A photograph of a rural landscape in Lesotho. In the foreground, there is a rocky, eroded hillside with sparse green grass. In the middle ground, several school buildings with corrugated metal roofs are visible. One building is a long, single-story structure, while others are smaller, more traditional-looking buildings. The background features rolling green hills under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds.

EQUIPPING LESOTHO'S PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS FOR EDUCATING AND MOTIVATING RURAL CHILDREN

An ESRC-FCDO-funded collaborative research project

RESEARCH REPORT

March 2023

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Previous research has identified that children in rural Lesotho see schooling as preparation for a future elsewhere in a professional career. The content of education seems abstract to them, unconnected with their experiences of rural life. Once they realise that they are unlikely to achieve the academic success necessary for a formal sector career, they see little purpose for continuing in education, and many drop out of school.

This report presents the findings of a collaborative project undertaken by a team from Lesotho College of Education (LCE), the National University of Lesotho (NUL) and Brunel University London (BUL) with support from Lesotho's Ministry of Education and Training – Basic Education. The purpose of the project was to identify ways to better prepare and support teachers in rural primary schools to make schooling more meaningful and engaging for rural children.

The team worked with 35 second year students on the Diploma in Education (Primary) at LCE to undertake action research projects during their teaching practice. The student teachers were supported during their placements by 11 graduates of NUL's B.Ed. (Primary) programme who had been trained in action research and were employed at the host schools or schools nearby. The participants attended a two-day workshop that introduced them to the project and trained them in action research. Once in the field, they received visits from members of the research team who were discussed progress and resolved problems. Both student teachers and supervising teachers wrote reports on their experiences which were analysed by the research team.

Overall, the action research projects resulted in some innovative learner-centred teaching and development of teaching aids that are likely to have been effective in enabling learners to achieve intended learning outcomes. The student teachers and teacher supervisors were less clear about adapting teaching to the experiences and interests of rural children, and generally struggled with the applying concept of rurality in their practice. Rural contexts were seen as deficient – lacking resources (both at school and in the community), exposure (to different people, ideas and practices) and conservative in their perspectives. Most of the action research projects focused on finding ways to overcome these rural deficits. There was a widespread assumption that resources needed to be brought in from elsewhere, rather than seeking alternative resources found in the rural setting that might enable children to engage more meaningfully with the curriculum. Some of the student teachers were more imaginative and creative in finding ways to make their teaching more relatable to children growing up in rural contexts. Very few of the projects were concerned with finding ways to make schooling relevant to future rural lives. Enabling teachers to direct their attention to these area requires further attention.

Recommendations for the institutions of higher education, and for the Ministry of Education and Training and development partners are offered at the end of the report.

BACKGROUND

The project built on a previous study – **Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings** – that examined the relationships between schooling and aspiration in rural areas of Lesotho, Laos, and India (Ansell et al 2019, see also <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/projects/education-systems-aspiration-and-learning-in-remote-rural-settings>). Based on ethnographic research conducted in two rural villages and their local primary schools (in the Maluti Mountains on the eastern edge of Maseru District and in the Seapala Valley, Quthing), that project found that schooling in rural Lesotho often fails to inspire learners, because it does not connect with their experiences. Children are taught that “paying attention” or “working hard” will bring academic success that leads to a salaried job such as working as a teacher, nurse, soldier, or police officer (Ansell et al 2019). Yet these children had limited knowledge of what such jobs entail. They only associate these jobs with a secure income and possible relocation, simply viewing them as worthy occupations that are useful to the community and society.

The curriculum content and textbooks were unfamiliar to the context and experiences of rural children, and hence were hard to connect with. The type of learning they received seemed abstract, making little sense in their everyday lives, and appearing relevant to somewhere else. The remoteness of what they learned also made it harder for rural children to succeed in school, and when learners realised they were unlikely to perform sufficiently well in exams to achieve the careers they thought schooling was intended for (as teachers, nurses, soldiers, and police officers), they lost motivation and tended to give up. From the perspective of their rural context, schooling seemed unimportant to their current or future lives (Ansell et al, 2020). It appeared to be about a distant future in Maseru or South Africa; not the sort of lives they anticipated in rural Lesotho.

The 2009 Curriculum and Assessment Policy introduced an integrated curriculum to Lesotho’s education system that was rolled out nationally in 2013. This curriculum was intended to address the issue of the relevance of education in the real world in which children live. The curriculum emphasises learner development and acquisition of skills, frequently giving attention to the competencies necessary for learners in their “respective societies in different spheres of operation such as political, socio-cultural, technological and economical; and to cope with the challenges posed thereof” (Kingdom of Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training, 2008, p.13). Such skills as using effective communication, appreciation of the environment, and creativity and entrepreneurship are emphasised. With the targeted skills, young people are expected to be able to create and sustain their own livelihoods. However, despite this curriculum reform, Ansell et al (2019) found that rural children still perceived schooling in terms of employment in the formal sector, and saw the “Creativity and Entrepreneurial” subject area as irrelevant to their current and future lives.

Many elements of the curriculum, and textbook examples and illustrations, continue to be unfamiliar to rural children, drawing on ideas and resources that are absent from the everyday lives of rural communities (Ansell et al 2019). Examples of these are the absence of electricity and telecommunications infrastructure that often result in the absence of television and the internet. Other examples include where the curriculum requires:

- children learn to play chess when most rural schools do not have any chess sets

- children learn to use *PowerPoint* and other computer applications when the schools do not have these resources and children have never seen a computer
- textbooks using pictures and images that depict scenes from urban life which rural children have never been exposed to

The aspiration study revealed that in the absence of specified resources and infrastructure, teachers taught topics theoretically. Many teachers lacked the confidence to use new curriculum approaches or adapt the curriculum to suit the rural context. With unclear guidelines on how to implement the curriculum, these teachers preferred to fall back to what they knew and were comfortable with – the content and pedagogy they had been exposed to during their own schooling (Dungey and Ansell, 2022). Like the rural children and their parents, these teachers generally saw the purpose of schooling as passing exams for further education or finding formal employment (elsewhere). Many rural teachers also had negative attitudes to rural life and believed that despite their efforts rural children’s academic success was doomed. Consequently, many were poorly motivated and frequently absent from school, as they lacked conviction that they could make a difference in children’s lives (Ansell et al, 2019).

If schooling feels distant to rural children and unrelated to their lives, this indicates that the education they are offered is unsustainable and irrelevant. It fails to develop the imaginations and skills that might enable them to participate actively in their communities, and ultimately to create and develop socio-economic environments that promote quality of life, empowerment, and mutual respect within their communities as envisaged in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Framework. Further, this type of education fails to tap into their potential to value, attain and sustain the social, economic, and ecological well-being of their communities (Sterling 2001). Unless something is done to remedy this situation, most rural children will continue to drop out of the education system, fail to achieve either academic credentials or salaried work, and continue to view schooling as irrelevant to their current and future lives. While education for rural children should not be watered down and bound to rurality, there is a need to assist schools, and teachers specifically, to make teaching and learning connect better with rural children’s experiences and to make schooling relevant to rural children’s current and future lives.

Teachers are key to teaching and learning. They are responsible for interpreting and translating curriculum outcomes into lesson objectives; they design and implement lessons; and they motivate and encourage children to learn. If well equipped, teachers could adapt the curriculum and textbooks to fit any context and would be perfectly placed to play a transformative role. Teachers can enable rural communities, children included, to value education as worthwhile, even where school graduates fail to continue beyond basic education and fail to achieve secure salaried jobs. With teachers’ abilities and efforts to transform and contextualise school curricula, rural children could acquire knowledge and develop skills that are useful in their context. But for this, teachers need preparation, support, and supervision to become better at translating the curriculum for a rural context and motivating youth for productive and engaging rural futures.

THE CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECT: EQUIPPING LESOTHO PRIMARY TEACHERS FOR EDUCATING AND MOTIVATING RURAL CHILDREN

This report focuses on a project that engaged teachers in rural schools to adapt and contextualise elements of the curriculum to the rural context. LCE student teachers enrolled in the Diploma in Education (Primary) undertook action research that explored how they could adapt teaching strategies and teaching aids to meet the learning needs of rural children. The student teachers and supervising teachers were prepared for this project through a two-day training workshop that focused on classroom action research, interpretation and translation of curriculum outcomes into lesson objectives and learning activities, and identification of the challenges that rurality poses for schools and communities. The supervising teachers were also trained in how to support the teachers through supervision.

Project objectives

The purpose of the study was to establish how teachers working in rural schools could be supported to contextualise their teaching and learning to the context of rural Lesotho. With a focus on the concept of “rurality”, the research sought to identify what could be done differently to help rural children enjoy schooling and relate it to their daily and future lives. The overall aim of the project is to raise awareness and change ways in which policymakers, teacher educators, trainee teachers, current teachers, and ultimately members of rural communities including children think about rural children and education in Lesotho. To achieve this, our objectives are to:

1. Encourage the inscription of the specific needs of rural children in Lesotho education policy
2. Influence the Ministry of Education and Training officials to rethink how they provide and support education for rural children
3. Influence teacher education providers to include rural education in their teacher education programmes
4. Influence provision of in-service / professional development programmes for primary school teachers on rural education
5. Influence teachers to rethink their classroom practices for rural children
6. Build and strengthen the networks among education stakeholders

Research approach

The study used the Research Learning Communities (RLC) approach to explore ways in which teachers could be supported to adapt and contextualise aspects of the curriculum to rural settings. RLC is an intervention approach whose main purpose is to improve teaching quality and learning outcomes by raising teachers' awareness of issues relating to their profession. In this case, awareness was raised through the interaction among student teachers, the supervising teachers, and the main researchers in the project. This interaction focused mainly on the learning needs of rural children and teachers' adaptation and contextualisation of teaching and learning. The RLC approach emphasises:

1. Engagement in reflective dialogue
2. Focus on student learning

3. Interaction among teacher colleagues as researchers, practitioners, or both
4. Collaboration among teachers with the aim to improve teaching and learning
5. Shared values and norms in teaching and learning

Research participants

Key Researchers: The project was led by a team of researchers from Brunel University London, NUL, and LCE. This team conceptualized and implemented the project. They prepared the student teachers and supervising teachers for their engagement, monitored the implementation and provided support to participants during the project. Planning and progress meetings were held regularly throughout the duration of the project, ensuring a common understanding and finding ways to overcome challenges. The team has been responsible for analysing and interpreting the data from the participants' reports and their own observation notes, and for disseminating the findings.

Supervising teachers: Eleven NUL B.Ed. graduates working in rural schools supported the student teachers who were assigned to them (from their own or nearby schools) to carry out and complete their action research projects. The supervising teachers had regular meetings with the student teachers and conducted classroom observations for general support. It was expected that the supervising teachers would use their expertise and experiences of working in the schools to support the student teachers to develop, implement, assess, and evaluate all instructional aspects of teaching. To ensure that the supervising teachers had clarity of their roles, they were provided training alongside the student teachers. This also meant both groups should have a common understanding of what each was expected to do. The supervising teachers also wrote reports on their engagement in the project.

Student teachers: The 35 student teachers (29 women and 6 men) participating in this project carried out action research and prepared reports on their experiences. Their participation included interpreting and translating curriculum objectives into lesson objectives; planning lessons; anticipating the challenges for lesson implementation that could be caused by the rurality of the school location or children; developing teaching aids and strategies that target the challenges; implementing lessons; assessing learning; keeping records of all the teaching activities, resources, and making general decisions relating to the lessons; and preparing and submitting their reports.

Participant selection

LCE places student teachers for teaching practice in schools across the country. Twelve schools in the districts of Quthing, Qacha's Nek, and Mokhotlong (Figure 1) hosted student teachers recruited for this study. These districts were viewed as being more rural than others because of their remoteness and elementary infrastructures. The selected schools lacked grid electricity or indoor running water. The communities they served engaged in rural livelihoods such as farming or livestock rearing, supplemented in some cases by labour migration to South Africa. As found in previous studies in rural Lesotho, many learners lived with their grandparents or other relatives because their parents had migrated in search of job opportunities.

Schools were selected based on the presence of NUL graduate teachers in or close to the schools. While rurality was the key consideration, accessibility for both by the researchers and the supervising teachers was also important, so all were accessible by road.

Figure 1: Map of Lesotho districts (based on <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0204758.g001>)

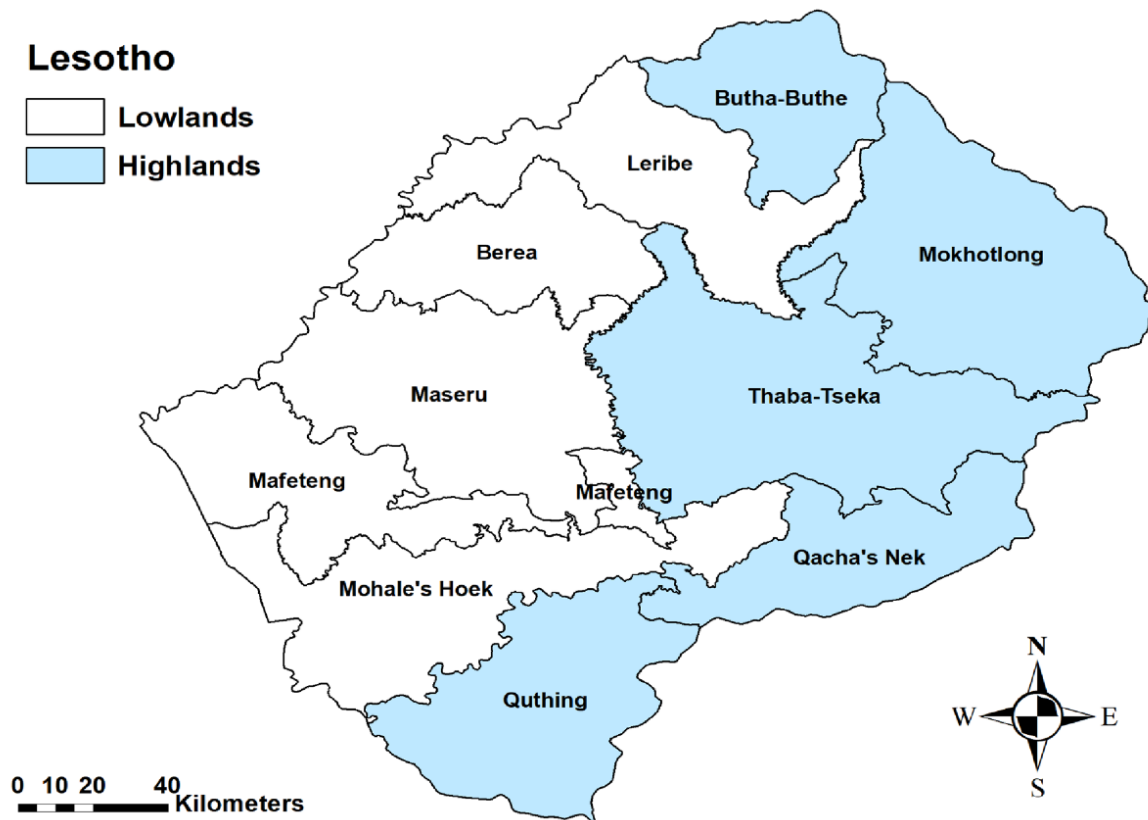


Table 1: The distribution of supervising teachers and student teachers

District	Schools	No of supervising teachers	No of student teachers
Mokhotlong	Ntlholohetsane Gov PS	1	2
	St. Peters RC PS	1	3
Quthing	Villa Maria RC PS	1	2
	Sekhoyana RC PS	1 (from Koali primary school)	2
	Masitise LECSA PS	1	2
	Mochotoane Gov PS	1	3
Qacha's Nek	Most Holy Redeemer RC PS	1	3
	Makhalong LEC	1	4
	Qacha's Nek United PS	1 (from Makhalong primary school)	5
	St. Josephs RC PS	1	4
	Hermitage PS	1	3
	Pheellong LEC		2
3	12	11	35

Project implementation

The project was implemented through three phases:

Phase 1: Introductory training workshop

The student teachers and supervising teachers were invited to participate in a two-day training workshop on issues of rural education and classroom research. The intention was that all participants should have a shared understanding of the project. The research team gave presentations and ran sessions focusing on the rationale for the study, classroom action research, rurality in education, and classroom supervision. Through the workshop, the supervising teachers and student teachers were introduced to a template to follow for their action research, and report writing.

Phase 2: Action research in schools with support visits

Following training, with the support of the supervising teachers, the student teachers implemented action research using the project guidelines provided. Some research team members from NUL and LCE visited the schools to provide on-site support both to the student teachers and supervising teachers. During these field visits, the research team first reported their presence in the schools to the District Education Offices. Each participating school was visited twice, during which school-based meetings and a cluster meeting were held. The school-based meetings included meetings with the student teachers and supervising teachers and also meetings with supervising teachers only. The meetings with a supervising teacher and student teachers thrashed out problems both the supervising and student teachers were encountering in implementing the project. The meetings with the supervising teachers explored issues relating to their supervision and the support they needed. The cluster meeting involved all participating student teachers and the supervising teachers in a district. These meetings particularly focused on the common areas of concern and how they could be addressed.

Phase 3: Report writing and debriefing

After four months of engagement in the project, and upon completion of their teaching practice, the student teachers were invited to a final workshop at LCE to clarify the way forward and guide on the completion of project reports. The researchers from LCE and NUL provided guidance in using the report template developed for the project. Each student teacher was assigned a research team member who supported them to complete and submit their projects. The supervising teachers were also requested to submit reports on their participation in the project using a template developed specifically for them. Thirty-four reports from the student teachers and eleven from the supervising teachers were submitted.

Implementation challenges

The Covid-19 pandemic halted almost all educational activities in Lesotho at the time the project was due to begin. When the project started in April 2021, after a year's delay, educational institutions had just reopened after a year-long closure. They then closed again from June to August 2021 and when they reopened, the second-year students (the cohort from which the participants were

selected) were sent almost immediately to their schools for teaching practice. It was not possible to provide the longer training programme that was originally envisaged which would have been provided while students were still at the college, prior to the start of their teaching practice. This programme would have had separate sessions for student teachers and supervising teachers, as well as training for both groups combined. In the event, the student teachers (along with their supervisors) were recalled from the schools they had been placed to attend a two-day workshop that was held at the LCE. With this limitation, a more structured approach was adopted to develop the action research projects. Moreover, the period of teaching practice was shortened to four months instead of a full school year. This made the project challenging in various ways, not least harmonising the project activities with the normal teaching work the participants were assigned in their schools.

Despite the disruption caused by Covid-19, schools continued to follow their almanac of activities. This meant that the time for end-of-year assessments arrived before the student teachers completed their action research activities. As a result, the student teachers who participated in this project were given a two-week extension to complete their projects in the January of the new school year.

THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS: ANALYSIS

The student teachers and supervising teachers submitted clearly structured reports. Although these differed a great deal in length and detail, they indicated that most had some understanding of the purpose of the exercise and had put significant effort into enabling rural children to meet the learning outcomes they had selected for attention. Some of the student teachers were clearly unable to fully grasp the concept of action research, either because of the brevity of the training and their lack of prior background in research, or because they were insufficiently motivated in what perhaps proved to be a more demanding exercise than they had anticipated. The research element of many of the reports was weak: although they described the various stages of action research, it was unclear how these stages were carried out in their own projects. Data collection methods and reporting of findings were particularly lacking in detail and in some cases graphs were presented that appeared either to be fabricated or not to reveal anything meaningful.

The “action” part of the action research was much more impressive. Most student teachers had devised schemes that involved interactive teaching, with a lot of group work and discussion and use of interesting materials. The approaches detailed in some of the reports were quite elaborate and very well thought through and executed.

A thematic analysis of the reports by the student teachers and teacher supervisors identified three areas in which student teachers responded to the challenges raised at the initial training workshop and which we discuss in turn below:

1. Overcoming rural deficits
2. Making learning more relatable to rural children
3. Making learning more relevant to rural lives

1. Overcoming rural deficits

Rurality was a challenging concept for the student teachers and even for the teacher supervisors who were clearly not used to being asked to think about its consequences for learning and teaching. 13 of the 35 student teacher reports did not directly relate the problem they worked on to rurality. They identified specific curriculum learning outcomes as a base for their studies and were able to interpret and translate these into the aims and objectives of their projects. Yet while the learning outcomes may in the first instance have been identified in relation to rurality, by the time the reports were written this was no longer the primary focus. Instead, these teachers identified problems that they did not directly associate with rurality, such as the strike that affected schools in 2019, general issues around resourcing, or simply identifying that the learners had difficulty with a particular learning outcome.

Those that did identify a challenge that they associated with rurality held a strikingly deficit view of the rural. It was what the rural was lacking that made certain topics harder to teach. In some cases it was the schools themselves that were seen as lacking – not having resources such as electricity or computers, or teachers who were well versed in the types of teaching methods the students had encountered in college. For others it was the rural children, their homes and communities that were lacking. The teaching and learning problems identified included:

- **School shutdowns:** 2019 teachers' strike and COVID-19 crisis affected rural schools differently to those in urban areas. For example, urban schools and communities had the infrastructure and resources that enabled children to continue learning during the schools shutdowns. In contrast, rural schools and communities lacked resources and facilities which their children could have used to continue learning.
- **Poor socio-economic conditions of the schools and the local communities:** the rural schools and communities' socio-economic status is too poor to accommodate the needs of the current curriculum used in schools.
- **Level of literacy of the parents in the local communities:** illiteracy inhibits parents from assisting children with their education.
- **Children's limited exposure to curricular content:** children are required to learn about things including signposts, advertisements, people from different cultures and careers that do not exist in the rural communities of the schools and seem irrelevant in the children's lives. The absence of television and international radio stations in rural communities was also viewed limiting rural children's exposure to English as a key medium of instruction in Lesotho schools.
- **Culture and traditional views:** some saw a strong presence of Basotho cultural and traditional beliefs and practices in the rural communities interfering with schooling and some of the messages conveyed through the curriculum.
- **Parents' labour migration:** many children of migrant parents live with their grandparents who are less able to support their education because of illiteracy and a traditional outlook that does not value education.

Table 2: Challenges identified by the student teachers

School-related	Home and community related
School closures due to teachers' strike (3 months in 2019) and Covid-19	Parents' illiteracy and lack of commitment to education
Lack of electricity, computers, library resources, space, etc.	Parents' traditionalism
Teachers' unfamiliarity with contemporary teaching methods	Poverty and lack of resources (e.g. phones, clocks, materials to take to school)
	Parents' and children's limited exposure to people from different cultures, careers, advertisements, signposts, English language

The participants selected learning outcomes for their projects from various areas of the curriculum. More than a third focused their attention on curriculum outcomes in numeracy and literacy. They believed that rural children were behind other learners in Lesotho schools in acquiring foundational skills in literacy and numeracy owing to the school shutdowns caused by the 2019 teachers' strike and the Covid-19 crisis. The participants could have substantiated their observations by indicating that much as these situations affected every learner in Lesotho, rural children were more affected because they did not have access to resources such as the internet, mobile phones, and computers, which learners in the urban areas used to access online learning resources. As a result, the education of children living in urban areas was not as disrupted as that of those living in rural areas.

Most of the *literacy* projects focused on basic aspects of learning English as a second language such as grammar, pronunciation, reading, writing and spelling, and speaking and giving a speech. Various strategies and learning resources were employed to teach these aspects of language.

Numeracy projects focused on addressing the numeracy foundational needs of their learners, particularly basic calculation skills such as finding percentages, long division, and the conversion of units of mass. Among these projects, none used the resources (content and supporting teaching aids) which exist naturally in the learners' context (at home and in the community) to enhance learner participation.

Table 3: Learning outcomes addressed

Type of learning outcome addressed	Main challenge faced	Number of projects
Numeracy or literacy	Missed learning	13
Use of computers	Lack of resources	6
Craft activities	Lack of resources	3
Relating the unfamiliar	Learners' lack of exposure	12

Six projects addressed the challenges of teaching *digital technologies* where digital resources and facilities such as electricity infrastructure, computers, and the Internet are absent. The curriculum learning outcomes that were addressed by these projects included finding information on the internet, using word processing, making PowerPoint presentations, and learning computer-aided art. The textbooks used in the classroom cover content relating to these curriculum outcomes but whereas urban children can learn through both theory and practice, the teaching of technology in rural schools is usually confined to theoretical knowledge.

Student teachers adopted different approaches to compensate for the lack of computers. Several made model computers and laptops from cardboard boxes or box files, drawing the parts and asking learners to practise writing using different fonts. One teacher devised a more complex set of activities and resources (see Case Study 1). Addressing the absence of electricity supply, many resorted to borrowing laptops that could be run on batteries or even generators to give the children a quick practice in groups.

CASE STUDY 1: Substituting a phone for a computer

It was clearly going to be difficult to teach the use of word processing software in absence of computers or electricity. Moreover, beyond the lack of resources in the school itself, there was the issue of rural children not having seen computers outside school. This student teacher set out to investigate potential methods and “[t]o find ways of using the easily available resources to make learners practice the computer skills that were listed in the grade 4 syllabus under LO 8.” He used pre-tests and post-tests and collected data from parents and teachers on what resources were available at home. Like several other student teachers attempting to introduce computer skills, he began with using cardboard boxes to construct model laptops.



However, his supervisor encouraged him to “think out of the box”. He used a cell phone, mouse, keyboard and an “on-the-go” cable with a phone app that made it possible to word process from the keyboard to the phone. Unlike using a laptop, it was easy to charge the phone using a solar charger. This was combined with learners copying and labelling drawings of computers from the chalkboard, and groups practising on a laptop in a series of lessons that appear to have been very engaging and effective.



keyboard and an “on-the-go” cable with a phone app that made it possible to word process from the keyboard to the phone. Unlike using a laptop, it was easy to charge the phone using a solar charger. This was combined with learners copying and labelling drawings of computers from the chalkboard, and groups practising on a laptop in a series of lessons that appear to have been very engaging and effective.

There were also other projects that focused on other forms but unfamiliar technologies to rural children these included analogue clock faces, advertisements, map symbols, and rain gauges. Similar to digital technologies, their absence in local rural communities and schools was compensated by drawings and cardboard models

At one school, all three student teachers focused on craft activities. Here, too, their concern was lack of resources in the school or the community that are required to teach the craft identified in the

syllabus. One explored the possibilities to teach children to make toy furniture items from cardboard. She saw this as a fun activity that would incentivise school attendance in a setting where many children were regularly absent or dropped out of school. Not all of the forms of furniture were familiar to the rural children, but they also faced difficulties finding cardboard boxes as there were no local stores with any to dispose of. Cardboard is associated more with urban than rural life as it is used for packaging sold goods. The teacher might instead have considered using the trees and shrubs that exist naturally in the local environment, thereby developing a skill the learners could use later in their lives.

Another student teacher (see Case Study 2) sought to make paper mâché with the learners, but as the villagers got their eggs direct from their own hens, they did not have egg boxes to use. The third teacher worked on a learning outcome that involved recycling materials to make crafts (Case Study 5). Recycling was an unfamiliar idea in a setting where many families are poor and buy little from shops and those who do reuse packaging for storage or for other purposes. One might question how valuable it is to learn about recycling in such circumstances! In all three cases, the rural community was seen as lacking the necessary resources to deliver the learning outcome. Instead of identifying locally available materials that could be meaningfully used as an alternative in the rural context, the approach was to import resources from an urban setting.

CASE STUDY 2: Making paper mache

Faced with the learning outcome of using paper mâché to make utensils, the student teacher was challenged as to how to provide the necessary materials. It seemed impossible to ask learners to



Credit: KABELO MOHLABULA

bring egg trays from home as in rural areas people get eggs directly from their hens, not in trays. There were also no wires available as there were no scrap yards. Her research involved an interview with a person skilled in making art with paper mache, but this did not produce a solution. Some learners did bring egg trays and some brought wires, but none brought soap and the quantities were insufficient,

so she resorted to asking learners and her fellow teachers to bring additional egg trays when coming from town. This is an instance where substituting an alternative creative activity might have been more appropriate. The student teacher herself suggests that local materials like plants and meal might have been used instead. Rather than finding the rural environment lacking and importing resources from town, the use of rurally sourced materials might have made the activity more meaningful and validating for rural children.



Credit: MABUSANG AGNES FOFO

Twelve of the reports focused on learning outcomes that were deemed to be hard to teach because of the rural children's lack of exposure to different people, objects or ideas. One focused on a learning outcome that required learners to state reasons for their *career preferences*. The student

teacher noted that, when teaching this learning outcome, the learners only mentioned “traditional” careers – teaching, nursing, police, herdboys and drawing. He raised questions around the importance of teaching about careers and addressed the challenge by using pictures from internet of a wide variety of jobs. In his report, he acknowledged that these images were problematic in that many were stereotypically gendered. He did not question the effect of using images that were almost exclusively of white people, but this too could convey an impression that only a specific gender or race is destined for particular careers or jobs.

There were two reports focused on enabling learners to *depict people of Chinese, Indian, and European cultures*. The student teachers noted that because rural children generally travelled very little, particularly during the pandemic, most had not encountered people from other cultures with the possible exception of Chinese business owners in the local towns. One of the student teachers sought to compensate for this lack of exposure by collecting pictures from internet and magazines and information about traditional foods for the children to look at. She also asked learners to bring in clothes that could be used to improvise Chinese and Indian attire, but they only brought European style clothing. The other student teacher had greater success (Case Study 3).

Some of the projects focused on attitudes or practices that were unfamiliar. Some student teachers investigated ways of teaching of issues that were perceived to be difficult because rural people were unaware of or unsympathetic to what was being taught. One student teacher represented the community as governed by traditional views and practices, meaning that learners had been “brain-washed”. She suggested it was accepted within the community that boys did not sweep and that bullying was tolerated. Such behaviours were perceived to make it difficult to teach human rights and responsibilities – a situation addressed by asking learners to copy down a list of rights and responsibilities followed by a role play exercise. Similarly, another student teacher noted that many children stay with elderly relatives who do not require them to wash their hands. Although learners were aware of how diseases spread, they appeared not to bath or to wash hands. Thus, various measures were introduced to try to inculcate this habit.

Overall, most of the student teachers (and presumably the supervising teachers) approached their action research projects from the perspective of: “How am I going to teach x in the absence of y?” Through trial and error, they developed methods and resources that enabled them to put across learning outcomes that would normally prove challenging. However, in general, they failed to think of rurality as a resource for learning, through which they can make education relevant and meaningful. Rather, they viewed it in terms of deficits of resources, infrastructure, and exposure. This perception portrays those living in rural communities and their education as inferior. It also promotes cultural exclusion.

2. Making learning more relatable to rural children

Consistent with the deficit approach, some of the student teachers were concerned to make the content of their teaching more accessible to learners, starting their lessons from something familiar. Student teachers that used phones to teach about computers did so in part as a way of connecting the unfamiliar to the familiar (Case Study 1). Similarly, a student teacher focusing on unfamiliar cultures started with pictures of people doing different kinds of work (Case Study 3).

CASE STUDY 3: Depicting other cultures

Learners were unlikely to be able to make portraits depicting non-African cultures. Some were unaware that other cultures even existed, in part because there had been no school trips in recent years due to the teachers' strike and pandemic. The student teacher began by taking printouts of pictures from the internet to class, but this was a little challenging for the learners. She, therefore, took a step back and asked the learners to bring in or draw pictures of people doing different sorts of work. They were asked to describe their appearance and attire and discuss what they ate, as a way to practise talking about different groups of



Credit: RETHABILE PESHO

people by focusing on those who were relatively familiar. They then

watched a 3-minute video on a phone about Chinese, Indian, and European people and were asked to observe their features, how they spoke, their attire, and their houses. They wrote their observations on the chalkboard. They subsequently studied other images and discussed these in groups and reported what they had noticed. In the final session, they had a debate about the ways in which Basotho dress today, and whether this style was theirs or borrowed from Europeans, a discussion which the teacher connected into an exploration of Lesotho's history. This series of classes took the learners on a journey from the familiar to the unfamiliar and back to connections with their own history.



Credit: MAPULE MOLETSANE

Other reports described activities that connected in various ways with the familiar, although this could usually have been pushed further and sometimes appeared to be incidental. One student teacher, for instance, asked learners to construct sentences about things they do at home but did not explain this activity in relation to connecting with their everyday lives. When learning about clocks, children were asked about the times they do different things throughout the day. The learning outcome, though, referred "solving real life problems" using clocks, and there appeared to be no attempt to do this. For a project that focused on spelling and pronouncing words, learners were asked to write compositions about their school. The words they were given, however, were unconnected to rural life. This would have been another opportunity to relate learning more fully to rurality.

Student teachers often sought to make their lessons more "real" by using material resources in the classroom. Some commented on how a demonstration method would provide learners with a clearer idea of the learning outcome than could be achieved through discussion alone. However, very few student teachers identified elements of the rural environment as potential resources for teaching. A few of the numeracy classes employed stones for counting, though not very effectively. A plan to convey how to divide four digit by two digit numbers, for instance, started with dividing up small groups of stones. This might have been a useful reminder of the concept of division but did not help with understanding or practising long division. The teacher that made paper mache utensils with her class commented that local materials like plants and meal might have been used instead.

One particularly effective attempt to “bring reality into the classroom” was employed by a student teacher who wanted to teach conversion of units of mass (Case Study 4).

CASE STUDY 4: Roleplaying shopkeepers

One student teacher sought to teach a large class to weigh items in grams and kilograms and to make comparisons and conversions between the units of mass. Learners were asked to bring bags of different sorts of grain and lentils and a plank of wood to school. In the absence of electric scales,



Credit: THANDIWE APHODIA OEJANE

the plank was used to demonstrate comparison of weights – in this case the improvised scale was almost certainly more effective in conveying the concept, even though the student teacher saw it as a less than ideal substitute for electric scales. The learners then roleplayed being a shopkeeper as a way of “bringing reality into the classroom” (although they actually practised outside the classroom). The learners were also asked to transfer multiple smaller packets of grains (e.g. 250g) to a larger plastic bag and to feel how it compared with a 1kg bag. This student teacher used familiar, locally available materials and meaningful activities that made learning more practical and learner-centred.

Many opportunities that could have been taken to address the issue of rurality were missed. A project on designing advertisements could have focused on those adverts that do exist in rural areas and perhaps encouraged learners to design advertisements that would appeal to rural populations. Two projects focused on a learning outcome concerning map symbols. It was striking that in neither case was any attempt made to produce a map of the local community. This would have been an effective way to connect to the local environment, and learners could probably have drawn their own as well as devising symbols, including symbols for things unique to their area. For a lesson on rain gauges, the rural location was probably advantageous. There was space to dig holes and mount the homemade rain gauges, but the lesson as a whole could have been much more directly applied to rural life.

3. Making learning more relevant to rural lives

It was very striking that none of the student teachers gave significant attention to using their action research to try to make their teaching relevant to life in a rural community. In general they focused on improving the prospects of learners achieving the learning outcomes, and not seeing their learning as something that might have value in a rural community. The shopkeeper example (Case Study 4) is perhaps an exception to this. The activity that involved making crafts from recycled materials might also deliver some learning value in a rural setting (Case Study 5), although the report did not frame it in this way. The one report that suggested a potential application to rural futures was the lesson on advertisements: the student teacher argued that this could be a useful skill for those wanting to do business in the future. However, notably, they did not encourage learners to think about advertising rural businesses in the lessons themselves.

CASE STUDY 5: Recycling materials to make craft work

The learning outcome of “recycle materials to make craft work” is difficult to achieve in a rural setting where plastic bags and bottles are reused and there are few shops and relatively little



Credit: MABUSANG AGNES FOFO

consumption of packaged goods. Learners are also unfamiliar with idea of recycling – although it is practised in the communities as a result of necessity. The student teacher herself collected crisp packets for two weeks but could not find many so she asked the learners to bring sweet wrappers from home. With the few that were collected, the learners were taught how to make bracelets and hairbands.

To an extent, this was an activity that made use of locally available resources, though the resources needed were scarce. The learning outcome cited by the

teacher was concerned with learners acquiring skills or manipulation, measuring, cutting, workmanship, tidiness, commitment and neatness, which could presumably have been delivered in other ways, using materials that are in more plentiful supply. However, one outcome of the activity was that other teachers in the school bought some of the craft products from the learners, perhaps teaching them something inadvertently about entrepreneurship around craft-making in a rural setting.



Credit: MABUSANG AGNES FOFO

CONCLUSIONS

Student teachers who engaged in action research for this project developed innovative ways of engaging learners in their classrooms, and putting across ideas in learner centred ways that made use of a variety of improvised learning aids. Compared to more typical teaching methods, it seems likely that learners benefited considerably and were more likely to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

However, the project revealed how challenging teachers, and especially student teachers, find the concept of rurality and its implications for their teaching. Most of the student teachers did consider how rurality impacts their ability to support learners in achieving learning outcomes (there were a few exceptions who did not really engage with this). But both student teachers and graduate teachers understood the rural almost exclusively in terms of deficit – a lack of literacy, of exposure, of resources at school and at home. These are important, of course, but the rural also presents opportunities – and some of the teaching described probably worked better for being in a rural setting. Where deficits were identified, the improvisations were not usually specifically adapted to rural settings but focused on sourcing what were perceived to be necessary materials from outside the rural area. Very few teachers explicitly considered how to make teaching more meaningful in a rural setting.

In some respects, rural schools are places of deficit – they lack important resources for teaching that are available in urban schools, notably electricity, and computers. These are not easily substitutable and both teachers and learners have a reasonable right to expect that these should be provided by the government. But there are good reasons to encourage teachers to view the rural as a source of alternative resources etc., rather than needing resources to be imported from elsewhere. It is important for rural children to see that schooling can be relevant to their contexts and their lives, rather than as something that is only of value in relation to different lifestyles in different places.

The project revealed that student teachers (and supervising teachers) are not accustomed to distinguishing between the knowledge, understanding, skills and values that the curriculum is intended to deliver and the themes and topics through which they are conveyed. The learning outcomes can generally be delivered in diverse ways and teachers need to be able to adapt to the context.

In order to make appropriate adaptations, and apply teaching methods that work in a rural environment, teachers need to be able to experiment. Action research, as used in this project, is a very valuable skill through which teachers can identify and develop methods and resources that work. The student teachers involved in the project had a good grasp of the “action” part of action research, but were less clear about the research side. Often, they provided accounts of lesson planning and implementation, with some evaluation, but little involvement of data collection and analysis. The two-day training workshops were clearly insufficient for many teachers to fully grasp what was expected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For teacher education providers (tertiary institutions)

- Consideration of the **significance of rurality** for teaching should be included in the teacher education curriculum.
- The forthcoming **curriculum review** should consider how to include explicit training in adapting teaching to needs of rural learners.
- Ensure that students are trained in **action research** before they begin teaching practice so that they are equipped to experiment and innovate.
- **Staff** should also be trained in action research and expected to encourage and support student teachers to use it in adapting their teaching to the needs of rural learners.
- More attention needs to be given to ensuring that students understand **how to interpret the syllabus**, teachers’ guides and textbooks, in recognition that their purpose is to enable learners to acquire knowledge, understanding, skills and values and not simply to deliver a predetermined lesson.
- As **Education for Sustainable Development** is embedded in the institutions, the sustainability of rural education, and the contributions of rural education to sustainability, should be key considerations.

- The NUL course on **Clinical Supervision** could be made a fast-track course for new principals.

For the Ministry of Education and Training and development partners

- Existing teacher education programmes provided by LCE and NUL cannot reach the majority of teachers currently working in rural schools. Alternative measures are needed to equip and encourage these teachers to adapt their professional practice to the needs of rural learners.
- A well-structured and effective **Continuous Professional Development** (CPD) framework is needed, with training of teachers for rural education as a key component. This training should take place over multiple days and require teachers to complete assignments in their schools. Ideally, it would be accredited, providing an incentive for committed participation.
- Support structures (**District Resource Teachers, Subject Advisors, Mentors**, etc.) should be revived to guide teachers, particularly those in rural areas.
- School **inspections** should give attention to the adaptation of teaching to the needs and interests of rural learners.
- In-service training and a **training manual** should be developed to guide Education Officers and District Resource Teachers to support teachers in rural schools.
- An **Induction Programme** for newly qualified teachers could provide valuable input on teaching in rural schools, particularly for those who experienced a gap between their initial training and their first teaching post.
- The **Comprehensive Teacher Policy** should make specific reference to the training and other needs of teachers in rural schools.
- More effective **collaboration** is needed between the Ministry, Development Partners and tertiary institutions. For instance, there should be a clear model for the appointment of tertiary providers into NCDC subject panels, to ensure productive two-way communication.

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EQUIPPING LESOTHO'S PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS FOR EDUCATING AND MOTIVATING RURAL CHILDREN

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