

Education systems,
aspiration and
learning in
remote rural
settings

International policy
workshop briefing



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Purpose of the workshop

- To brief those involved in education policy and practice internationally about the findings of an international research project.
- To identify how (and when) education systems might work more effectively with young people's aspirations to enhance learning outcomes and address structural disadvantage.
- To explore avenues through which the findings might be translated into changes in aspects of education policy and practice.

Background

Schooling is almost universally understood, by governments, communities, parents, children and others, to be principally concerned with preparation for future life. In rural areas, in particular, this future life is expected to be an improvement on the present, and for many it is understood to lie elsewhere – in urban or foreign places. Yet organisations working in the education sector often express concern that disadvantaged young people and their families, notably those from remote rural places, have 'low aspirations' which limit their capacity to benefit from education. This is challenged by a growing body of research that suggests young people's aspirations are raised through schooling but subsequently thwarted by lack of opportunity, leaving them disillusioned and ill-prepared for a rural future that they have come to consider undesirable. Unpacking this paradox is central to our research.

Study objectives

The purpose of the research project is to understand how education systems can develop effective policies and interventions that work with young people's aspirations to enhance learning outcomes and address structural disadvantage in remote rural places. To achieve this, the team investigated:

- Processes through which schooling shapes young people's aspirations;
- How young people's aspirations shape their engagement with schooling and the learning they achieve.

Research methods

The two-year project was conducted in remote rural areas of three lower middle income countries: Lesotho, India and Laos. In each country it involved:

- Nine months of ethnographic research in two communities and their local primary schools, involving participant observation, interviews and participatory activities with children of different ages, both in and out of school, and their families and other community members;
- Interviews and workshops with policymakers and other key informants;
- A pilot survey with approximately 200 children and young people aged 12-22 in approximately five remote rural communities, building on concepts emerging from the ethnographic findings.

The settings

Lesotho, India and Laos differ significantly in socio-economic terms as well as having distinctive education systems. Research took place in two localities in each.

	Lesotho	India	Laos
Macro level socio-economic indicators			
GNI per capita Atlas method, USD, 2017 ¹	1280	1820	2270
Unemployment, % of labour force ages 15-24, 2016 ¹	35.2 (male) 44.2 (female)	10.2 (male) 11.4 (female)	1.8 (male) 1.6 (female)
Labour force participation, % of ages 15-24, 2016 ¹	27.0	29.6	59.8
Education system			
School structure	7+3+2	5+3+4	5+4+3
Cost of education	Free primary education compulsory for ages 6-14	Free primary education (Class 1-5)	Free primary education, compulsory to completion
Gross enrolment ratio, primary, 2016 ¹	103.9	114.5	110.5
Gross enrolment ratio, secondary, 2016 ¹	52.3	75.2	66.5
Control over rural schools	90% of schools owned and managed by churches, but government pays teachers and determines curriculum	Mostly government schools, but growing number of private schools run by churches and NGOs	Virtually all schools are government managed with the exception of a few privately owned vocational training schools
Funding of education ^{1,2,3,4}	13.8% of government expenditure; 7.1% of GDP; donor funding has fallen sharply from a high of 9% in 2014/5	14.0% of government expenditure; 4.13% of GDP	12.2% of government expenditure; 2.9% of GDP; 30% of the education budget is donor funded (Australia, Japan, ADB, WB)
Curriculum	New 'integrated curriculum'	Set at state level	Nationally determined
Youth literacy rate, % of ages 15-24, 2007-16 ¹	Male 80 Female 94	Male 90 Female 82	Male 77 Female 67
Study sites			
Terrain	Rugged, sparsely populated locations in Maluti Mountains / Senqu Valley	Chhattisgarh: forested areas, interspersed with rice-based agricultural terrain, comparatively sparsely populated	One hill-top village and one valley village in a remote, mountainous, and sparsely populated part of Oudomxay Province
Livelihoods	Historically dependent on male labour migrants; agriculture and pastoralism dominant activities but usually inadequate for subsistence	Historically dependent on subsistence agriculture (rice cultivation), supplemented by collection and sale of non-timber forest products; increasing migrant labour (male dominated)	Swidden cultivation used to be the prime occupation; village resettlement policies, conservation policies and government efforts to eradicate swidden cultivation have pushed villagers into other livelihoods including casual wage labour, migrant labour, commercial agriculture and (illegal) trade in forest produce
Migration patterns	Some migration to lowlands for factory and domestic work, and to South Africa for mining, domestic and agricultural work; remittances to villages much lower than in the past	Migration to district and state capital (Raipur); some migration to more distant cities for wage labour opportunities	Migration to district, provincial and national centres and some migration to Thailand or China. Some households receive remittances from migrants including overseas family members
Ethnic differences	Almost all are ethnically Basotho, with a few Phuthi or Xhosa families in the Senqu Valley location	The area has a large population of adivasis (tribal), with Kanwar and Majhwar the most dominant. There are also large numbers of OBCs (Other Backward Castes)	One predominantly Hmong village, one mixed village (Khmu, Hmong, Lao, Lue; majority Khmu)
Religion	Almost 100% Christian, most belonging to one of two traditional churches (Roman Catholic and Lesotho Evangelical Church)	Majority Hindu adivasi; large numbers of Christian (Catholic) adivasis, who migrated to the area from neighbouring districts. Smaller numbers of Muslims	Animism, Buddhism, Christianity
Infrastructure	Roads are unpaved but have improved and villages are accessible by daily minibus transport. Water from protected springs. Electricity limited to a few households with small solar panels. Patchy access to mobile phone network	Villages in the area are electrified, though electricity is still sporadic. Main roads are paved roads, but roads into villages remain unpaved. Mobile phone coverage is sporadic and unreliable	Both villages are on the road and electricity network, good mobile services coverage

Data sources: ¹World Bank (2018) *World Development Indicators* <http://wdi.worldbank.org/>; ²UNICEF (2017) *Lesotho education budget brief*, UNICEF, Maseru; ³UNESCO (2018) *UIS.Stat* <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>; ⁴Government of India (2016) *Educational Statistics at a Glance*, Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi

Key findings

All aspects of education systems in the three case study countries play a part in shaping young people's aspirations. The desirability of social and spatial mobility is depicted in the curriculum, referenced by teachers and embodied in, for instance, the linear structure through which children progress through school. Yet for most rural young people, schooling fails to offer realistic pathways to successful social or spatial mobility.

There are some notable differences between the three contexts. The future is also more prominent in, for instance, Lesotho and India, while children's present lives figure more prominently in Laos. There are also differences in the extent to which people believe that the future can be planned and worked toward. In Lesotho, children are told they should work hard to secure a good future; in India, children are told that if they work hard they might be able to access a better future; while in Laos, the future is more often seen as a product of fortune. These differences reflect historical socio-economic and religious differences between the contexts, refracted through somewhat different education systems.

In all three settings, teachers, students and parents talk about schooling predominantly in relation to salaried jobs, in particular nurse, teacher, police officer or soldier. These four careers appear repeatedly in textbooks and elsewhere in school and are regularly reiterated by children when asked what they hope to do in the future. Many, however, demonstrate little conviction that these careers will materialise. Children shift inconsistently between the four jobs, speak of alternative futures when outside school and describe other aspects of their aspirations that are incompatible with their chosen career such as being self-employed and continuing to stay in the village. Neither are teachers heavily invested in their students becoming professionals: they recognise that structural constraints limit children's prospects, and while they may encourage children to 'dream' as a way to keep them focused on schooling, their own frequent absences and lack of preparation attest to a sense that however much they invest in their teaching, they are unlikely to enable rural children to attain the futures they talk about.

Many young people begin to express more attainable aspirations – usually common rural occupations such as farming or building – as they come to realise they will not be able to access the level of education required for a salaried job. The extent to which they revise their ambitions relates partly to their perceptions of their own academic abilities relative to their peers. Ultimately, very few rural youth find salaried employment and many become disillusioned about schooling. Where children are encouraged to believe their destiny depends on their own hard work, disillusionment may be accompanied by self-blame.

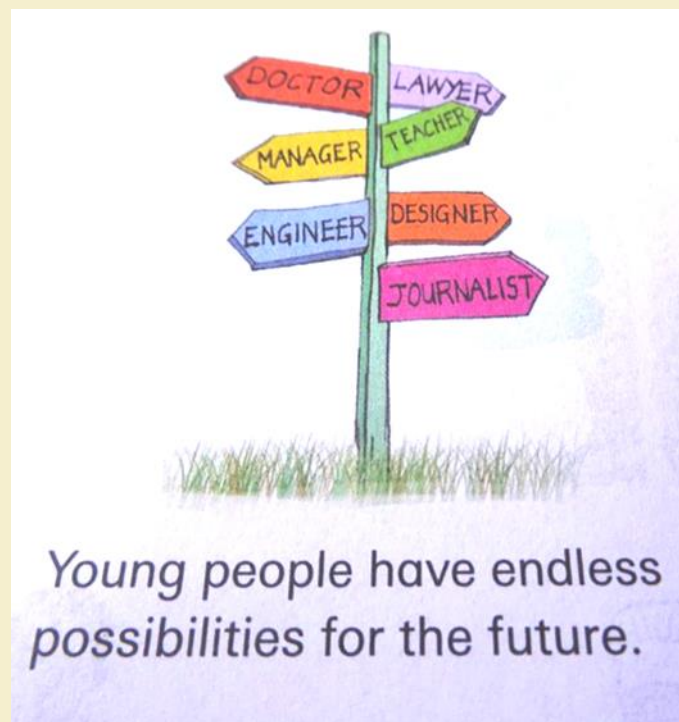
While the idea that one goes to school to ultimately become a nurse, teacher, soldier or police officer is commonly expressed, it is not the only narrative of education's role. Teachers, parents and students all speak of other ways in which education might contribute to a different future, including literacy and language skills, confidence and ability to navigate the outside world. Moreover, aspirations promoted and addressed through schooling relate not only to individual futures, but those of the family, community and nation. Some see education and knowledge as virtuous in their own right.

What needs to change?

Three key problems persist across all three case study communities:

- Education is widely seen (by children, parents and teachers among others) as preparation for futures that are in practice unattainable by most rural youth.
- There is a mismatch between the futures that education systems present as desirable and the knowledge, skills and attributes that most rural young people acquire through schooling.
- Education systems neither encourage young people to desire, nor prepare them adequately to achieve, a diverse range of alternative livelihoods and social roles that would benefit themselves, their families, their communities and their societies.

Young people who leave school without attaining their hoped-for futures often feel education has benefited them little. Some blame themselves, or are accused by their families of failing to achieve expectations. However, it is not only young people themselves that suffer. Where education systems do not offer youth alternative routes to contribute to their communities, they are also failing society. Moreover, while today's parents and children tend to view schooling favourably, if its promises remain unfulfilled, in future belief in education may diminish.



What should education systems seek to achieve?

- Encourage young people to develop aspirations that are diverse, socially useful, matched to their aptitudes and interests, and achievable.
- Encourage creativity, imagination and versatility in relation to future livelihoods and roles.
- Provide better information about diverse livelihood possibilities (both conventional and alternative), what they entail and how to attain them.
- Develop young people's knowledge and skills so that they are better placed to achieve a sense of success.

Curricula



Curricula are shaped by political agendas, but tend to be slow to change. The legacy of colonial education, designed to produce a small cadre of public servants, has persisted in India and until recently Lesotho. The knowledge, understanding and skills promoted here are those that can be tested through public examinations designed to select individuals for further academic study or white collar work. This in itself sends messages about the purpose of education. In Laos, the concern with nation building is more prominent, and characterised by a stronger emphasis on mass literacy and numeracy, as well as training for white collar and technical roles.

Curricula could be adapted to provide meaningful information about a wide range of livelihood options, including but not confined to those considered particularly desirable. This would help young people with the ability and motivation to pursue challenging careers to compete with their urban counterparts, while affording value to other (perhaps rural) futures. Coupled with the development of skills suited to diverse livelihoods (including practical work with a clear future-oriented purpose), young people might come to see education as relevant to more than just salaried jobs.



It is important to note that changes in the formal school curriculum, while important, are insufficient to encourage children to see schooling as useful in relation to a broader range of possible futures. Lesotho has recently introduced a new primary curriculum that aims to develop skills and values, emphasises creativity and entrepreneurship and advocates children-centred pedagogies. However, teachers have not fully embraced these innovations. Confronted with a very intensive curriculum, inadequate preparation and lack of resources, teachers confine their classes largely to those elements that are familiar and employ methods they are confident with.

The didactic pedagogies and rote learning that predominate in rural classrooms may enable academically able children to pass exams. However, they do little to facilitate the types of learning or skills development that are useful for livelihoods that do not require formal qualifications. Moreover, those who are successful in passing school exams may still lack the skills required for more advanced learning. Alternative pedagogies such as groupwork, roleplay, problem based learning and debate might more effectively develop creativity, problem solving and confidence.

Teachers do not always deliver the pedagogy or curriculum as intended, in part because they feel they lack the skills to do so, and in part because they do not fully believe in what these are intended to achieve (or that such goals are attainable). Rural teachers are particularly powerful figures, distant from the oversight of education offices and able to deliver education according to their own ideas. Thus any reform of education requires efforts to gain the buy-in of current and prospective teachers.

Pedagogy



Textbooks



Textbooks provide powerful messages to students about their futures. While generally based on the school curriculum, textbooks interpret and select, particularly in the examples and illustrations they use. Middle class, ethnic majority, urban lives often dominate, and where rural life is depicted, the portrayals may be unfamiliar to those in more remote communities. The lives of the affluent urban elite may be viewed by some as aspirational, but others find them irrelevant or even impossible to relate to. Efforts at representing gender and ethnic equality may appear far removed from rural children's lives. Even aspects of textbook design as seemingly mundane as sketched illustrations may disadvantage those who cannot relate to unfamiliar items from simplified depictions. Thus representations that convey meaning to urban children may fail to communicate to those familiar only with rural environments.

Through encounters with fiction, children receive messages about aspiration and the values they are expected to espouse. In Lesotho, children read novels in primary school that typically convey moralistic messages that about successful lives, and the important role of personal effort and commitment to education. The choice of fiction for use in school is likely to play a role in shape their aspirations and sense of agency.



Novels and stories

Examination systems

If rural livelihoods and futures are undervalued in schools, one way to re-value them is to give a greater role to the rural community in shaping the character and content of education. Inviting successful individuals from the community and beyond to talk about their livelihoods, and how to pursue these, could encourage young people to consider alternative possibilities, learn how to succeed in them, value them more highly and see their school experience as relevant to them. Local communities might also prove valuable resources for education that is more relevant to rural life, as well as providing mentors from within the community.

The requirement to pass exams at the end of each school year or stage in order to progress contributes to the sense that schooling is mainly concerned with academic learning and the types of futures for which academic accreditation is required. Failing such tests conveys messages about young people's worth in relation to these futures. Decisions about what is examined, when, how and with what consequences can affect how young people see their futures and the value they ascribe to education in enabling them to succeed.

Other aspects of schooling



School-community relations

A wide range of other aspects of schooling also play a role in shaping how children view and work toward their futures. These include elements as diverse as talks at assemblies; school uniform policies; motivational posters; messages conveyed through sporting activities and events; inter-school competitions.

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