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Gabriela Guerrero, Claudia Sugimaru, Alexandra Cussianovich,
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Summary

Results from the Young Lives survey show the existence of a gap between young people's aspirations for higher education and their actual chances of accessing this level of education. This paper uses qualitative information from Young Lives in order to gain a deeper understanding of young people's aspirations as well as their perceptions of the main barriers preventing them from achieving these aspirations. More specifically we analyse how aspirations are formed, to what extent they are related to parents' educational aspirations for their children, and if they are stable or tend to change over time. We find high educational aspirations among low-income young people and their caregivers and we establish that education is highly valued by Peruvian families. The aspirations of young people and their caregivers are influenced by caregivers' educational history and experiences. The longitudinal nature of the data, both quantitative and qualitative, allowed us to identify that young people's, and particularly caregivers', educational aspirations were not static and changed over time, mainly in response to changes in the socio-economic status of the family.

The study also identified several barriers preventing low-income youth in urban and rural areas from realising their educational aspirations. Besides economic and psychological barriers (mainly experienced as lack of family support), the results of this paper point out to the existence of additional barriers such as a lack of information available to secondary school seniors (and their parents) about higher education (what and where to study and how to apply) and the fact that schools are not playing an active role in preparing students for a transition to higher education. Based on these results, the study discusses policy recommendations aimed at overcoming those barriers.

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About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in 4 countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) over 15 years. www.younglives.org.uk

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1. Introduction

In recent years, education has been placed at the centre of the global development agenda, reflecting its recognition as an essential condition for human development, poverty reduction and economic growth. The Muscat Agreement, signed in 2014 at the end of the Education For All (EFA) Meeting, states that the general goal of the post-2015 education agenda is to ensure equitable and inclusive high-quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030.¹ Unlike in the previous Dakar declaration, there is an emphasis on the provision of high-quality education at all levels, from early childhood to higher education. As a matter of fact, one of the targets of the post-2015 agenda is to increase young people's access to technical and vocational tertiary education and training.

In the case of Peru, the percentage of the population aged between 17 and 24 years old that attends higher education is currently around 28 per cent, according to the National Household Survey 2012, which is below the average in the Latin American region, where the gross enrolment rate in higher education is 41 per cent (CEPAL 2012). Given this situation, the Government of Peru has recently launched a new scholarship programme (*Beca 18*) with the objective of increasing the access to higher education of young people living in poverty and extreme poverty.

Considering the growing importance of higher education both globally and nationally and the still low enrolment rates in higher education in Peru, this paper draws on longitudinal qualitative data from Young Lives to take a closer look at young people's aspirations regarding higher education and their perceptions of the barriers that may be preventing them from realising these aspirations. The main focus of this paper is to describe young people's aspirations regarding higher education, analysing how they are formed, to what extent they are related to parents' educational aspirations for the young people, and if they are stable or change over time. This paper also gives an account of the main barriers faced by young people in the realisation of their educational aspirations.

This paper is divided into seven sections including this introduction. Section 2 presents the literature review, examining educational aspirations and presenting explanations of the factors influencing the formation of aspirations. Section 3 provides information about higher education in Peru, describing the different types of higher education available in the country as well as the main government scholarship programme aimed at increasing Peruvians' access to higher education. Section 4 gives information about the methods, including a description of the sample, the different contexts and the qualitative information analysed for this paper. Section 5 presents the findings and Section 6 the discussion of those findings. Finally Section 7 provides a conclusion and policy recommendations.

1 2014 GEM Final Statement, The Muscat Agreement, Global Education For All Meeting, UNESCO, Muscat, Oman, 12–14 May 2014, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002281/228122E.pdf>

2. Literature review: The educational aspirations of low-income young people

Educational aspirations represent a relatively abstract, idealistic plan; a person's desire or hope to achieve high levels of education (Bohon et al. 2006; Reynolds and Pemberton 2001; Trusty 2002). Aspirations 'represent idealistic preferences for the future so ... in some degree [they] might reflect students' recognition of the social and economic importance of higher education rather than their personal desire to attend' (Bohon et al. 2006: 208).

Several theoretical models have been used to study the issue of educational aspirations in the past few decades. However, the two most relevant frameworks internationally to understand the formation of low-income young people's educational aspirations are probably the status attainment models, which suggest that socio-economic status (SES) has a large effect on educational aspirations and attainment, and the social support models, which suggest that social support – mainly from family, friends and peers – has a positive influence on educational outcomes, including aspirations (Berzin 2010).

2.1. Individual and family factors influencing educational aspirations

Studies have shown that family background characteristics such as SES have a significant positive association with students' educational aspirations (Bohon et al. 2006; Hanson 1994; Khattab 2003). According to Freeman (1997), economic barriers, which are usually related to background characteristics such as SES, tend to limit low-income young people's aspirations to higher education.

The influence of SES on young people's educational aspirations is channelled through different mechanisms, including parental education and parents' high expectations around education (Berzin 2010). In that regard, Behnke et al. (2004) found a positive association between parents' educational level and their offspring's aspirations, as parents may act as role models for their children. Moreover, parents' educational expectations also influence the formation of young people's aspirations regarding higher education (Garg et al. 2007; Marjoribanks 1998). Parental expectations refer to the assessment parents make when anticipating how far their child will go with his/her education, which is based on resources or external barriers (Mickelson 1990). Studies report the powerful effect that parents' educational expectations have on the likelihood of their child going to college (Glick and White 2004), the formation of their offspring's academic identity (Howard 2003) and the shape of their child's ambitions and educational goals (Thapar-Bjorkert and Sanghera 2010). Parents' high expectations are usually accompanied by a series of attitudes, messages or actions that communicate the value of education (Ceja 2004).

In relation to the social support models, educational aspirations – including perceptions about higher education – are built through the social and family network, specifically through personal or family members' experiences (Marquez 2010). Therefore, parents and other family members might act as role models for children's educational aspirations and expectations (Behnke et al. 2004). In the absence of a family support system that provides care, love and orientation, youngsters do not have a clear idea of educational objectives and they perceive more barriers between them and their educational goals (Hill et al. 2003). This

may constitute an example of what Freeman (1997) calls 'psychological barriers', referring to a lack of support or encouragement from parents, friends and significant others, and to a lack of desire to pursue higher education or an inability to recognise its benefits. These barriers will also limit low-income young people's aspirations to higher education (in addition to economic barriers).

Both the attainment and the social support models concentrate heavily on family characteristics and to a certain extent ignore the influence of school and school experiences on the formation of educational aspirations. However the influence of these has to be addressed, particularly in low-income contexts, given the malleability of school factors from a policy perspective.

2.2. The influence of the wider context: school and community

School plays a very important role in helping students to overcome psychological barriers like those described above, as teacher support may help to build a positive self-image and high self-esteem in students, who will consequently have higher aspirations (Howard 2003). This is also related to the provision of guidance and information that would help students make a successful transition out of high school. According to Rosenbaum et al. (1996), schools avoid giving advice to students, thereby allowing them to embark upon a life course for which they are unprepared. As a consequence, some young people end up aspiring to a professional career but do not understand the steps they should follow or the implications of pursuing post-secondary education (Behnke et al. 2004).

In addition, it is also important to take into account the characteristics and effect of the social context in which young people are immersed, commonly known as the 'neighborhood effect' (Flowers et al. 2003). Young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods (low SES, small number of professionals, high crime index, etc.) have lower educational aspirations (Stewart et al. 2007) and attain lower levels of education (Garner and Raudenbush 1991). These findings reflect the need for support from an ecological system – parents, family members, friends, school and community – to enhance young people's opportunities to aspire and encourage them to expect more for their educational future and help them attain these goals (Reddick et al. 2011).

2.3. What is known about educational aspirations in Peru

Economic growth in Peru – as well as in the other Young Lives countries – has been associated with a national expansion of formal education and with high rates of school enrolment among children. Consequently, the aspirations of both parents and children have risen as well (Boyden 2013).

As a matter of fact, previous studies in Peru have found that youngsters and their parents hold high educational aspirations (Ansion et al. 1998; Benavides et al. 2006; Crivello 2011; Cueto et al. 2010; Mena 2012). The idealistic nature of aspirations reflects both students' and parents' recognition of education's great value since it provides a way to 'become somebody' (Crivello 2011) and escape from poverty (Boyden 2013).

These already documented high educational aspirations, with both parents and children wanting the youngsters to have higher education, contrast with the still low rates of access to higher education in the country, as described in the introductory section. Therefore it is worth taking a closer look at how are these aspirations formed and what the barriers are that may be limiting their realisation. We use qualitative data from Young Lives to contribute to the understanding of this discrepancy.

3. Higher education in Peru

Higher education in Peru is intended for those who, after completing their mandatory basic education, wish to pursue further professional, technical or artistic studies. There are two types of higher education: (a) university tertiary education and (b) non-university tertiary education. In the latter case, a student can choose among a Pedagogical Institute (ISP in Spanish), a Technical Institute (IST in Spanish) or an Artistic Institute (EFA in Spanish). There is a significant difference between these two types of higher education in terms of the duration of the studies. While a university degree can be obtained after five or more years of studies (depending on the course), a technical higher education degree (either at an ISP, an IST or an EFA) can be obtained after three years of study.

Higher education is provided both at public and private institutions. Public education is subsidised by the state while students at private institutions must pay a fee. Most of the supply of higher education in the country is located in urban areas. Therefore, rural students are usually required to migrate or at least to commute every day in order to enrol in a higher education institution.

According to the National Household Survey 2012, 28 per cent of young people between 17 and 24 years are enrolled in higher education, as previously indicated. Most of them are enrolled in a university (68 per cent) while a smaller percentage is enrolled in technical tertiary education (32 per cent). Most students attending higher education (either technical or university) are enrolled in private institutions (62 per cent); nevertheless, there are serious concerns about the quality of these institutions (Diaz 2008).

Specifically in relation to higher technical education, a study conducted by Valdivia in the late 1990s (1997) with a sample of technical education graduates found that most of these graduates had studied in poor-quality institutions and although this type of higher education had a positive effect on their occupational mobility, technical education was a second best for them, given that they could not access university higher education.

In order to enrol in a higher education institution, a student must pass its entrance examination. Usually, the number of places available per higher education institution is smaller than the number of students applying to it. In this competitive scenario, it is a common practice to rely on pre-university academies for the necessary training to pass the entrance examination.

Given the relatively low enrolment rates in higher education in the country, Peru's Ministry of Education recently launched a scholarship programme named Beca 18 aimed at increasing low-income young people's access to higher education. Beca 18 is targeted at young people between 16 and 22 years of age living in poverty or extreme poverty, who have completed secondary education with high levels of achievement and have been admitted to a higher education institution but have not yet started their studies. The scholarship funds higher education studies both at universities and technological institutes. It covers tuition fees, educational materials, accommodation, food, transportation, medical insurance and academic tutoring. Connecting this to the literature review presented above, a programme such as Beca 18 would help students facing economic barriers to their aspirations, but will this be enough? Or are students facing other barriers at the end of secondary education?

4. Methods

This paper uses mainly qualitative data from the Young Lives Older Cohort in Peru, born in 1994–5. Qualitative information was collected from a sub-sample of Young Lives children in 2007, 2008 and 2011 using multiple techniques including in-depth individual interviews, brief ethnographic observations and a selection of participatory group methods.²

The qualitative sample comprised 25 young people who were aged between 15 and 17 years old in 2011; most of them were in Grade 11 (the last grade of high school). The sample was evenly distributed across the four study sites, which differ according to the area of residence (rural/urban), geographical location, level of poverty, and degree of impact of political violence (post-conflict area or not). The two study sites in Rioja and Andahuaylas are rural localities, located in the northern jungle and in the central Andes, respectively; while Villa María del Triunfo and Juliaca are urban areas located in the capital of Peru and in the Andean highlands respectively.³ One important difference between urban and rural sites is the availability of educational services, especially post-secondary institutions, since these are mainly located in urban areas.

We have analysed the data collected from the interviews with young people (2011) and their caregivers (2008 and 2011). Additionally, we have also analysed data from the Well-being discussion groups, where young people discussed and developed their own concept and indicators of well-being; the Transitions out of school discussion groups, where they discussed their perceptions regarding their transition out of school and identified the sources of information and support they had for this process; and the Caregiver History Time Line, which provides information on the extent to which the parents' own histories influenced their educational aspirations for their offspring. (Further information about these methods can be found in Crivello et al. 2013.) Qualitative data were complemented by quantitative data from the main household and child surveys in order to contextualise the situation of the young people and caregivers who participated and to understand it better.

² A fourth round of qualitative data collection took place in 2014 but that information is not included in the analyses because, at time of writing (October 2015), the data are still being cleaned.

³ All names of research sites and respondents are pseudonyms, in order to preserve respondents' anonymity.

5. Findings

5.1. Young people's aspirations regarding higher education and their access to it

According to Round 3 of the Young Lives survey in Peru (2009), 90 per cent of the young people in the Older Cohort (then aged 15) who were still attending secondary school aspired to have higher education: 9.44 per cent of them wanted to go to a technical institute and the remaining 80.82 per cent wanted to go to the university, as shown in Table 1. Although aspirations were high throughout the sample, there were some differences between young people with different characteristics. Aspirations to university higher education were more frequent among girls, those living in urban areas, those who had a better socio-economic situation and those with a more educated mother; and the differences were statistically significant.

Table 1. Aspirations of young people aged 15 regarding higher education (2009) (%)

Educational level aspired to	Secondary education	Higher education		
		Technical higher education	University higher education	Total
Average (N= 670)	9.75	9.44	80.82	90.25
Gender				
Boys	9.88	11.88	78.25	90.12
Girls	9.61	6.90	83.49	90.39
Gap (%)	0.27	4.97	-5.24	-0.27
Baseline area of residence (2002)				
Urban	6.55	11.61	81.84	93.45
Rural	13.65	6.77	79.58	86.35
Gap (%)	-7.10	4.84	2.26	7.10
Baseline family wealth (household's real per capita expenditure in 2006)				
Top quintile	0.00	11.17	88.83	100.00
Bottom quintile	18.67	5.98	75.35	81.33
Gap (%)	-18.67	5.19	13.48	18.67
Maternal education				
Higher education	0.00	3.13	96.87	100.00
Complete primary or secondary	7.66	13.51	78.83	92.34
Incomplete primary or less	13.58	7.35	79.08	86.42
Gap (%)	-13.58	-4.22	17.79	13.58
Mother's first language				
Spanish	11.50	11.09	77.41	88.50
Indigenous	7.68	7.49	84.83	92.32
Gap (%)	3.81	3.61	-7.42	-3.81

Source: Young Lives household survey, Rounds 2 and 3.

Note: Mean averages using population weights.

Gaps in bold indicated that the differences are statistically significant at 5%

Although the percentage of young people aspiring to higher education in 2009 was high, only a few of them actually managed to enter higher education. According to the Round 4 survey (2013), by the time they were 19 years of age only 39.4 per cent of young people were enrolled in a higher education institution: 22.2 per cent in a technical institute and the remaining 17.2 per cent in a university. Several gaps are observed, particularly in regard to the access to university higher education. A young person was more likely to attend a university if they were male, had a higher family income, lived in an urban area and had a more educated mother who had Spanish as her mother tongue, as shown in Table 2. However, none of these gaps was observed in the access to technical institutes. As Sanchez and Melendez (2015) point out, this may be due to the fact that technical institutes are more geographically dispersed throughout the country.

Table 2. *Access of young people aged 19 to higher education (2013) (%)*

	Technical	University
Average (n=631)	22.2	17.2
Gender		
Male	21.5	20.9
Female	23.0	13.2
Gap	-1.5	7.6
Baseline area of residence (2002)		
Urban	26.9	21.7
Rural	16.3	11.6
Gap	10.7	10.2
Baseline family wealth (2006)		
Top quintile	19.6	35.0
Bottom quintile	20.7	3.0
Gap	-1.1	32.0
Maternal education		
Higher education	33.9	41.4
Complete primary or incomplete/complete secondary	25.6	19.6
Incomplete primary or less	17.3	10.9
Gap	16.7	30.5
Mother's first language		
Spanish	26.3	19.3
Indigenous	16.9	14.7
Gap	9.5	4.6

Note: The data include young people interviewed in all four rounds. The percentages have been adjusted considering the sample design. Gaps in bold are statistically significant using the t-test at 5%. The gaps are shown in percentage points and are calculated using as baseline: indigenous, incomplete primary or less, and the bottom quintile.

As has been shown in this section, using information from the quantitative survey, there is a gap between young people's aspirations regarding higher education and their actual chances of accessing this level of education. We will now use qualitative evidence in order to gain a deeper understanding of both young people's aspirations and their perceptions of the main barriers preventing them from achieving these aspirations. In doing this we analyse not only the information provided by the young people during the qualitative data collection but also the information provided by their caregivers. This is because young people's aspirations are influenced by their family background, as has been previously indicated in the literature review presented at the beginning of this document.

5.2. “I want to study and be something more”: Understanding young people’s aspirations regarding higher education

Most of the young people expressed a desire to become a professional because they believed that higher education (mainly at the university level) was the (only) way to progress in life and *be something more* or *become someone*.

Interviewer: Would you like to work forever in this job you have during the weekends? I mean, working in a restaurant.

Isaura: No. ... I want to study and be something ... be something more and start working.

Interviewer: So, working on what you're working now would never let you be something more ... as you say. And for example what is to 'be something more'?

Isaura: Mmm ... to practise a profession.

(Interview with Isaura, age 16, Villa María del Triunfo, 2011)

Even though educational aspirations among the young people were high in both urban and rural sites, one difference was that rural youth discourses gave greater emphasis to the importance of pursuing higher education as a way to improve well-being or get out of peasant life. On the other hand, in the case of urban young people the emphasis was not on the hope of escaping poverty but on the recognition that nowadays completing high school was not enough to get a good job. The following quotations illustrate this contrast.

The facilitator reads the last card: ‘He dreams of completing higher education’. One participant notes that the boy in the story dreams of having a profession and returning the favour to his parents, making them feel proud. The facilitator asks if the boys that do not dream of completing post-secondary studies can do well in life, and one participant says ‘No’.

(Observer’s notes, Well-being group discussion, Rioja, 2011)

Peter: Before you could [find a good job only with high school education] but not any more. Before you could knock and say: ‘I will practise and I will learn’. Not any more ... More than anything [they ask] for experience and knowledge in the field you will be in.

(Interview with Peter, age 16, Juliaca, 2011)

It is clear that young people value education highly and this is probably related to the fact that their parents also have a very positive view of education, which they have transmitted to their children during their socialisation process. Parents’ discourses demonstrated that education (in general) was highly valued and considered the best legacy they could give to their offspring. Their educational aspirations for their children were high; they wanted them to be professionals and to understand the importance of continuing education beyond high school.

Maria’s mother: I always say that education is the best heritage you can give, better than giving them a piece of land. Nobody is going to get their studies out of their minds but a piece of land – you sell it and that’s it.

(Interview with rural caregiver, Rioja, 2011)

Parents’ own educational experiences influence to a certain extent their aspirations for their offspring. In the case of rural areas, most parents (mothers especially) did not complete primary education or had no formal education at all; a situation they regretted greatly since they attributed the suffering they endured to this experience. For them education held the

possibility of breaking the poverty cycle; their educational aspirations for their children were high since they recognised education as the channel that could release young people from the suffering and hardship they themselves had undergone.

Esmeralda's mother: I ask God, crying, I ask for my children to be professionals so they don't suffer as I do. I have suffered a lot, even to get food. I ask God for my children to finish studying ... so I tell them too that they have to study.

(Interview with rural caregiver, Andahuaylas, 2011)

High educational aspirations for their children were also found among parents from urban areas – especially in Juliaca – in keeping with young people's aspirations to go to university. In this case, there were several parents who had attained post-secondary education and who might have acted as both role models and motivators for their children to pursue post-secondary studies. Both urban parents and children also recognised that post-secondary education had great value; recognising that nowadays completing high school was not enough to get a good job, as the above quotation from Peter suggests.

5.3. “I wouldn't make it”: Changes in educational aspirations over time

We used information from Rounds 2 and 3 of the quantitative survey to investigate whether the educational aspirations of young people and their parents were stable or had changed between 2006, when children were around 11–12 years old, and 2009, when they were around 14–15 years old. (We do not take Round 4, carried out in 2013, into account for this analysis because by 2013 most of the young people in the Older Cohort had already entered post-secondary education and/or the labour market.) If we found changes, we then used information from the last two qualitative rounds (2008 and 2011) to explain them.

Young people's and parents' educational aspirations are not static, and change over time, particularly in the case of parents. We identified three cases (out of 25) where young people lowered their aspirations between 2006 and 2009 and also seven cases (out of 25) where parents lowered their aspirations for their children during the same period of time.

In the three cases identified among the young people, the educational aspirations changed from wanting to go to the university to wanting to pursue a technical career. Analysing the profile of those cases (Elmer, Peter and Ana) we did not find a common pattern that explained these changes. In the case of Elmer, the change may be related to the fact that in 2006 he was expecting to move from Rioja to Lima, the capital of Peru, as soon as he finished primary school and that this move represented an opportunity for a better future. However, by 2009 he was back in his village with fewer opportunities to access university higher education. The change in Peter's aspirations on the other hand, may have been related to his school performance. He had some academic difficulties and ended up repeating a grade. Finally in the case of Ana, the change in her aspirations may have been related to the fact that by 2009 she was about to finish secondary school (she finished earlier than most of her peers in the cohort) and had a clearer idea of her interests. Her goal was to become a professional baker and the studies required for that are technical. (She finished secondary school in 2010 and by 2011 she was preparing for her chosen career.)

The situation was different in the case of parents, where we could identify a similar pattern among those seven parents who had changed their aspirations for their children: six parents who originally wanted their children to complete university education ended up wanting them to pursue a technical career and one parent who had originally wanted her child to go to

university ended up saying she wanted her to complete secondary education. In all these seven households, the economic situation of the family worsened, mainly because one of the adult earners in the household became ill.

Particularly dramatic was the case of Isaura from Villa María del Triunfo (Lima). In 2006, her mother reported she wanted Isaura to complete university and become an accountant and she thought this was achievable. Three years later, her aspirations changed dramatically, and she expected her daughter, at the most, to complete secondary education. During 2006 and 2011 the family income was reduced because the father and son were sick and unable to work, and the family had to pay for the medical treatment they required. In this deteriorating economic context, the mother said in 2011 that she wanted her daughter to start providing for herself in the short term.

We also explored whether there were other changes reported within these households that may have affected caregivers' aspirations. More specifically, we checked if the young people whose parents had changed their aspirations for them, had experienced any major academic problems between 2008 and 2011. We found that the young people were in Grade 10 or 11 (almost at the end of high school) and had not repeated a grade (at least) in the last years. By contrast, we found three parents who had not changed their aspirations between the two rounds, despite the fact that their children had repeated a grade during that time. In consequence, we believe that in those cases described above, the main reason behind the change in parents' educational aspirations was the deterioration of the economic situation of the household.

5.4. "It will be difficult": Barriers to low-income youth's aspirations to higher education

Economic constraints are the main barrier faced by low-income young people to the realisation of their educational aspirations. Parents, too, are very aware of the strong economic limitations on their children's further study (especially in rural areas where continuing with post-secondary studies implies migrating outside the village).

When parents don't have a good job and they only have money to eat, then one cannot get prepared to become better. Even though parents would like her to be better, the daughter will realise that she won't be able to achieve it

(Transitions out of school group discussion, Villa María del Triunfo, 2011).

María's mother: Higher education is expensive ... her father has said that if she [is admitted to the university] ... he would do everything possible to pay for her studies. It will be difficult, I believe. There's not enough money for that ... I told her to work this year [and save money] so she could study next year. Because you can study higher education at any time, can't you?

(Interview with rural caregiver, Rioja, 2011)

Faced with this economic barrier, work is seen as both a strategy and a risk for achieving further studies. Working gives young people the opportunity to save money in order to finance their studies. However, at the same time, work is also seen as a risk, given that young people might "start working, take the money to buy clothes and afterwards ... will not want to study" (Interview with rural caregiver, Andahuaylas, 2011).

Young people across sites also recognised the existence of psychological barriers since they mentioned the lack of moral support from their families as one of the barriers that might

prevent them from realising their educational aspirations. They defined moral support as the possibility of being able to talk about future educational plans and receiving advice about ideas such as pursuing post-secondary education. It refers to *feeling backed up*. As one of the girls mentioned in Villa María del Triunfo: “If a girl doesn’t feel supported [by her parents], she has no reason to improve” (Transitions out of school - Group Method, 2011).

However, most parents (especially from rural areas) think of support as mainly economic, since pursuing post-secondary studies relies more on the willingness and abilities of young people, who are now perceived more as adults and autonomous individuals. Therefore, many of the parents said things such as “it’s her/his decision” or “I can’t do anything if she/he doesn’t want to go”. In general, parents showed more determination and confidence that their children would finish high school, even if they had to force them, than that they would pursue post-secondary studies.

Rodrigo’s mother: He was thinking of dropping out of school and I told him, “You’ll finish high school this year, no matter what.”

(Interview with rural caregiver, Rioja, 2011)

Hank’s father: I have told [Hank], “You play on Saturday and play guitar on Sunday. But the other five days are sacred for school and homework.”

(Interview with urban caregiver, Juliaca, 2011)

Another barrier to the realisation of their aspirations faced by low-income young people is the lack of information about post-secondary studies. The majority of caregivers and young people expressed their desire (for the young people) to have higher education. However, when we started digging deeper into what going to the university really meant for the young people, we found that their ideas about higher education were rather vague and in some cases inaccurate, as illustrated by the following quotations.

Interviewer: And how do you think it will be when you finish school?

Peter: I really don’t want to imagine it.

...

Interviewer: Are you worried about finishing school?

Peter: Yes, for the preparing to enter university ...

Interviewer: So you want a career?

Peter: Yes.

Interviewer: What profession would you like?

Peter: I don’t know. I’m thinking about mechatronics in SENATI [technical institute] or marketing.

(Interview with Peter, age 16, Juliaca, 2011)

Interviewer: What do you want to study?

John: I don’t remember the name but it is for specialising in ... reading blueprints [‘*leer planos*’].

Interviewer: And where is it studied?

John: At university.

Interviewer: So in what university do you plan to study?

John: I don't know yet but my mum is seeking where I'm going to enter ... I must begin soon as we're going to finish classes [high school], so as not to be resting, because otherwise I'll virtually lose the year.

(Interview with John, age 16, Villa María del Triunfo, 2011)

Young people did not seem to have a detailed plan of what to do after finishing high school, where to study or how to apply to higher education, despite the fact that most of them were in the final grade of high school at the time they were interviewed in 2011. The lack of a solid plan for their future was a source of concern for the young people, as the following quotation illustrates:

Carmen: At that moment [after finishing high school] you think about several things. When you are about to sleep you're thinking: "What am I going to do? I'm no longer at school; I'm on the street now. I can't do anything ... I don't know what career I'd like, I do not know if I can pass the exam". All this I thought.

(Interview with Carmen, age 16, Juliaca, 2011)

In this scenario and in the opinion of the young people interviewed by Young Lives, schools were not providing students with any information or guidance on how to choose a career, what careers or professions were available, what they consisted of, what type of skills were needed or where these skills could be developed. Schools seemed to ignore the fact that many young people finishing school had "many fears about the future and the next steps to take". As one young person put it, "that's why it is important to have someone that can provide real information about life and this new phase that [school leavers] have to live" (Transitions out of school group discussion, Juliaca, 2011).

In the absence of good information about higher education, the presence of role models, such as parents, older siblings or significant family members who had made the transition to higher education, became crucial in the decision about which career to pursue, as the case of Carmen suggests. At the end of high school, she did not know what to study and sought advice from her older brother, aunt and cousins, who were professionals.

Interviewer: How did you decide you wanted to go to the university and study social work?

Carmen: That's because my aunt told me to do so.

Interviewer: Which aunt?

Carmen: My Aunt Silvia. She has recommended me: "Study social work. It is a good career." She has told me so. I didn't know what to study

...

Interviewer: Besides what your aunt told you, did you ask somewhere else what was that about?

Carmen: No, not really ... I couldn't think of another career. "I'll study this [social work]," I said.

(Interview with Carmen, age 16, Juliaca, 2011)

Finally, one last barrier to the realisation of their aspirations to higher education faced by respondents was the fact that the knowledge acquired at school was not enough to pass the

entrance exam set by most higher education institutions. Young people from Andahuaylas, Juliaca and Villa María del Triunfo agreed on the need to get prepared in an academy before taking the entrance exam. In Villa María del Triunfo, girls mentioned that they knew that school was not enough because they had taken mock entrance exams and they said: “The questions are difficult and even now we can’t answer them. [The majority] first gets prepared for a year, so you don’t spend money in vain since sometimes there are questions they haven’t taught you at school” (Transitions out of school group discussion, 2011).

6. Discussion

The results of this paper support the findings of previous studies regarding the existence of high educational aspirations among low-income young people and their caregivers in Peru and the fact that education is highly valued by Peruvian families (Anson et al. 1998; Benavides et al. 2006; Boyden 2013; Crivello 2011; Cueto et al. 2010; Mena 2012). Post-secondary education holds the promise of achieving greater well-being, as it allows one to obtain jobs requiring qualifications and offering higher remuneration than the jobs available to those with only secondary education.

The aspirations of young people and their caregivers are influenced by caregivers’ educational history and experiences. According to the literature, higher parental SES and education is associated with higher parental aspirations and expectations for offspring (Bohon et al. 2006; Goyette and Xie 1999; Khattab 2003), as suggested by status attainment models. Nevertheless, the results here suggest that aspirations are high even in the case of caregivers with low levels of education and living in poverty, precisely because they regard education as the main tool to overcome poverty and avoid the suffering they have experienced.

Although aspirations are equally high in rural and urban areas, there are clear differences between the views of respondents living in these areas. While rural low-income young people’s and parents’ discourses put more emphasis on the importance of pursuing higher education as a way to improve well-being and escape from poverty; urban young people based their high educational aspirations on the recognition that nowadays completing high school was not enough to get a good job.

The longitudinal nature of the data allowed us to identify that young people’s, and particularly caregivers’, educational aspirations were not static, and changed over time, mainly in response to changes in the socio-economic status of the family. This change was usually described as moving from aspiring to university higher education to aspiring to technical higher education. In the context of a country such as Peru, this change is understood as lowering someone’s aspirations since technical education is generally regarded as second best to university education, a view probably explained by the poor quality of some technical institutions, as some studies suggest (Valdivia 1997). In this context, young people and parents think that in the face of economic constraints, doing a relatively short training course for a technical career would allow the young people to support themselves in the short term.

It should be noted, however, that even in the face of changes in young people’s and their parents’ educational aspirations, most of them continue to aspire to higher education. Nevertheless, quantitative data from the last two rounds (2009 and 2013) clearly show the existence of a gap between young people’s aspirations to higher education and their actual

chances of accessing this level of education. The qualitative analyses presented in this paper allow us to identify the existence of several barriers preventing low-income young people in urban and rural areas from realising their educational aspirations.

Besides economic and psychological barriers (mainly experienced by YL respondents as lack of family support) previously described in the existing literature (Freeman 1997), the results of this paper point to the existence of additional barriers such as a lack of information about higher education (what and where to study and how to apply) available to secondary school seniors (and their parents) and the fact that schools are not playing an active role in preparing students for their transition to higher education. What we found was that young people and parents had rather vague and, in some cases, inaccurate ideas about what higher education was, and seldom did they have a detailed plan of what to do next or how to apply, despite the fact that most young people in the sample were finishing high school the last time they were interviewed, in 2011.

In relation to the role of schools, results suggest that students receive neither vocational guidance nor information about higher education while at school. Moreover, most young people in the sample (and also their parents) thought what they had learned at school was not enough or would not be useful to apply for higher education, and saw the need to enrol in an *academia* in order to prepare for the university entrance exams. As Freeman (1997) suggests, schools must contribute to the development of awareness from an early age of the possibility of pursuing higher education and the requirements or steps involved in this decision. This is an aspect that should be carefully considered in terms of educational policy since there is evidence that students attending schools that provide some sort of institutional support for students' transition to higher education are more likely to pursue college or university education (Gonzales et al. 2003; Smyth and Hannan 2007; Stanton-Salazar 1997).

Overall, we found that there was a need for more information about post-secondary educational options. The existence of significant others (usually family) that had made the transition to higher education turned out to be crucial since they could act as role models, in line with what is proposed by social support theories. The young people looked for these models in the absence of information. There is some evidence of the influence of these role models and to a certain extent the wider social context in the formation of career aspirations. The latter may be suggesting the existence of neighbourhood effects (Flowers et al. 2003) in the formation of career aspirations, an issue that may be interesting to study in the future.

7. Conclusions and policy recommendations

There is a gap between young people's aspirations to higher education and their actual chances of accessing this level of education. Providing secondary school students and their parents with better information could be key to improving young people's chances of realising their aspirations to higher education. We believe schools can play an important role in this.

I consider the provision of vocational information to secondary school students to be a good and manageable starting point in this process. The first thing students need is information on careers and higher education institutions, as well as on the steps and/or requirements to apply for higher education. Within the tutor period for instance, teachers can help students

find information about the higher education available in their contexts. The provision of vocational information in schools can easily be implemented in the short term and its implications in terms of improving students' transition to higher education can be major. However, relevant information to make informed choices about what and where to study should not only come from within schools. It is necessary to develop information systems open to the general public that can provide students and their parents with information on careers, higher education institutions where preparation for those careers is available, and information on the characteristics of graduates by career and higher education institution – particularly in terms of their earnings and the time required to get a job after graduation – all of them elements that should be taken into account by young people during their decision-making process.

Finally, the results of this study also suggest that educational policies aiming to increase access to higher education should address the different types of barriers to the realisation of their educational aspirations faced by low-income young people and not only the economic barriers, as is usually the case in developing countries. For instance, in the case of Peru, the recently launched scholarship programme, Beca 18, will mainly address the economic barriers faced by young people wanting to pursue higher education, since the young people are expected to have in advance a clear picture of what and where to study (young people have to be admitted to a higher education institution before applying for the scholarship). Based on the results of this paper, I believe it is key to the success of this programme to also have a component aimed at providing potential scholars with vocational guidance and better information about higher education, in order also to address the barriers created by a lack of adequate information.⁴ Additionally, it will be relevant to involve secondary schools in the implementation of the scholarship programme since this may help reduce the existing gap (as perceived by students) between secondary and higher education.

⁴ By the time this paper was in press, the Ministry of Education launched a webpage (*Ponte en carrera*) with relevant information about higher education institutions, courses available in those institutions and the wages of the students recently graduated from each course/institution. In the future, it will be important to assess the extent to which this source of information is helping students and their parents in their decision-making process.

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Education Aspirations among Young People in Peru and their Perceptions of Barriers to Higher Education

Data from the Young Lives survey in Peru show there is a gap between young people's aspirations for higher education and their actual chances of accessing university or college. This paper uses qualitative information from Young Lives in order to gain a deeper understanding of young people's aspirations as well as their views of the main barriers they face. We analyse how aspirations are formed, to what extent they are related to parents' educational aspirations for their children, and if they are stable or tend to change over time.

We find high aspirations among low-income young people and their caregivers and establish that education is highly valued by Peruvian families. Young people's aspirations are influenced by their caregivers' educational history and experiences. The longitudinal nature of the data, both quantitative and qualitative, allowed us to identify that young people's, and particularly caregivers', educational aspirations changed over time, mainly in response to changes in the family's socio-economic circumstances.

The study also identified several barriers preventing low-income youth in urban and rural areas from realising their educational aspirations. Besides economic and psychological barriers (mainly experienced as lack of family support), the papers points to the existence of additional barriers such as a lack of information available to secondary school students, and their parents, about higher education (what and where to study and how to apply) and the fact that schools do not play an active role in preparing students for a transition to higher education. Based on their findings, the authors discuss some policy recommendations aimed at overcoming those barriers.



An International Study of Childhood Poverty

About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children in 4 countries over 15 years. It is led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the 4 study countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children.

Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Professor Jo Boyden.

- *Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Ethiopia*
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- *Save the Children India*
- *Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India*
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