

# 'We believe we will succeed... because we will "*soma kwa bidii*": acknowledging the key role played by aspirations for 'being' in students' navigations of secondary schooling in Tanzania

Laela Adamson 

Department of Education, University of Bath, Bath, UK

## ABSTRACT

With dramatic global expansion of secondary schooling there has been significant research interest in how education is related to future aspirations, with important calls to acknowledge connections within processes of aspiring to young people's social, economic and cultural circumstances. This paper presents findings from thematic analysis of interview, participant observation and classroom observation data from an ethnographic study in two secondary schools in Tanzania. It argues that an important, and often overlooked, aspect of this complex process is the way in which aspirations for the future are connected not only to present realities, but also aspirations in the present. Focusing on students' aspirations relating to 'being a "good" student' and being able to '*soma kwa bidii*' or 'study hard', this paper uses the conceptual language of the capability approach to assert the importance of considering aspirations for 'being' in education in conjunction with future aspirations for 'becoming'.

## KEYWORDS

Education; aspirations; agency; capability approach; Tanzania

## 1. Introduction

For many young people, education plays a crucial role in their aspirations for the future and schooling is frequently positioned as the key to achieving a 'good life', however that is conceived (Ames 2013; Stambach and Hall 2017). Particularly in low-income contexts, though, students face a wide range of barriers to continuing, and succeeding, in schooling. Research literature has explored young people's aspirations for 'becoming' through education across a wide range of contexts, identifying the different things that students hope their schooling will enable them to 'be' and 'do' in the future (Crivello 2011; Morrow 2013; Dungey and Ansell 2020). Researchers have also mapped many of the challenges and obstacles that have a detrimental impact on students' ability to both attend school and learn effectively (Smith and Barrett 2011; Wulff 2020). However, identifying challenges alone does not enable us to understand how students who persist in schooling attempt to navigate these obstacles, nor how they understand the relationship between these challenges in their educational present and their future aspirations through education.

**CONTACT** Laela Adamson  [la711@bath.ac.uk](mailto:la711@bath.ac.uk); [laela.adamson@gmail.com](mailto:laela.adamson@gmail.com)  Department of Education, University of Bath, Bath, UK

This paper presents data from an ethnographic study in two Tanzanian secondary schools, where there was found to be a remarkably consistent narrative amongst students about the behaviours and attitudes that were necessary for success in and beyond schooling. These were embodied in the concept of '*soma kwa bidii*', a Kiswahili phrase meaning to 'study hard' or 'study with effort'. However, although students clearly articulated what they felt they needed to do to be successful, classroom and participant observation frequently identified behaviours and choices that were not in line with this ideal. This seeming contradiction was initially confusing to me and I began to further explore students' explanations for different actions and choices. Drawing on the conceptual language offered by the capability approach, I found that '*soma kwa bidii*' could be best understood as an aspirational state of 'being' in the present that was importantly connected to students' aspirations for 'becoming' in the future.

This paper argues that students' aspirations for 'being' in the present are often neglected in studies of aspiration, but in fact, play a significant role in students' experiences of education. For students in this study, '*soma kwa bidii*' was framed as a source of perceived agency and hope, through which they could overcome or bypass barriers they faced in their learning and schooling. However, the capability to '*soma kwa bidii*' was unevenly distributed amongst students who had access to differing levels of resources and support. This paper raises concerns about the individual responsibility that the '*soma kwa bidii*' narrative placed upon students for their own success or failure, despite barriers to quality education that were beyond their control, not least unequal access to resources and a language of instruction in which most were not proficient.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Education and aspirations

The past 30 years have seen a rapid expansion of both primary and secondary schooling across a range of countries where access to education had previously been limited (UNESCO 2015; World Bank 2021). Alongside national initiatives, there has been a global push for Education for All, associated with the 1990 Jomtien Declaration (WCEFA 1990), and aspirations for universal education have been included in both the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations 2000) and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2015). These initiatives have drawn a close link between education and *development, transformation, and improvement*, with the World Bank asserting in 2005 that secondary education in particular has the 'ability to change lives for the better' (World Bank 2005, xi).

The promise of education and its association with aspirations for improved life chances has been felt at all levels and in a wide range of contexts. For example, research with young people and their parents and guardians has found that education has been frequently associated with, and in many cases considered essential to, ideas of a 'good life' or a 'better future' (Ames 2013, 271; Dungey and Ansell 2020, 1; Pattenden 2017; Camfield 2011). Schooling has also been framed as an escape from poverty (Billings 2011; Mkwanzani and Cin 2020; Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008). In Tanzania, the country focus of this research, it is common to hear the assertion that 'education is the key of life' (Billings 2011; Stambach 2000; Posti-Ahokas and Palojoki 2014; DeJaeghere 2017).

## **2.2. Connections between socio-economic realities and future aspirations**

Studies in a variety of contexts have sought to better understand the particular aspirations that students, and their parents or guardians, associate with education and hold for their futures. Many of these studies, drawing primarily on qualitative data, importantly recognise the link between the socio-economic conditions of young people's lives in the present and their future aspirations. Examples include: Morrow's (2013) case studies of children from agricultural families in Andhra Pradesh in India; Malvankar's (2019) consideration of the aspirations and schooling experiences of students from lower social classes in Goa; and Dungey and Ansell's (2020) research into the aspirations of young people experiencing a new entrepreneurship curriculum designed to better reflect real-life opportunities in rural Lesotho. Research has also considered the impact of other factors that influence young people's circumstances and identity. In particular, there has been interest in the aspirations held for and by girls, for example in rural Peru (Ames 2013), in Nepal (Madjdian et al. 2021), in Kenya (Warrington and Kiragu 2012), in Ethiopia (Bernard et al. 2019) and in Tanzania (Posti-Ahokas and Palojoki 2014; DeJaeghere 2018). The relationships between different forms of migration, education and aspirations have also been explored, for example in Ethiopia (Schewel and Fransen 2018), Peru (Crivello 2011), South Africa (Faith and Melis Cin 2020), and amongst Himalayan students in India (Smith and Gergan 2015). Observations are often made, and concerns raised, about the nature of aspirations for young people, in some cases finding that aspirations might be adapted in line with the constraints of a person's current life situation (Malvankar 2019; Madjdian et al. 2021), or that the types of aspirations associated with education are unrealistic and do not take adequate account of the limitations placed on possibilities by current life circumstances and labour market opportunities (Dungey and Ansell 2020; Frye 2012; Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008; Camfield 2011).

When considering the relationship between socio-economic circumstances and aspirations, it is common for researchers to draw on the work of Appadurai (2004) who argues that an individual's 'capacity to aspire' is shaped by their own social and cultural circumstances (Stambach and Hall 2017; DeJaeghere 2018; Conradie 2013; Walker 2018). This results in the ability to imagine a range of futures being unevenly distributed as young people in different contexts have access to more limited or diverse knowledge of possibilities, and their values are shaped by different community expectations and social and cultural norms (Appadurai 2004). A number of empirical studies of young people's aspirations have acknowledged significant difficulties in separating out how aspirations relate to individual or collective desires, whether they are formed individually or with the influence of others, and where the lines fall between aspiration and expectation (Crivello 2011; Morrow 2013; Hart 2016).

Considering the complexity and diversity of factors shaping aspirations and the belief that influencing aspirations may be a route to improved futures (Appadurai 2004; Conradie and Robeyns 2013; Bernard et al. 2019; Serneels and Dercon 2021), it is not surprising that there has been such focus on processes of setting aspirations for the future.

## **2.3. Aspirations and agency**

An important contribution to the discussion of processes of aspiring has been the exploration of agency, defined as the freedom of individuals and communities to imagine and make decisions about their futures. These studies have asserted that, although

aspirations are shaped by social context, this relationship is not necessarily deterministic, but that young people are, or can be, engaged in a dynamic process of negotiating their aspirations over time (DeJaeghere 2018; Okkolin 2016; Faith and Melis Cin 2020; Zipin et al. 2015). However, whilst highlighting the role of agency, these studies also acknowledge that this agency exists in dialogue with structures present in the socio-cultural context. These structures work to shape the aspirations that young people set, but may also act as constraints on progress towards achieving future aspirations.

Young people's educational experiences are, then, influenced by both the social realities of their school and home environments in the present, and their imaginings about what they hope education will enable them to achieve in the future. But some concerns have been raised in the literature about the extent to which all young people acknowledge or understand the relationships between constraints in their present and their ability to achieve their future goals (Frye 2012; Unterhalter 2012). Some studies have found that young people who acknowledged significant constraints on their ability to achieve success in schooling and their future aspirations could, reflecting back on their schooling experiences, point to key strategies they had used to circumvent some of the barriers they faced, such as 'resilience' (Hemson 2019), 'cleverness' (Vavrus 2015), and 'hustling' (Markovich Morris and Adjei 2021). However, others have found that some young people who are still in education do not accept that external constraints may hold them back, rather suggesting that 'it is only their failure to "be serious" that is holding them back' (Unterhalter 2012, 319; see also Camfield 2011). This study draws entirely from the voices of students who were engaged in schooling and articulated clear aspirations for the actions and attitudes in the present that would enable their success in achieving their future goals.

This paper argues that broadening the focus from students' imagined futures to include consideration of their aspirations for the present enables valuable insight into this important, but underexplored, part of the process of aspiration, where students are striving to hold in mind their future aspirations whilst navigating challenges and constraints in their daily lives and schooling. In order to better conceptualise this relationship between aspirations for the present and aspirations for the future, this paper draws on the capability approach to theorise the connection between students' valued 'beings' and 'becomings'.

### 3. Conceptual framework

#### 3.1. Capabilities for 'being' and 'becoming'

The capability approach focuses on the extent to which an individual can 'be' and 'do' the things that they value (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000; Robeyns 2017). Central to the approach is the distinction between 'functionings', which are achieved outcomes, and 'capabilities', which focus on the opportunity that a person has to achieve certain outcomes. This distinction is important because a focus only on achieved outcomes may mask dramatic differences in two people's experiences and 'the real alternatives we have' (Sen 1992, 49), or lead to incorrect assumptions about what people value. Walker and Unterhalter (2007) explain this distinction using the example of two Kenyan school students who perform poorly in mathematics. One experiences good quality education with a high level of support but chooses to spend more time on other things, while the

other is interested and dedicated to her study of mathematics, but attends a poorly resourced school that does not have a specialist mathematics teacher and does not have support outside of school. Walker and Unterhalter (2007, 5) explain that, ‘if we look only at functioning in these two examples – performance in examinations – we see equal . . . outcomes. But while the functionings of the students are the same, their capabilities are different’. By focusing on capabilities, attention is importantly drawn to the range of different factors, including personal, material, social and environmental factors, that may enable or constrain a person’s opportunities, and how these factors influence a person’s values and aspirations (Sen 1999).

Another distinction that is a key feature of capability analysis, but is by no means limited to the capability approach, is the identification of ‘ends’ (the beings and doings that a person values and wants to be able to achieve) and ‘means’ (Robeyns 2017, 48). The concept of ‘means’ includes, but is not limited to, resources or inputs. Rather, Sen (1992, 27) highlights potential differences in people’s opportunities for ‘converting primary goods (including incomes) into achievements of well-being’, depending on factors such as personal attributes and abilities and social and environmental context. For example, if the parents of a student buy their child a physics textbook, but that student does not have enough knowledge of English to access the language the book uses, or availability of free time at home to be able to study, they will not be able to use the book to achieve the functioning of passing the examination. The abilities or opportunities that a person has to transform inputs or resources into capabilities and functionings are commonly termed *conversion factors*.

When considering the temporal relationship between ‘means’ and ‘ends’, there are some cases where the time gap is negligible, for example if a person values being with family who live in a different city to observe a religious holiday, if they have the necessary resources and opportunities to travel, they can achieve that valued functioning without significant delay. However, in other cases, and particularly when considering future aspirations, the temporal gap between the ‘means’ and ‘ends’ may be a number of years. Moreover, there will often be a series of interim functionings that must be achieved as pre-requisites to achieving the final aspiration. For example, in most education systems, students at secondary level will have to make choices about which subjects to study or prioritise. If they aspire to a specific occupation in the future, they will most likely seek advice about the entry requirements for that career path to help with their decisions. But they will also make frequent, smaller choices, about what to prioritise. For example, a student who is invited to a social event in the week before an important examination must weigh up the potential impact on their exam performance and whether this might have negative repercussions for their future aspirations. It is clear from these examples that there is an important connection between what a young person is able to ‘be’ and ‘do’ in the present and what they will be able to ‘become’ in the future. Considering the significance of this temporal connection, particularly in the case of education and aspiration, the dynamics of this relationship are underexplored. This paper contributes towards developing a picture of young people’s understanding of the relationship between their education-related aspirations in the present and the future.

Students’ circumstances in the present mean that the choices they make are not always ‘free’ but may be enabled or constrained by their access to resources and conversion factors (Kleine 2013). For example, for students who aspire to be doctors, but attend a poorly resourced school without access to science laboratories or equipment, their

desire to achieve good grades in science subjects may be thwarted. Similarly, and very relevant to this study, a young person who aspires to work abroad and so knows the importance of speaking English for international mobility may choose not to practise English outside of the classroom if their attempts are met with mockery from their peers and family. Thus, it can be seen that some young people may experience tension between the 'beings' and 'doings' in the present that they feel will support their future aspirations for 'becoming', and the 'real alternatives' or capabilities that they have, considering the material, social, environmental or personal constraints they may face. However, as is highlighted in some of the aspirations literature introduced above, and in some of the broader literature associated with the capability approach, individuals often demonstrate agency to navigate and negotiate constraints (DeJaeghere 2018; Khader 2012; Faith and Melis Cin 2020; Khalid 2019), but each person's 'negotiating position' will be influenced by the personal, material and social resources that they have available to them (Okkolin 2017, 95). This paper explores how secondary school students at two schools in Tanzania imagined the connections, and navigated tensions and constraints, between their aspirations for 'being' in schooling in the present and their aspirations for 'becoming' in the future.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. The study

The broader study that this paper relates to addressed the overarching research question: *How do students negotiate their school language environment?* Tanzania is a multilingual country with more than 100 ethnic community languages (Muzale and Rugemalira 2008). The national *lingua franca* is Kiswahili and this is the language of instruction (LoI) through all seven years of government primary schooling. At the beginning of secondary level, the LoI shifts to English for all subjects except Kiswahili. This transition is widely acknowledged to present significant challenges for learning (Brock-Utne, Desai, and Qorro 2003; Barrett et al. 2014), yet the public desire to retain English as LoI is strong, resulting in some labelling language attitudes and practices as 'perplexing' and 'contradictory' (Senkoro 2005, 12). A key finding of the overall study was that this confusion is reduced when students' language beliefs and behaviours are understood in the richness of their social context and the connections, and conflicts, between students' multiple valued capabilities are acknowledged (Adamson 2021). Although the overall study was not framed in terms of aspirations, the importance of students' aspirations for both 'becoming' and 'being' came through strongly when discussing students' views about the importance of education and what they felt would help them to succeed in schooling.

### 4.2. Methods and data

This ethnographic study incorporated a wide range of different methods that were designed to enable a rich picture of students' experiences and to ensure that students' own voices and perspectives, which are too often limited in LoI research, could be heard (O'Reilly 2012; Juffermans and Van Camp 2013).

The data in this paper were generated through classroom observations, participant observation and informal conversations recorded in fieldnotes, and semi-structured

interviews. I conducted 51 lesson observations across all year groups and a range of subjects. However, I focused on selected classes in Forms 1 and 2 to enable repeated observation of the same groups of students who were navigating the transition to English as LoI. Between lessons I remained in the classroom and talked informally to students about what I had observed. These conversations were supplemented by 31 group interviews including a total of 146 students.

In addition to leading my own research agenda, I worked with a group of 10 Student Researchers. At the rural school these students were in Form 4, but in town, where the school also offered Advanced Level schooling for those who had performed well in the Form 4 national examinations, these students were in Form 5. The Student Researchers designed and conducted 18 of their own interviews. All the study data was analysed together as part of the final thematic analysis, but where excerpts presented are from student-led interviews, they are clearly identified. I also held meetings with the Student Researchers where we discussed emerging findings and they offered explanations and interpretations from their own perspective as successful students. These meetings were recorded and included in the thematic analysis as part of the study data.

Data was collected in Kiswahili, English, or a combination of languages, depending on the preference of participants. My dual-status as native speaker of English, but also a language learner of Kiswahili, played a significant role in this research and often contributed to more developed discussions and negotiations of words and meanings (Adamson 2020).

### **4.3. Ethics**

This research was approved through the ethics process at the Institute of Education, University of London in 2014. I followed official procedures to obtain research permissions from the Tanzanian Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH), the Tanzanian Immigration Service and Education officials at the regional and district levels. Once in school, research ethics remained a constant consideration and issues such as informed consent were explained and negotiated on a daily basis.

### **4.4. Study sites**

This study took place in two secondary schools in the Morogoro Region of Tanzania over a period of 8 months. Morogoro was selected partly for pragmatic reasons, including its accessibility and the fact that Kiswahili is widely used in both the school and community, and because it represented a region that was neither amongst the highest nor lowest performing in national learning assessment surveys (Uwezo 2019).

The first school was a large, well-established urban school that offered both lower and advanced secondary levels (Forms 1–6) with more than 1500 students enrolled. Although there was considerable socio-economic diversity in the student intake, many had parents in professional jobs and siblings who had already completed secondary education. Students' levels of English varied dramatically as some had attended private, English-medium primary schools, while the majority were educated in government, Kiswahili-medium primary schools.<sup>1</sup>

The second school was in a rural community, 35 km from town, but only 2 km from a main road. It was less than 10 years old and offered lower secondary education (Forms

1–4), with 600 students enrolled. Most students came from farming families, and many were the first in their family to attend secondary school. All students had attended Kiswahili-medium primary schools and very few reported having access to English-language support outside of school.

The inclusion of an urban and a rural setting, along with the diversity amongst the student body at the urban school, enabled the observation of similarities and differences between students' experiences relating to both their school and home socio-economic contexts. This was valuable when researching aspirations and language use as both have been identified as highly socially-embedded processes (Appadurai 2004; Street 2001).

## 5. Findings: aspirations for 'becoming' ... but also for 'being'

The argument set out in this paper does not aim to undermine the importance of understanding students' aspirations for future 'becoming' through education. Certainly, when asked about why education was important, students in this study talked at length about their future aspirations. 'Becoming employed' was a key aspiration, although there were notable differences between urban and rural students in terms of the occupations that they aspired to. In town, becoming a doctor, a bank clerk, or a business person were common aspirations. Rural students were less likely to be specific about the jobs they wanted, but in a context where most came from farming families, many were clear that they aspired to salaried employment, with some students giving examples like becoming a teacher or joining the army. Another observable difference was that rural girls were more likely to talk about the importance of 'being financially independent' as an important step to 'being protected from harm', often referring to examples from their own lives where they had witnessed domestic violence.

What was also clear from the way that students talked about their future aspirations was that 'being a student' and completing lower secondary education was considered a prerequisite that would enable young people to access the futures they imagined. Some Form 4 students at the rural school were quite honest that they were not confident about achieving passing grades in the upcoming national examinations, but they asserted that having continued in education would still allow them better opportunities: *'It can be that you have failed, but since you have your education you can develop yourself. . . '* [Female, Form Four, Rural school]. But 'being a student' was not only valued for its instrumental role in enabling young people to achieve their future aspirations. 'Being a student' in itself represented an aspirational identity that supported students' aspirations in the present. Moreover, there were certain attitudes and behaviours associated with the aspiration of 'being a "good" student' that students believed would enable their success and support their progress towards their future goals. The remainder of this paper concentrates on students' aspirations relating to 'being a student' in the present to demonstrate the role that these more immediate aspirations played in the broader process of education and aspiration.

### 5.1. 'Being a student' – as an aspirational identity

'Being a student' was positioned as an aspirational identity within society that students felt proud to have achieved, and wished to retain. In a group discussion with the urban, Form 5 Student Researchers involved in this study, one offered an explanation of why



speaking English and ‘being a student’ were highly valued. He said: *‘When people in town hear you speaking English it gives you a kind of status. They hear and think, “Ah! That person is a student”’*. This student has been successful in his schooling and speaks English well in comparison to some of his peers, contributing to his confidence to use English outside of the school setting. Use of English was the most highly valued marker of ‘being a student’ and was very closely associated with the ideal of ‘being a “good” student’, but even students who rarely used English outside of lessons, as was very common at the rural school, expressed pride in their student status. Without English, student status was still visible through the wearing of school uniform.

In addition to ‘being a student’ offering a certain status that was considered aspirational within the social context, the young people also talked about ‘being a student’ as offering protection from alternatives, which were positioned as extremely undesirable. A number of girls talked about ‘being a student’ offering protection against pregnancy and early marriage. For example, a female student in Form One at the urban school spoke about out-of-school girls, saying that: *‘some are married off . . . before their age. Others get pregnant before their age . . . so it has a big impact on their lives’*. Boys tended to focus on idleness and illegal behaviours. In an interview with a group of male students in Form 4 at the rural school, one boy gave a very bleak account of how he believed life might be if he had not continued in schooling:

When you go to get education, you avoid many temptations . . . on the streets . . . A person comes and says to you, “my friend, let’s go to this certain place” . . . You go there and maybe you steal, and as you leave there you are arrested. Either you should die, or you should escape, or you should be caught. Meaning that school has its importance. Education is important.

Even when students did not offer as extreme accounts of the activities of non-students, they often suggested that they were not engaged in activities that were considered worthwhile. The alternative to being in school was often described as ‘staying at home’ or ‘sitting at home’ and out-of-school peers were positioned as ‘different’ to those who continued in school.

The finding that ‘being a student’ represented an aspiration in the present, both for the status it carried and its protective role, was consistent across both schools. However, how students felt about this identity changed over time and differed depending on the setting. Many students in town aspired to continue to Advanced Level schooling and on to university, and so, for them, ‘being a student’ was considered a valuable status into early adulthood and even beyond. For some rural students, though, there was a sense that ‘being a student’ was for younger people and some Form Four boys stated: *‘To tell the truth we feel happy that we are almost finished . . .’*, explaining that they were regularly mocked by others for still being students. Yet, these students persisted to the end of Form Four as this was the key watershed that would allow them to transition from the identity of ‘being a student’ to ‘being educated’, a status that was not afforded to those who left formal education earlier. This clear link and evidence of the transition between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ demonstrates again that ‘being a student’ is both an aspirational identity in the present and plays a key instrumental role in supporting progress towards students’ future aspirations.

## 5.2. To be a ‘good student’ you have to ‘soma kwa bidii’

*Ndiyo . . . tunaamini tutafaulu . . . kwa sababu tutasoma kwa bidii.*

Yes . . . we believe we will succeed . . . because we will study hard.

[Male, Form Two, Urban school].

Although ‘being a student’ in itself represented an aspirational identity, within this identity, there were different versions of what ‘being a student’ could look like. Students described the actions and behaviours that were associated with ‘being a “good” student’ in ways that were remarkably consistent across schools. These were encompassed in the notion, ‘soma kwa bidii’, which translates as ‘study hard’ or ‘study with effort’. The Kiswahili verb ‘soma’ means ‘to read’ as well as ‘to study’. It can be transformed into a noun in two ways. ‘*Msomaji*’ describes a person who reads, but ‘*msomi*’ translates to mean a scholar or a learned or educated person. These multiple meanings of the word, ‘soma’, perhaps help to explain the different layers of meaning encompassed in students’ use of the expression, ‘soma kwa bidii’, and why it is argued here to refer to both behaviours and a mindset associated with the identity of ‘being a good student’.

At the most direct level, ‘soma kwa bidii’ referred to dedicating effort to the practical tasks that dominate students’ learning-related activities, including copying down notes in class either from the teacher or from a book if available, followed by re-reading, re-writing and memorising them in their own time. One student explained:

If you say I want to study [“soma”] at home, it requires that you read, if you finish, you say, let me write out what I have read. You write, then you return to the book and check . . . here, have you followed, have you missed anything?

[Male student, Form One, Urban school].

In addition to these practical activities, the notion of ‘soma kwa bidii’ was also associated with a particular mindset of focus and determination. A different male Form One student at the urban school explained: “*Soma kwa bidii*”, we can say that you should take heed of everything that is given to you there. Stop with all other things. Make education your main priority.’ There were a number of situations both inside and outside of school that students listed as ‘distractions’ that should be ‘ignored’, including when students encountered negative and discouraging comments from peers as well as members of the broader community.

It was a key feature of ‘soma kwa bidii’ that, although it referred to a set of behaviours and attitudes in the present, these were firmly connected in students’ minds to their future aspirations. For example, some students talked about having an ambition or goal for the future that would help to direct their education-related efforts and keep them focused and motivated. A female student in Form One at the rural school explained: ‘*So, soma kwa bidii . . . it’s like you are making yourself for your future life . . . you say “I have planned that I should study so I can be a doctor, I have planned that I should study so I can be a teacher . . . ”*’. A female student in Form Two at the urban school shared a similar assertion, saying: ‘*If you have the intention of doing it, in short, you will manage it*’. For her, and others, having this intention was considered central to their ability to succeed. This links back, then, to the phrase in the title of this paper: ‘We believe we will

succeed . . . because we will “*soma kwa bidii*”. Versions of this statement were frequently expressed by students who imagined a very clear link between their ability to ‘*soma kwa bidii*’ in the present and their success in schooling and in achieving their future aspirations beyond school.

### 5.3. ‘*Soma kwa bidii*’ – aspiration rather than reality?

There was remarkable consistency about the narrative students used to talk about the strategies for success they associated with the concept of ‘*soma kwa bidii*’. However, being able to consistently ‘*soma kwa bidii*’ was more attainable for some students than others. The broader study from which this paper is drawn includes numerous examples of students acting in ways that did not align with their own expressed aspiration to ‘*soma kwa bidii*’ and so would seem to undermine progress towards their future aspirations.

Perhaps the most visible and frequent example of this tension between aspiration and reality was when students remained silent rather than answer teachers’ questions. Students themselves asserted the importance of participating in class. Referring specifically to answering teachers’ questions, a female student in Form One at the rural school explained: ‘*the first requirement is that a student . . . cooperate with them [teachers] in the studies*’. A key explanation for this silence was that the use of English as the LoI created a significant obstacle for the vast majority of students. Teachers often tried to support students’ understanding by translating into Kiswahili, but most expected students to answer in English. The same student explained that cooperating with teachers, though desirable, was not always possible:

. . . the teachers ask in English, then they translate for us, and if we ask them if they want the answer in Swahili language or English language, they say English language, so then every person feels weak. [Female, Form One, Rural school]

Even when students did have some understanding and perhaps had enough competence in English to attempt to answer questions, they spoke of the fear associated with making mistakes. For example, a male Form Four student at the rural school stated: ‘*So they break a person’s heart . . . even if you are interested in speaking, you shouldn’t speak . . . because you are afraid.*’ But despite the frequency with which these moments that seemed incongruous with descriptions of ‘*soma kwa bidii*’ were observed, the majority of students still pointed to the aspiration to ‘*soma kwa bidii*’ as the key to their ability to succeed in education and beyond.

It was unusual for students to express doubt about their ability to succeed, particularly those in the first two years of secondary schooling. Some of the older students at the rural school were very honest that they were not sure they would pass their national examinations based on their own difficulties in class and the historical performance of students from the school, but the vast majority of younger students pointed to ‘*soma kwa bidii*’ as a source of confidence that they could succeed. There was one notable exception, though, in an interview with a group of rural students in Form Two, one boy and two girls, when they discussed their chances of passing their Form Four examinations:

Student 1: I don't have certainty. Until we have textbooks.

Student 2: Myself, I would have certainty, if my life at home were to change. Because if I were to have time to study, if I were to get money for going to tuition to help me a little, I would be able to progress. But like this . . . I don't know . . .

Student 3: Me, I do have certainty. Like she said, if I were to get time for studying and doing past questions . . . I could succeed.

All three of these students expressed a desire to be able to study harder, but one that they were struggling to fulfil due to external constraints.

The challenges that these students mentioned were shared by many of their rural peers. Some urban students, too, faced significant obstacles, such as limited household finances and having to make long and difficult journeys to reach school. However, in town the socio-economic diversity in the student body worked to highlight the impact that these differences had on students' ability to engage effectively in learning, and in particular, to act in accordance with their stated aspiration to '*soma kwa bidii*'. Arriving at one mathematics lesson at the urban school, two thirds of the class were lined up to receive strokes of the cane from the teacher for not completing their homework. When I asked another student why some had managed to complete the homework when the majority had not, she explained that: '*they understand in tuition*' [Female, Form Two, Urban school]. Those students who could not access additional support outside of school were unable to understand the task they had been set. Sometimes additional support came in the form of family members or friends, but again, not all students had access to this. In an interview conducted by a Student Researcher with a group of Form One boys from the urban school, one boy stated:

when I am home there are many things that can enable us to be able to know the English language . . . like if my relative is there and can help us with those things we are failing with

But this comment was met with some frustration by another boy in the group who lamented: '*there is no place outside of school where I can learn English. Truthfully, I don't have such a place*'.

But external constraints and student differences were not commonly recognised or acknowledged by students as valid obstacles to success. Rather, it was more common for students to point to '*soma kwa bidii*' as the route to ignoring and overcoming other challenges. A female student in Form One at the urban school, who had attended an English-medium primary school and performed well relative to her peers, was quite unforgiving when she spoke (in English) about others who were struggling with English on the transition to secondary school:

They are not improving because they don't focus on their studies . . . they are not serious in their studies, cause if they could focus, they could perform . . . If they really want to know English, just let them try.

In reality, it was much more possible for some students to consistently conform to the expectations of '*soma kwa bidii*' than others, particularly those who were more fluent in the LoI and experienced home living circumstances where they had financial support, protected time, and encouragement with their studies. As such, '*soma kwa bidii*' can be seen as representing an aspiration in the present, both because of its close connection to

aspirations for ‘becoming’ in the future, and because it represented an ideal way of ‘being’ that students aspired to, but very few students were able to consistently uphold.

## 6. Discussion: ‘soma kwa bidii’ – agency(?), responsibility, and inequality

By highlighting students’ aspirations for ‘being’ in the present, this paper has demonstrated the crucial role that these play in the broader process of aspiration, as certain ‘beings’ and ‘doings’ are importantly connected to future desired ‘becomings’. The findings shared above work to support the observations of other studies that have shown that ‘being’ in education, and particularly in secondary education, represents an aspirational identity in itself (Vavrus 2002; Frye 2012; Williams 2019). But this paper has also gone further, exploring how students imagine the connections between ‘being a student’ and their future aspirations. Key to students’ notions of success in schooling, and thus in achieving their future goals, was the concept of ‘soma kwa bidii’.

The way that students used the concept of ‘soma kwa bidii’ presented it as an expression of agency as they stated with optimism that, if they could fulfil their aspiration to ‘soma kwa bidii’ in the present, it would enable them to successfully achieve their future-focused aspirations. As such, this aspiration for ‘being’ in schooling played a crucial role in the broader process of aspiration, acting as both a practical and imaginative tool to help students to maintain hope, and thus their engagement with continued schooling. Increased focus on agency in more recent studies of aspiration has been an important development, allowing researchers to highlight the capacities of individuals to negotiate and navigate constraints present in their socio-economic and cultural environments (DeJaeghere 2018; Okkolin 2016; Faith and Melis Cin 2020). However, a closer look at the aspiration to ‘soma kwa bidii’ challenges the extent to which this can truly be viewed as a source of agency.

The findings showed that, for most students, ‘soma kwa bidii’ represented an ideal rather than a reality that they could consistently achieve. Moreover, the notion of ‘soma kwa bidii’ placed significant responsibility on individual students to adhere to the rather exacting demands associated with the concept, including the ability to ‘ignore’ the obstacles that students faced. Although there were a small number of rural students who acknowledged that external constraints represented a significant challenge for their aspiration to ‘soma kwa bidii’, the broader narrative positioned any failure to overcome these obstacles as personal weakness. There are similarities here to the students in Unterhalter’s (2012) study who blame their failure on their own lack of ‘seriousness’, a narrative that can also be found amongst teachers and education commentators in Tanzania (Mligo and Mshana 2018; Khaji 2019). Writing specifically about Tanzania, DeJaeghere (2017) has observed a historical shift in the discourse around the meaning of education from the communal identity and value associated with President Nyerere’s Education for Self-Reliance programme of the 1960s, to the current discourse, which is shaped by the neoliberal global system and places responsibility for success firmly on the individual. Emphasis on individual responsibility for educational success has also been identified elsewhere, for example in Ethiopia (Camfield 2011), Lesotho (Dungey and Ansell 2020) and India (Highet and Del Percio 2021). In this study, students’ aspirations to ‘soma kwa bidii’ were found to foreground personal responsibility, while neglecting the role of others and external factors in enabling or constraining success.

There are parallels between my concerns about the notion of '*soma kwa bidii*' discussed here and Wilson-Strydom's (2017) criticisms of individualised notions of 'grit' that she has observed in her study of Higher Education in South Africa. Wilson-Strydom notes that framings of 'grit' have placed responsibility on students to be heroic and exceptional, whilst overlooking the broader factors that support or undermine resilience. Like Wilson-Strydom, I argue that the capability approach can offer a useful corrective. If '*soma kwa bidii*' is approached as a capability, it draws attention to the resources and conversion factors that enable or constrain different students' abilities to consistently act in accordance with its associated behaviours. For example, some students identified lack of learning resources, lack of access to additional tutoring or home-based support, and lack of time to study as constraints. However, the factor that most clearly affected students' learning and wider opportunities in education was their ability in English. A capabilities analysis encourages us to look beyond the functionings of different students and whether they are able to understand and use English to answer teachers' questions. We are required to evaluate why students have these different language abilities. For example, we must consider the level of exposure to English they have had prior to starting secondary school and assess whether a student has access to English language support outside of school. By doing this, inequalities between different students are highlighted. Viewing '*soma kwa bidii*' as a capability draws stark attention to the fact that this aspiration for 'being' in the present, that students frame as a key source of hope and optimism, in fact acts to amplify existing inequalities as some students are much more able to '*soma kwa bidii*' than others. On top of this, the narrative of individual responsibility associated with '*soma kwa bidii*' allows those students who have greater access to this capability to feel successful, while others carry the burden of personal failure.

## 7. Conclusion

Existing studies of education and aspiration have importantly highlighted inequalities in the way young people set aspirations for 'becoming' in the future, related to their socio-economic and cultural situations in the present. However, this paper has argued that students' aspirations for 'being' in the present should also be a focus for research because they play a key role in the ways that young people practically and imaginatively navigate the challenges that they face in their schooling and home environments. Moreover, since aspirations are considered a central element of efforts to ensure that education unlocks better opportunities for all, understanding how aspirations in the present, such as the notion of '*soma kwa bidii*', may, in fact, work against this goal by compounding existing inequalities is crucial.

## Note

1. Of 115 students in Forms 1 and 2 at the urban school who completed home background questionnaires, 13 had attended private, English-medium primary schools.

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## ORCID

Laela Adamson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2471-3246>

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