this time, one of the younger brothers was still finishing his studies in Tunisia, could no longer pay his university fees and was therefore unable to leave Tunisia until three years after graduation. This example shows how educational decisions may depend on other people's life stages. More generally, this example illustrates how the decision to pursue higher education and the search for employment after graduation stretches across a longer life span than the stage of youth is usually defined. As a result, waitthood affects young people who are dependent on their (often kin-related) supporters for a long period of time, often into their 30s. On the other hand, (kin-related) supporters also wait for the youths to succeed some day in making their own living – and therefore they stay in waitthood as well.

(Higher) education constitutes an expensive investment, for which the fear of 'losing' (female) recipients during their education (through pregnancy, for example) affects decision-making (Bocast 2019, 44). Lifecycle events, such as marriage and giving birth, are often seen as incompatible with education because they might interrupt girls' and young women's schooling. In Jordan, however, marriage can allow women to continue their education, funded by their husbands, either before or after they have children (Adely 2012). Thus, in some parts of the world, having children does not mean leaving school, since mothers can return to school or university after having cared for an infant. Nevertheless, the support group for mother and child is decisive and often changes from the family of origin to the family of the husband, especially when the mother-in-law cares for a young child while the husband pays for the education of his wife (see Torno 2017 for Tajikistan; Aarii 2016 for Ethiopia).

Combining schooling with motherhood often provokes contentious negotiations, which Johnson-Hanks (2016) describes, for Cameroon, as a 'vital conjuncture'. Few role models for combining schooling with motherhood seem to exist, although in contexts outside school, it is common for women to participate, learn, and work alongside their children. In fact, women may be motivated to work by the need to feed their children on a daily basis (Clark 2010). Thus, young women do not necessarily have to decide between education and starting a family, but may be able to combine both (see Behrends 2002 on women's education, professional careers and motherhood in Ghana; see Stambach 2000 and Alber 2018 for a more detailed analysis of age and gender perceptions in educational decisions).



In Hoechner's example of Senegalese migrants in the US (2020), we see that decisions about education are made at different stages of young people's and their parents' lives and how prestige, status and definitions of young people's proper education and behaviour are shifting categories in a transnational context. Migrant parents decide when their children will stay and learn in the US and when they will go 'back home' to Senegal to live with relatives and attend Qur'anic schools before returning to study in the US. However, the children and youths often have different opinions about the best course for their education. This leads us to a more detailed analysis of different actors' interests.

### *Different actors' interests in education*

In the field of education in Africa and its diaspora, states, (inter)national NGOs, religious and private institutions, parents, relatives and young people decide about the educational life paths of children and youths. All those actors engage in a very contentious process. In their decisions about education, (prospective) students and their parents face critical issues beyond the economic costs of schooling: for instance, how to get to school each day, or whether there are relatives with whom schoolchildren can stay while attending school (cf. Alber 2018). The actual living conditions of young people and their family's livelihoods, to which the contributions of young people are often crucial, are another key aspect which the global drive to send all children to school often does not take into account.

For south-western Ethiopia, Maurus (2019, 2020) shows how agro-pastoralist households in Hamar district depend on young people. Therefore, most children are educated by kin within agro-pastoralist households, where they not only learn agro-pastoralist skills but also contribute to the household's livelihood. Although schools exist and are accessible and free, only a minority of the children in Hamar District go to school. This educational decision, which violently rejects compulsory schooling, contradicts the global policies that promote schooling for all children. In this area, where education is a subject of contention that even creates violent conflicts, young people find themselves in dilemmas to decide if they want to go to school and live in student hostels in town or if they will continue to live in agro-pastoralist homesteads. The state and the international community cannot impose their idea of schooling for all children against local needs and interests: children and parents might have different ideas about 'proper' ways of education.

In decisions about schooling, parents and schoolchildren may also ask about the quality of schools, the safety of the school environment and whether schools are spaces to 'lose' or 'save' time, values, and morality (Dilger 2017). School may be regarded with suspicion as a place where girls meet lovers (including predatory teachers) and lose their chances for a respectable marriage (Davidson 2015), or where young people will be converted to a different religion, or become emboldened to challenge their parents. Furthermore, parents in Africa may decide to send their children abroad for schooling or migrants may decide to send their children 'back' to their home countries to be educated while living with relatives. These decisions cannot be made only according to individual interests and ideas of 'proper' education but depend on changing political and legal frameworks and on parents' working and living conditions (Hoechner 2020; Kea 2020). In these often-difficult situations, many considerations are taken into account when making a decision about education at a specific time and place.

Hopes about the outcome of education can differ between governments and families, as for instance when families hope to change their own life trajectories and policymakers hope to see changes in international statistics (Meinert 2009, 5). In many cases, parents take the interest of the whole household into account when deciding which child they wish to have educated where (at home, in the vicinity, among kin, in a bigger town or abroad) and for how long, as well as in what kind of institution (religious, private or public). Although education is not solely an economic investment, we consider the ways that it is also an economic issue in the present and an investment in the future. Households have to weigh risks and expected outcomes, while considering restrictions in the present, in order to support the children and the household in the future.

Another distinction may be drawn between educational support for biological and foster children, especially when there are (temporary) financial restrictions in a household. Thus, Alber (2018) describes different forms of schooling for children within the same household in Benin, such as sending biological children to private school and foster children to public school.

Educational decisions might also be made upon the observation of individual capabilities. Georg Klute (1996, 220–222) shows how parents among the nomadic Kel Adagh Tuareg observe their children to see who qualifies for what kind of work in animal husbandry. This practice builds upon the assumption that every person is different and has different special capabilities and good fortune. Some children are good at finding lost animals or in identifying and treating sick camels or goats. This talent enables animals to thrive under the care of certain people, so parents observe and encourage their children to learn this capability. We give this example to show that parents observe which education suits which child not only in decisions about schooling but also in education outside school.

Decisions about schooling can also lead to arguments between family members. Among the Bashada in south-west Ethiopia, fathers often favour schooling for their children, while mothers argue that some children should stay at home. The children themselves are not normally asked if they want to go to school or not, but some repeatedly run away from home to attend school (Epple 2012, 209–210). In the anthology 'Children as Decision Makers in Education', Cox et al. (2010a) compare children's decision-making across cultures. The anthology stresses that despite the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1990), decisions concerning their education are mostly made by adults. Schools are often places where children experience control rather than free choice and where educators feel uncomfortable if power relations shift towards more power for children (Cox et al. 2010b, 2). However, educational decisions are made not only upon entering school but also when leaving it.

### *Decisions to leave school*

The massive campaigns in many African countries to enrol all children in school at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, seem to have turned schooling into a passive and ritualised way of educating children. Nowadays it is usually only after primary school that active decision-making for or against schooling comes into play.<sup>2</sup> In conversations about education in Africa, we have repeatedly been told that many parents think that a few years of schooling are enough for their children. Through the implementation of universal primary schooling in most parts of Africa, the state has made the decision about whether or not children will go to school. However, particularly in rural Africa, examples show that parents sometimes actively decide to withdraw their children from school after a few years (cf. Alber 2012). This means that dropping out is not necessarily a sign of failure. Particularly in rural areas in Africa, parents often choose alternatives to 'Western'-style schooling for their children.

Many (agro-) pastoralists in northern Kenya are 'suspicious of formal schooling':

Parents increasingly perceive school as expensive and 'high risk'. They see it as importing an alien culture and largely failing to equip children with useful knowledge and skills. [...] [In Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands] most parents select some children to go to school 'to give them a chance of getting a job' and others to be educated at home 'to keep the family's wealth'. In Turkana, in particular, many use formal school primarily as a feeding centre for their younger children, taking them out of school when they are around 8 years old after two to three years of schooling. (Scott-Villiers et al. 2015, ix)

When deciding for or against schooling, the timing and the age of the children plays into the decision, as do the livelihoods of the families. Among Rabari nomads in India, Caroline Dyer shows how schooling is chosen for some children as an 'insurance policy' and a 'whole family job-ticket', if sedentarisation becomes necessary (Dyer 2001, 320).

Leaving school before graduation happens not only when students fail their exams or cannot afford to stay in school: it can also be an active decision by youths and their kin to learn outside school and to start working. ‘Alternative possibilities’ besides a successful school career are often described as marginalisation and a life under precarious circumstances, but this might be the case for not only dropouts but also be a situation school graduates encounter: a diploma no longer guarantees a job (Pattenden 2017). These studies show that the jobs which are available, for instance in the informal economy – where youth entrepreneurship and vocational training are predominantly situated (Gough and Langevang 2016) – appear unattractive to school-educated youths (cf. Mains 2007). However, here we suggest that dropouts do not necessarily ‘lose’ their future, since many later work in farming or (small) business and make a living independently, while former classmates who remained in school often stay jobless despite their diploma, and depend on kin while waiting for a ‘proper’ job (see Abebe 2020).

The power to make decisions about education does not always lie in the hands of individuals but is also structured by wider social, economic and political constraints. For instance, the educational infrastructure accessible, immigration laws, war and crises (such as the HIV/Aids epidemic) can impede the educational life trajectories of individuals and generations and may make livelihood practices other than education more important. Political struggles in the education sector itself – such as strikes – can affect students’ education directly. These circumstances do not only shape individual life paths but may also influence planning for the future on a national and family level, which demands new decision-making.

School credentials or white-collar jobs are expected to guarantee a good life. However, Mains (2011) points out the fragility of such markers of success. There are different competing factors of securing a good life and being recognised as a socially-mature adult. The ability to make investments, marriage, capabilities, autonomy and belonging are a few points that may equally mark personal success. Relatives’ expectations of good moral behaviour are often shaped by reciprocity in African societies. Being educated often means showing obedience to those who raised one by, for example, helping with household chores or the family business. While understanding that schooling is good for gaining credentials, parents often argue that it does not help one acquire skills that lead to valued jobs or even prestige.

### *Multiple prestiges of educations*

In decisions about education, the prestige associated with certain ways of education and its certificates plays a crucial role. Beside the possibility of turning one’s education into a white-collar job (cf. Coe 2020) or of letting university credentials work for themselves (cf. Abebe 2020), being considered an ‘educated’ person (Levinson, Foley, and Holland 1996) carries a form of prestige and has an impact on people’s life course. The social status of a person can correlate with his/her educational background, but the status and prestige that educated people acquire through schooling or vocational training also depends on their social background (class, caste, kin group, religion, gender, race) (cf. Newman 2020; Hoechner 2020). It is not a given throughout the world that schooling improves the social status of people in local communities (cf. Maurus 2020).

As Schut (2019) describes for Indonesia, returning from urban to rural areas is quite a realistic ‘alternative possibility’ for educated youths, although many of them aspire to live a ‘modern’ life in town (cf. Maurus 2016). However, this rural future becomes insecure when land is no longer available to farmers but leased out to (inter)national businesses (see Abebe 2020). Therefore, we focus not only on the prestige and ideals attributed to various forms of education, but also on the practices, agency, and prospects present in decision-making processes concerning young people’s education and their future.

Anneke Newman (2020) describes a female perspective on education, ‘noble work’ and ‘appropriate’ future life trajectories, where we see the complexity of decisions about education and future work for women of certain castes in Senegal. Newman shows how ideas of ‘noble work’ and status

influence decisions about girl's education and their future labour. Among the Haalpulaar, highly-educated girls are expected to marry rather than enter the job market, do manual work or take a job outside the house.

Decisions about girls' education and labour often face contradicting constraints. Bocast (2019) demonstrates how in Uganda NGOs reason that education carries the potential to empower girls and expect this to lead to community development within a national modernisation project (see also Moeller 2018; Vavrus 2003 on the gender effect of education). As education is strongly tied to hopes for a better future for the individual, the family, the community, and the nation-state, the pressure on educated youths to realise these changes to the basis of their educational background is immense, overwhelming and often triggers a sense of shame when the majority of the school-educated youths remain without 'proper' jobs and cannot care for themselves, relatives or a family of their own.

Despite many hardships, some people who finally 'made it', serve as role models for many and lead to an 'enchantment' with education (cf. Coe 2020). In this vein, Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2008, 210) mention the 'iconic importance of education to marginalized populations' in India, which certainly holds also true in African countries.

Cati Coe (2020) shows how education is entwined with enchantment and disillusion within the framework of the developmentalist state and neoliberalism. While the state and neoliberal educational models both play with nostalgic ideas of acquiring middle-class status through nursing training, private healthcare training is in reality followed by precarious working conditions. Paradoxically, students of private healthcare institutes get the feeling of moving forward in their lives through acquiring certificates that later hold little value on the national and international job market. This case shows us that the prestige attributed to government employment and white-collar jobs encourages the proliferation of private teaching institutes even though the certificates they provide cannot compete with the national certificates to which access is highly limited.

## Conclusion

The model of state-controlled 'Western' schooling is accompanied by the expectation that it leads to 'proper jobs' in the formal economy and to personal and national (economic) growth. This narrative dominates the global educational landscape and asserts that this one model serves every person on the globe, turning it into a 'global good' that has barely been criticised (cf. Maurus 2020). Since young people and their kin in Africa and its diaspora often have a different experience with schooling in daily life and after school (even though some do turn their school credentials into well-paid formal jobs) we argue for looking beyond the grand narrative of 'Western'-style schooling to actual practices and experiences of education in Africa and beyond.

Analysing processes and practices of educational decision-making, the contributions to this issue explore the variety of existing forms of education in Africa and its diaspora. Educational decisions are often inspired by sacrificing in the present to secure a good life in the future or to prevent losing it in the future. However, the making of one's future and of decisions about education are not a zero-sum game: many ways of making a living exist beyond 'proper' schooling and 'proper' jobs. Furthermore, our analysis of decision-making processes shows that children and youths are neither living in isolation from their surroundings nor that education happens on 'neutral' ground. Our focus embeds seemingly universal and individual processes for making decisions about education into wider contexts of historic, political, economic and ecological transformation as well as changing intergenerational and international relations. Decisions about the education of young people consider, among other things, religion, gender, status, class, caste and prestige, as well as young peoples' and their kin's imagined life-courses. They are also entangled with state's development plans and international organisations', churches' and corporations' investments in education in the global South. Facing uncertainty of what the future might bring and based on previous experiences, various actors make decisions about young people's

education. Doing so, they follow different, at times contested interests, while being enabled but also limited actors by their means over time and space. What might appear to some as a loss might appear as a gain from another perspective – and vice versa. As social scientists studying young people's education, we should consider temporal and spatial aspects in our studies and ask *who* makes decisions about education, about *what kind* of education and about *for whom* in order to understand socioeconomic and political projects of future-making that concern not only the young generation but societies at large.

## Notes

1. The core members of the Working Group were Anna Madeleine Ayeh, Tanushree Biswas, Tabea Häberlein, Lena Kroeker, Daniel Kyereko, Sabrina Maurus, Jennifer Scheffler, Julia Thibaut, Astrid Utler, Theresa Vollmer and Maike Voigt. The group organised an international symposium 'Education & Visions of Future(s)' (April 12–13, 2018). Some of the papers presented in the working group and at the symposium are part of this special issue.
2. We thank Mickael Hounghbedji for contributing this idea to our introduction.

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