A photograph of two children walking away from the camera on a dirt path in a rural setting. The child on the left is wearing a red and white striped shirt and dark pants, carrying a striped bag. The child on the right is wearing a yellow shirt and shorts, carrying a white bag. They are walking towards a line of trees in the background.

# Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings

Project report  
(draft)  
September 2018





## Executive summary

Historically, mass education systems across the Global South were established to produce government workers (administrators, police, nurses etc). As educational enrolments expand, particularly amongst disadvantaged rural communities, the number of learners far exceeds national economies' capacities to provide formal employment for all. Yet when asked about their aspirations, rural young people continue to express a desire for salaried work in a narrow range of government employment – as teachers, nurses, soldiers and police officers. This report addresses the roles that different parts of education systems play in perpetuating these apparent aspirations, based on ethnographic research conducted in two remote rural settings in each of three lower middle-income countries (Laos, Lesotho and India) that have witnessed rapid recent growth in primary school enrolment.

We find that for rural children, their parents and teachers, schooling is an engagement with the abstract. Much of the content and practices of schooling fail to connect with their everyday rural lives. Schooling is understood in terms of an abstract trajectory wherein 'paying attention' or 'working hard' in school brings academic success and leads to a salaried job. The job titles children and adults refer to (teacher, nurse, soldier or police officer) are generally hollow labels, representative of worthy occupations (useful to the community and society) but devoid of real content. Children understand little of what such work would entail, the lifestyle associated with it (other than a secure income and possible relocation), or what steps would be required to access it. Importantly, for most, such futures are also illusory. The great majority of rural children will fail to achieve either academic credentials or salaried work, in part because of the rural disadvantages they face (at home, in the community and at school). As they 'fall off' the assumed trajectory, children's alternative view of their future is often one in which their schooling plays no valuable part.

The binary view of education – academic success and salaried work vs drop out and ongoing rural life – is problematic for several related reasons. First, it leaves young people feeling disappointed and dissatisfied. It also limits their capacity to find ways in which to apply their education to enhance their lives, and those of their families and communities, outside salaried employment. Even where (as in Lesotho) 'entrepreneurship' appears on the curriculum, it is engaged with as something abstract. Children find it very difficult to associate it with their own futures. If children are unable to see education as contributing to 'a better future', other than through the prescribed pathway, they are also less likely to be motivated to engage with schooling.

For people in rural communities to see education as worthwhile in the long term (when it becomes apparent that most children will fail to achieve the current promise of a salaried job), changes are needed at the level of the education system. Children need to be encouraged to aspire to more diverse and accessible futures, and provided with a concrete understanding of what different jobs entail and how to access them. Curricula and textbooks should connect with children's rural lives and reveal to them how education is meaningful in the rural context (and not simply condemnatory of rural livelihoods). Teachers play crucial roles in this but would themselves would be better motivated if they didn't see children as inevitably failing to achieve the futures schooling ostensibly prepares them for. None of this is straightforward. Lesotho has recently implemented a new curriculum that seeks to address many of the problems of a narrow academic form of schooling. Yet this is implemented only partially and has yet to persuade rural children that they can achieve better futures through education without securing a salaried job.

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## 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 peri-urban, urban or even 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 (see, for instance, World Bank 2014). There is some evidence that disadvantaged groups have lower aspirations and are consequently less successful in school (Dalton et al 2016). However, this view is challenged by a growing body of evidence that disadvantaged youth have unattainably high aspirations. Research from the Young Lives project reveals that 75% of poor Ethiopian 14-15-year-olds would like a university degree and, of these, 90% expect to achieve one (Abrahams 2014). Yet research across the globe demonstrates that educated young people routinely outnumber existing opportunities for employment (cf. Sancho 2015; Brown 2013; Demerath 1999). This would suggest that young people’s aspirations are raised through schooling but subsequently thwarted by lack of opportunity. Such a scenario leaves young people not only disillusioned but without the knowledge and skills to participate in the rural livelihoods that they have come to consider undesirable.

The mismatch between aspirations and expectations of schooling, and young people’s prospects of work carries significant implications beyond the impacts on individual youth. The issues raised relate to the wider challenge of whether the global economy ascribes value to rural young people in the Global South, or whether they are to be cast as ‘superfluous’ or ‘residual’ within a rapidly changing world dependent on the labour of a skilled minority.

## 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 three closely interrelated research questions:

- What roles do 21st century education systems play in shaping young people’s aspirations in remote rural areas?
- How are the aspirations of young people living in remote rural areas produced in relation to both schooling and wider social, economic and cultural contexts?
- What are the consequences of young people’s aspirations for their educational engagement and learning outcomes?

## Research methods

The two-year project was conducted in remote rural areas of three lower-middle-income countries: Lesotho, India and Laos. Aspirations are not easy to research: they are socially produced, contextual, normative, fluid and difficult to articulate. Young people may simply reproduce the dominant narrative or find direct questions about their futures impossible to answer. Consequently, a substantial period of ethnographic fieldwork was necessary to explore how young people encounter ideas about the future and construct their own narratives. This intensive and sustained approach was able to reveal contradictions and inconsistencies in the views expressed, as well as apparently more long-term and firmly held aspirations.

In each country the research has 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, teachers and other community members;
- Textual analysis of textbooks, curricula and exams;
- Interviews and workshops with policymakers and other key informants;
- Feedback and dissemination workshops with children, teachers, communities and policy makers (4-6 months after the completion of the main fieldwork);
- A pilot survey with approximately 200 children and young people aged 12-22 across approximately five different remote rural communities, building on concepts emerging from the ethnographic findings.

The comparative case study approach offered insights into how global dimensions of both education systems and rural economic change intersect with more localised phenomena to shape aspiration and learning. Each team member focused on one particular country but also visited at least one other to maximise the opportunities for comparison.

## The settings

Six communities and their local primary schools were selected for the research. Some research was also undertaken at the local middle or secondary schools, though these were up to 20km from the villages.

The project concentrates on schooling in 'remote, rural settings'. What, precisely, is 'remote' and 'rural' is relative: it differs between the study contexts and also between individuals, whose capacities for (physical) mobility are unevenly distributed. For city-based people in Laos, travelling to district centres in the rural north is experienced as going deep into the countryside. Yet, for the villagers we worked with, the district 'capital' is the centre of things and viewed as cosmopolitan rather than 'remote, rural', with the signs of guesthouses and businesses expressed in Chinese and English as well as Lao.

### The national settings

	Lesotho	India	Laos
Macro level socio-economic indicators			
GNI per capita Atlas method ,USD, 2017 <sup>1</sup>	1280	1820	2270
Unemployment, % of labour force ages 15-24, 2016 <sup>1</sup>	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 <sup>1</sup>	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 <sup>1</sup>	103.9	114.5	110.5
Gross enrolment ratio, secondary, 2016 <sup>1</sup>	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 <sup>1,2,3,4</sup>	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 <sup>1</sup>	Male 80 Female 94	Male 90 Female 82	Male 77 Female 67

### The villages and schools

	Laos		Lesotho		India	
	Village 1	Village 2	Village 1	Village 2	Village 1	Village 2
<b>Location</b>	Oudomxay Province	Oudomxay Province	Maseru District (close to Thaba Tseka border)	Quthing District	Korba District, Chhattisgarh	Korba District, Chhattisgarh
<b>Population</b>	985 (905 resident)	610 (547 resident)	248 (176 resident)	765 (715 resident)	900	424
<b>Main livelihoods</b>	Upland rice cultivation, maize, sesame, livestock, fishing, sale of forest products	Upland rice cultivation, maize, sesame, livestock	Livestock herding, subsistence farming, remittances from labour migrants	Livestock herding, subsistence farming, remittances from labour migrants	Subsistence farming, labour for private/state construction, sale of forest products, masonry, carpentry	Subsistence farming, labour for private/state construction, sale of forest products, masonry, carpentry
<b>Infrastructure</b>	Dirt road, grid electricity, good mobile signal	Dirt road, grid electricity, good mobile signal	Dirt road, no grid electricity, limited mobile phone signal	Dirt road, no grid electricity, limited mobile phone signal	Dirt road; electricity grid; limited access mobile phone signal	Dirt road; limited electricity and limited mobile phone signal
<b>Primary school</b>	Years 1-5	Years 1-5	Grades 1-7, 3 km from village (serves several villages)	Grades 1-7, located in village	Classes KG-5	Classes KG-5
<b>Number of teachers</b>	4	3	7	3	3	2
<b>Number of students</b>	490	110	202	126	60 (with ave 53 attendance)	37
<b>Nearest secondary school</b>	On same site	20 km	2 hours' walk	40 mins walk	Classes 6-8 in village; new school in progress for 9-12	Classes 6-8 1km walk from village; classes 9-12 6 km (1 hour) walk

All six of the villages in which the research was conducted were accessible by road, except in exceptionally wet weather. Those in Laos and India were also connected to the electricity grid (although not necessarily at household level). All six had mobile phone signal, at least in parts of the village, which made internet access possible for the few with smartphones, although reliant on being able to purchase airtime which in Lesotho was often unavailable in the local shop. Markers of rurality differed considerably between the villages. The smaller Lesotho village, for instance, had very limited infrastructure and a feeling of isolation, but was in fact only 3 hours' drive from the capital city. The larger Lao village by contrast had many more amenities (electricity, shops, secondary school), but was more distant from substantial urban settlements.



The idea of rural remoteness often suggests disconnectedness and a static, unchanging condition. This, however, is far from the case. In the primary 3/4 classroom in Baan Nyai in Laos, we found a girl's drawing which suggests an active engagement with ideas of modernity, here represented through a fashionably dressed young woman, with neatly painted nails busy chatting on her cell phone. Similarly, in India, children drew pictures of mobile phones and people in 'urban' dress such as jeans. In Lesotho, children made cuttings from magazines of material objects such as furniture and televisions, or food associated with town life.

All of the communities are connected, not only by cell phone but also by migration over significant distances. Lesotho has a long history of labour migration to South Africa, which used to support most rural households (Murray 1981). While mining opportunities (and associated remittances to rural households) have diminished since the 1990s (technological change and the preference for South African employees have made it harder to find jobs), young people from the larger village in particular were very aware of the possibility of finding work across the border on fruit farms. In India, migration practices for young men are linked to the timber, mining or construction industries (which typically involves short-term migration within Chhattisgarh), or to borewell drilling (which sees longer-term migration elsewhere in India). Migration among young women is rarer but may include work as a domestic servant within Chhattisgarh. In Laos, some ethnic Hmong in particular have transnational connections through the global Hmong diaspora. Some households receive money from relatives abroad (e.g. in the USA). Such transnational connections may also affect young people's aspirations. For example, ethnic content created by the Hmong diaspora is shared widely across social media, even into remote rural settings (Ó Briain 2018), exposing young people to new ideas, novel lifestyles and possibly even livelihoods without necessarily moving themselves. Some villagers do move physically. In the Lao study sites there is a long history of young men's migration (Evrard 2011), yet over the past decade young women have also become involved in migration to urban centres in Laos, to Thailand and to a lesser extent to China (Phouxay and Tollefsen 2011). Despite the importance of acknowledging various forms of mobilities that are reshaping all three settings, it is also important to acknowledge that many children of primary and secondary school age have barely travelled beyond their own villages.

Local livelihoods, too, are changing. In Laos, traditional livelihoods are under threat (from outlawing, land concessions, promotion of modern livelihoods and village relocation). The pace of rural change is on occasion dramatic. One of the Lao study villages has over the course of our research transformed dramatically as it is located on the 'Lao-China rail project', which is part of the Chinese 'One Belt, One Road' project. This means that what were rainfed rice fields when we started the research are now the location of a labour camp, home to some 100 mostly male Chinese workers digging tunnels and realising other railway related infrastructure. This has not only transformed the physical landscape but also everyday life and young people's imaginations of the future.

In India, population growth translates to a shortage of agricultural land, which means that local households can no longer depend on their agricultural yield for subsistence. In addition to increased labour migration, local people are being forced to diverge into different livelihoods. More common sources of income include small-scale animal husbandry (namely, the sale of pigs or poultry); small-stall holders (selling trinkets or other goods at local festivals or bazaars); sale of non-rice agricultural produce weekly market stalls. In Lesotho, on the other hand, men are returning to livestock rearing in the absence of opportunities for employment elsewhere.

In all three settings, over recent years, some years of primary schooling for boys and girls has become the norm with close to 100% primary school enrolment nationally. In India, primary school enrolment has increased hugely since 2009, with the introduction of the 'Right to Education' Act. In Lesotho Free primary education was introduced from 2000 and became compulsory for 6-13 year olds in 2010. In Laos it has been compulsory since 1996. Educational structures differ considerably across the three countries (children attend primary school for only 5 years in India and Laos, but 7 years in Lesotho). Data on educational outcomes has raised concerns in all three countries. The World Development Report (World Bank, 2018) noted that half of all children in Class 5 in India could not solve a basic 2-digit subtraction problem. According to the 2007 SACMEQ survey, 25% of Grade 6 students in rural schools in Lesotho were functionally illiterate and 47% functionally innumerate (Spaull 2012). In Laos the 2012 Early Grade Reading Assessment revealed that 32% of 2nd graders could not read, and among those who could 57% did not comprehend what they read (World Bank 2014b). Concerns about quality of education and indicators of learning outcomes have led to a variety of innovations. Laos is about to implement a new curriculum, and Lesotho's new 'integrated curriculum', introduced in 2009, has recently extended to Grade 7 of primary school and is moving into the secondary level. In all three settings, attention is being given to vocational education, but this remains confined to a small minority of young people.

Rural schools play a particularly significant role in their communities. They are often the only permanent social service and visible state presence (and thus symbolise the extension of the state into rural areas). They present children with a distinctly different generational order from the village/home and children engage in very different activities from those they experience outside school. As schooling expands, it transforms both the meaning and experience of childhood.

Rural schools, however, present a number of challenges. They are generally remote from district offices and education ministries. Teachers have a more prominent, but sometimes more controversial place in the local community than is usual in urban areas. Resources such as books, electricity and computers (at school and within the household) are more limited, and children have less exposure to many things in the curriculum. Children also tend to receive many fewer days of teaching owing to relatively high levels of absenteeism among both teachers and students, and weather conditions such as severe cold or heavy rain and flooding that makes rivers dangerous to cross and leads to school closures.

## What do we mean by aspiration?

Even in policy and academic discourse, where the term 'aspiration' is widely used, it has no simple definition and is applied to many different aspects of people's orientation to the future. In the three settings where our research took place, young people talked about the future using local language terms which coincide to a greater or lesser degree with the way aspiration is conceived in academic discourse. There are relatively formal translations of the term, but young people referred more informally to wants, hopes, expectations, desires, dreams or goals.

### Local terms for aspiration

<b>Laos</b>	The term 'aspiration' (khwaammoungmaadpaathanaa) exists in Lao but it is not part of everyday village vocabulary (it is an educated term). Villagers would express aspiration in terms 'dreams' (khwaamfan) and in terms of 'want to be' (yaak pen), or more generally a 'longing for' (yaak dai).
<b>Lesotho</b>	Aspirations are formally translated as ' <i>Litabatabelo</i> ' in Sesotho, but this word was seldom used by respondents in the research. The term can also translate as 'desires'. Most young people used the phrase ' <i>ke batla ho ba xx ka moso</i> ' (I want to be xx in the future).
<b>India</b>	' <i>Ichchha</i> ' means 'desire'; it is quite common to ask 'what do you desire [to be]'. The phrase 'to become' ( <i>banane</i> ) or 'want to become' ( <i>banana chaahate hain</i> ) is also relatively common, in relation to a future career. 'Hope' ( <i>aasha</i> ) is also used.

Following Quaglia and Cobb (1996), we define aspiration as a process of identifying, setting and being inspired to work towards future goals. Aspiration is not, however, straightforward. It is multidimensional, fluid, multiple, produced through relationships and is never simply about the individual. Moreover, aspiration is never simply 'high' or 'low': the goals of aspiration differ. Zipin et al (2015) helpfully highlight how the aspirations that people express publicly – that they describe as 'doxic' – tend to reflect what is taken for granted as desirable within society. People may hold other aspirations – 'habituated' aspirations – which reflect what they feel to be possible in the future, in light of their circumstances. They may not articulate these aspirations or expectations, but they are important aspects of orienting to the future.

Aspiration, while complex, multiple and varied, is not universal. Rather, it depends on an idea that the future can be envisaged, planned and achieved through deliberate action. Aspiration can also only exist where there are perceived choices to be made. The idea that one can set goals and create one's own future is promulgated most clearly in entrepreneurship education in Lesotho. However, this view does not necessarily resonate in all rural societies, where religious or cultural traditions may suggest a different relationship with the future. In Buddhist and post-socialist Laos, for instance, one's fortune is understood less as a product of individual will and more a result of luck or connections ('*dek sen*'). In India, one's future is believed to be linked, in some way, to the idea of 'karma' and an individual's actions in a previous life, although young people are nonetheless held responsible (or blamed) for their own failed aspirations, or for their lack of educational engagement. In Lesotho, some young people see God or witchcraft playing the determining role in fulfilling or failing to accomplish their aspirations. As a 14-year-old boy in primary school in Lesotho explained:

*In each month as it ends, I always ask God to help me to pass, last year, I did ask him to help me to pass, and indeed I passed it.*

The idea that aspiration can serve an instrumental role in driving engagement with education (and ultimately raising learning outcomes) assumes the modernist view that what one does today affects the future. Aspiration then justifies sacrifice of time, effort and money for future reward. Again, this is more realistic in some contexts than others. In Lesotho and India, hard work is widely valued for its instrumental role: children are encouraged to 'work hard' in school to secure a better future. In Laos, on the other hand, hard work is valued more as intrinsically good. School work is referred to as

‘studying’ (*hian*), rather than work, and children are advised to study well (*hian kheng*) and pay attention to the teacher.

Aspiration is not, however, simply about the future. It may be a way of managing in the present (Jakimow 2016) or claiming a virtuous identity (Frye 2012), because to aspire is itself increasingly understood as intrinsically good. Nor is it a singular phenomenon. Instead, it involves a wide variety of orientations to the future. Aspiration may be short or long term, individual or collective, material or non-material, relating to occupation, place of residence or family status, rational or emotional, cognitive or embodied, vague or concrete, firmly held or fleeting, likely or unlikely, articulated or merely ‘felt’. People may aspire for individual advancement, to assist their parents or siblings, or to play a positive social role, helping their community or wider society.

Education systems reflect and produce aspirations at many levels. Consideration is given to the future of the child, their family and community, but also the wider nation. In Laos, for instance, the education system aspires to turn children (*dek*) into students (*nak hian*) and into ‘good children’ of parents, the community and the multi-ethnic nation-state. In India, the education system aims to produce ‘good citizens’, who will be make useful contributions to the development of the Indian nation state.

Some young people aspire to education as an end, rather than a means. For most, however, education is perceived as a route to high status. When rural Basotho say ‘education is life’ (*thuto ke bophelo*), they are viewing it as a means to a more desirable future. Yet the futures imagined through schooling – futures involving salaried government employment – are unattainable for most. In the Indian context, for instance, 3.6% of adults are employed in government jobs, while 2.3% work in the formal private sector and the remaining 94% work in the informal sector. While many young people make a sacrifice for their aspirations, only a few can attain them.

### The diverse aspirations of young people in Lesotho

Access to **money** is a significant aspiration. Both girls and boys expressed a desire to be nurses due to the money they believed they could earn. Many young people said they would get more money once they had been to school. Yet others talked of being able to achieve wealth through owning animals or even as a traditional doctor (*ngaka*). The motivation was to be able to fend for themselves (*ho iphelisa*), to get beautiful houses and cars, or to have an easy life where they can be ‘fat’ and eat well.

Aspirations for others, particularly boys, related to the **maintenance of law and order**. They were keen on the observance of school rules, notably listening to and respecting teachers. Some despised the neighbouring rural service centre and wanted to prevent lawlessness.

Some young people aspired to **mobility**. They said that life is boring in the village – that life happens in towns. They wished to attend school in town, and indeed parents who could afford it often invest in schooling elsewhere, in some cases in South Africa. Many children mentioned that they wanted to leave the village for the nearby service centre, South Africa or Maseru where there were better services and shops. Others, by contrast, envisaged a future life in the village, perhaps working for a few years to purchase livestock and build a beautiful house.

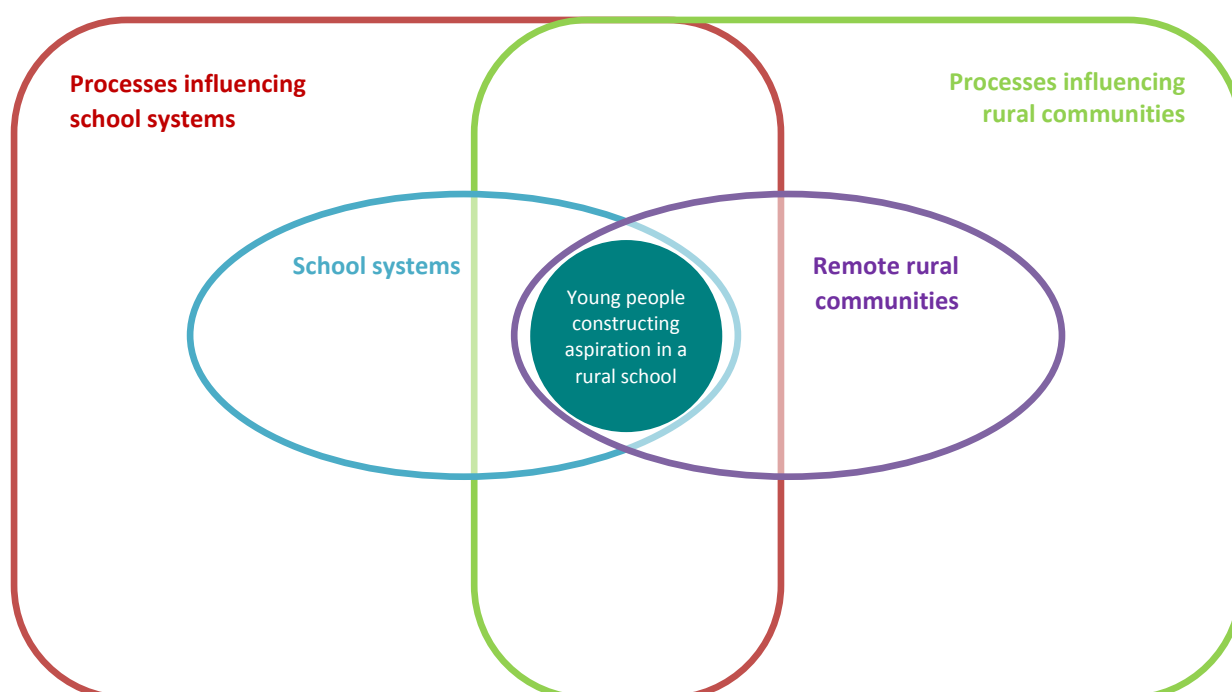


Some insisted ‘I want only to stay/sit’ (*ke batla ho lula feela*). This was resistance to more than mobility. They did not want to attend school or to marry and protested against the idea that they should be doing manual work. They aspired to a life **free from responsibilities**. Unemployed young people declared ‘I am just sitting’ (*ke lutse feela*) which was often viewed negatively by others and sometimes by young people themselves who wished to **work hard** (*ho sebetse ka thata*). Doing nothing (*ho etsa letho*) is often represented as dangerous by parents, as idling might lead to crime.

## Aspiration and education systems: interrelationships

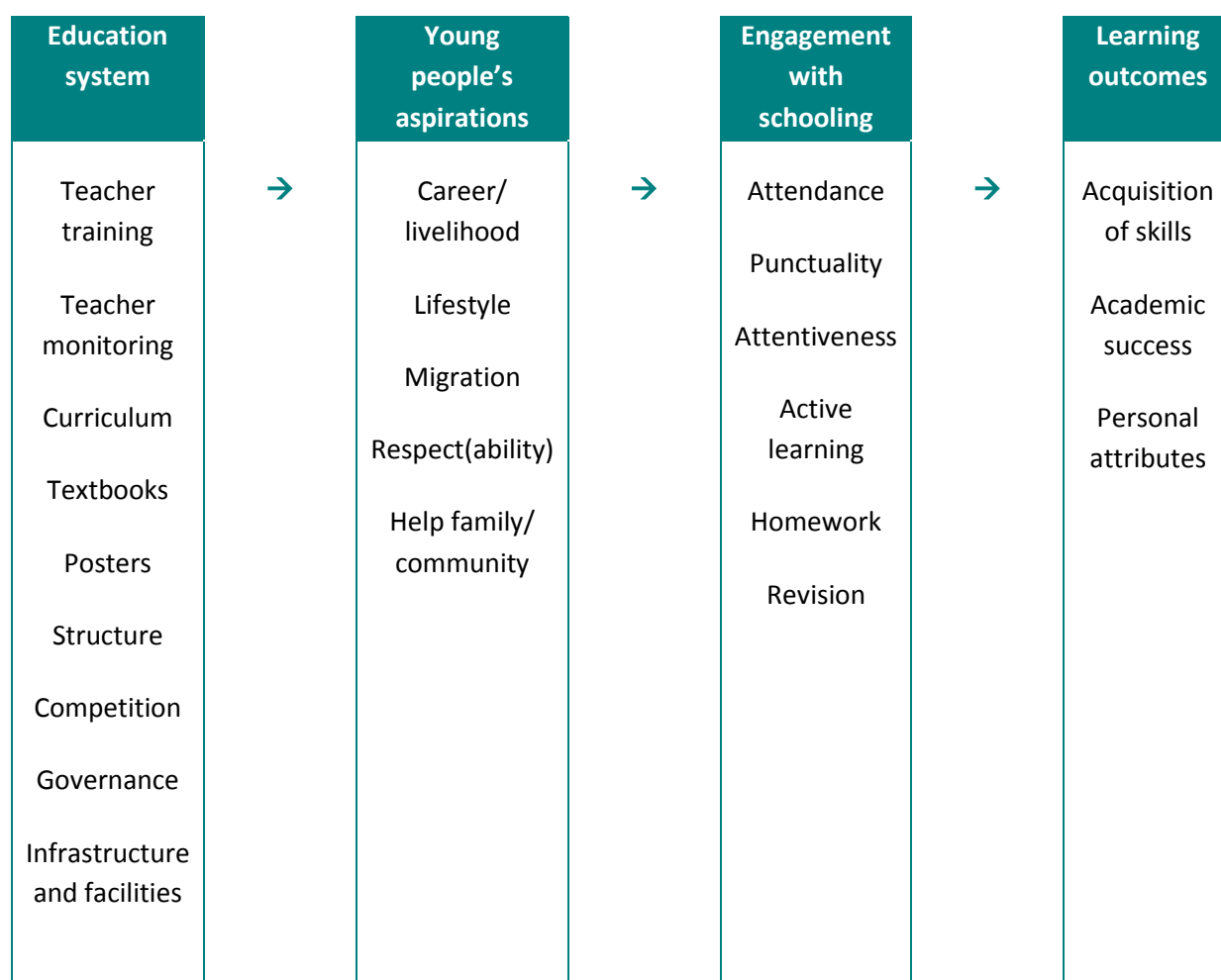
The relationship between aspiration and schooling is a two way one, and exists within a wider social, political and economic context. Our first two research questions examine how young people form aspirations, focusing initially on the roles played by different aspects of the education system (and in turn the processes operating to shape education systems) and then on the ways in which these intersect with other processes and practices within remote rural communities. Both education systems and communities exist in social, political and economic contexts which operate at multiple scales. The expectations of families, and prospects of employment are not entirely apart from the design and implementation of education systems, but they are formed from and respond to different sets of processes.

### The relational construction of young people’s aspirations



Our third research question focuses in turn on how young people’s aspirations, deriving from their experiences in and beyond school, shape the ways in which they engage with education and ultimately their learning outcomes. Although represented below as a set of linear casual processes, it is crucial to recognise that context plays a role at every stage. The focus on two rural communities

in each of three countries enables these contextual aspects of the relationship between education and aspiration to be better understood.



## 1 What roles do 21st century education systems play in shaping young people's aspirations in remote rural areas?

### Structuring orientations to the future

There are a variety of aspects of education systems that present young people with a view of a different future from that which prevails in the absence of education, and a structured orientation toward that future. Even if centrally located, a school is a place apart from the rural community, and behaviours expected in school differ. The difference of school (and by implication of educated people) is **embodied**. Learners are expected, in many cases, to wear uniforms. The attire of the village and of local livelihoods may be prohibited. In India, uniforms are required, and children are admonished if they do not wear the correct attire, or if their uniforms are not clean. In Lesotho, boys are forbidden to wear gumboots, blankets and kupa hats, even where these may offer practical warmth and protection on the long walk to school, because they symbolise the unscholarly approach

of the herder. Although teachers also wear gumboots to cross the river, they hide them in the fields on the way to school, as a way of signalling 'proper' school attire. In the Lao context, schools in remote rural settings, aware that many households will be unable to purchase uniforms, may not enforce uniform policies. Schools do, however, enforce strict policies on hairstyles: boys must wear their hair short, and girls long tied in a ponytail. Here, out-of-school youth, male and female, can often easily be recognised by their more fashionable hairstyles and in-school youth are keen to experiment with alternative hairstyles during the long summer holidays.

**Temporally**, the age-graded system suggests a linear pathway towards the future. Children 'move forward' [*Aage badhna* in Hindi] through a hierarchy, completing stages, looking to the future. As they progress toward the finish line of schooling, their aspired futures supposedly come nearer. Life is set out as a trajectory along which young people should travel in a forward direction.

The structure is not simply temporal, but also **spatial**. For many rural children in remote rural places, completing the full cycle of basic education may not be possible without moving away from their village. Progress through the education system beyond primary level implies relocating to larger villages and eventually urban areas that have full secondary schools and post-secondary education. This potentially contributes to some young people's association of the remote rural with 'backward', and their notion that moving toward the city (and perhaps in turn out of the country) constitutes progress.

**Occupationally**, too, schooling exposes children to alternative possibilities. Historically, formal education systems in the Global South prepared children and youth for low ranking jobs in the (colonial) state apparatus. In the postcolonial period, despite dramatic expansion of schooling the focus has remained by and large on preparing children and youth for salaried employment. The figure of the teacher is the case in point. In rural school s/he embodies the promise of the education system: a uniformed (in some settings), educated, and salaried occupation that is distinctly different from other occupations children are exposed to in rural villages.

### Locating the aspirations of education systems

The ways in which education systems orient rural children to the future are not inevitable, but to some extent reflect the intentions – and aspirations – of the actors who design and implement schooling. **National priorities** differ, but education systems also come under the influence of **global pressures**. School structures, curricula and teacher education are designed variously to serve purposes of nation building, human capital formation, regional competitiveness and children's wellbeing. The Millennium Development Goals and more recently the Sustainable Development Goals have shaped donor priorities as well as education ministry plans, while neoliberal thought and global economic competition are highly influential. While broadly embedded in similar ideas, **donor interests** differ. In Lesotho, for instance, the World Bank is currently focused on Early Childhood Development; GIZ is concerned with reducing dropout and provision of vocational education; the African Development Bank is also working on vocational education, while the EU is providing budgetary support to the Ministry of Education and Training in support of mutually negotiated policies.

An aspiration shared by national and global actors, and often also by teachers, is for education to **instil a desire for a 'better' rural condition**. In rural Laos, posters and lesson series sponsored by international organisations depict the current rural condition as 'bad' and advocate improved alternatives. Teachers in Lesotho discourage boys from herding, which they associate with idleness and crime. Textbooks series on 'moral education' represent particular national agendas in all three settings. Teachers, who often originate from outside the rural communities in which they teach, also seek to improve rural students, and interpret the curriculum in their own ways deciding what is relevant for rural students and what to leave out, and how to teach it.

### Key elements of education systems

There are elements of education systems that play particularly powerful roles in shaping young people's aspirations. Curriculum, assessment policies, textbooks and pedagogy are all potential points of intervention, although governments generally have most control over the former, with textbooks interpreting curricula and teachers in turn interpreting and making selective use of both curricula and textbooks (and to a significant extent assessment).



**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 moral education, nationalist interpretations of the revolutionary struggle, 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 (e.g. practical work with a clear future-oriented purpose), young people might come to see education as relevant to more than just salaried jobs. *[See Briefing 1: The representation of occupations in school.]*

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 (Kingdom of Lesotho 2008) 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



# The representation of occupations in school

The figures of the teacher, nurse, soldier and police officer feature prominently in textbooks and in the aspirations articulated by children in remote rural settings. These occupations represent the category of educated, salaried and uniformed employment, the promised reward for education which is particularly powerful in remote rural areas. The occupations are, however, represented as static endpoints and children do not learn what they entail or how to access them. Realistic rural occupations are largely absent from textbooks or may be represented in an alienating fashion. Efforts to broaden occupational horizons through representations need enforcement by teachers in order to be recognised as actual options by students in remote rural areas.



'Occupations' from a Lao primary school textbook

The occupations of teacher, nurse, soldier and police officer feature with remarkable consistency across the otherwise very different textbooks in use in India, Laos and Lesotho. The lesson on 'Occupations' (*asip*) in a Lao textbook explains what these four occupations represent. It speaks of different categories of work such as labourers, farmers, **employees** and traders. Across the three countries farming and labouring are considered forms of work that do not require schooling. The figure of the 'trader' is starting to appear in the school books across the three coun-

tries through the emphasis on entrepreneurship, which is most visibly the case in Lesotho.

The ubiquitous presence of the educated employee, signified most commonly through the figures of teacher, nurse, soldier and police officer, doubtless relates to the history of education systems that were originally established to produce and select an elite cadre of government workers. Today, these figures represent **salaried, educated and uniformed employment**, something the school system directs students to in various ways: through posters and textbooks, through insistence on school uniforms and regulating hairstyles, as well as preoccupation with discipline and order.



'Careers' from a Lesotho primary school textbook. The top row features a nurse, a police officer and teacher.

The occupations of teacher, nurse, soldier and police officer also feature prominently in **children's future aspirations** – especially those articulated within the space of the school. Their popularity relates in part to the fact that they are visible in rural areas, where children have little exposure to other jobs that require education. This is most true for the figure of the teacher, embodied by the classroom teacher. The salaried nature of these occupations has

“When I grow up I want to be a police officer and prevent lawlessness in villages in the mountains, to prevent corruption and reprimand children” (Primary learner, Lesotho)

particular appeal in impoverished rural areas, and the educated and uniformed dimensions provide further elements of distinction that may appeal to remote rural students. Moreover, these four occupations are socially valued roles, from the perspective of the state as well as from the perspective of children in remote rural villages. Teachers, nurses, the military and the police force are key ingredients to the project of national development. Equally, children justify their dreams to land in one of these four occupations in relation to their remote rural village, seeking to make it a healthier, safer, and better educated place, while the associat-

ed regular salary is acknowledged to be important for survival. In the occupation of the teacher, nurse, soldier and police officer, state-centric, **national aspirations converge with a local altruism articulated by rural children.**

"I want to be a soldier because I want to guard the country" (Grade 7 learner, Lesotho)

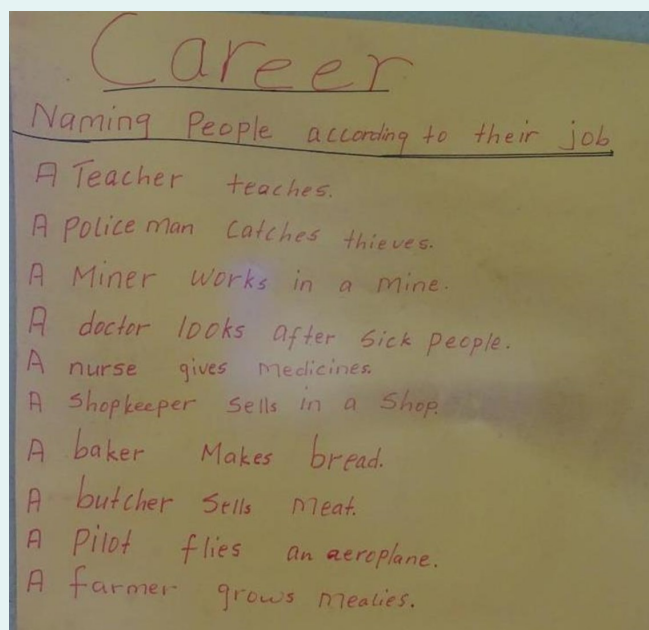
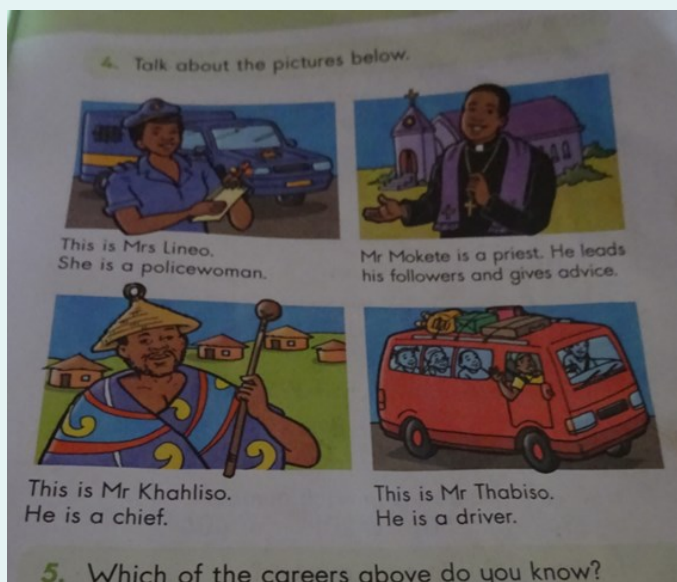
	Boys	Girls
Teacher		5
Police	5	
Teacher & police	1	1
Studying English	1	1
Nurse		3
District governor, soldier & nurse	1	
Teacher, soldier, police & nurse	1	
District governor	1	
TOTAL	10	10

Aspirations expressed by a group of Primary 3, 4 and 5 children (aged 9-13) in rural Laos



Primary school girl's painting, Chhattisgarh

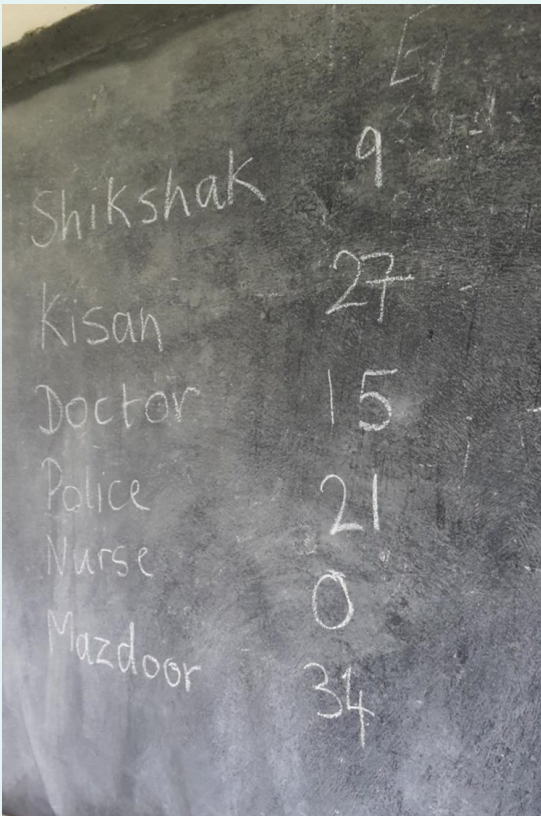
Where schooling encourages children to see a restricted range of government jobs as the intended outcome of education, it fails to enable them to make informed choices in the face of restricted opportunities. Rural children may see soldiers and nurses, both in textbooks and real life, but have **limited knowledge of what these jobs entail, the qualifications and processes required** to access them, or how many people apply for each training place or job. This is also true for other occupations represented in textbooks. The example from a Lesotho textbook (below) exemplifies the common tendency to present occupations as static points of arrival with virtually no discussion of what the job entails or what needs to be done to get there. The list to the right (from the Grade 6 classroom wall in Lesotho) offers the barest of details.



Given the absence of real life examples of most occupations represented in textbooks, there is a task for textbooks and teachers for orienting students to the content of as well as the pathways into these occupations. In addition, rural children could be better informed about possible careers, including through bringing successful individuals into school to talk about their work and career paths, and enabling children to visit workplaces beyond the village. Information and role models could also be made available through smart phones.



It is likely that most rural children will not obtain formal sector work, but rather pursue **rural livelihoods**. In the Indian context for instance, 3.6% of adults are employed in government jobs, while 2.3% work in the formal private sector. The remaining 94% work in the informal sector. These informal sector occupations tend not to be associated with education, and although many young people, as they progress through school, come to recognise that their futures are likely to depend on rural self-employment, they may not view education as having a role to play in supporting them in such work. Some see rural livelihoods as a failure of their aspirations. Yet there is no fundamental reason why school shouldn't support young people to engage productively in rural work. Bringing successful local farmers and businesspeople into the classroom could inspire young people and assist them to relate their education to rural futures.



Profession	Number of Students
Shikshak	9
Kisan	27
Doctor	15
Police	21
Nurse	0
Mazdoor	34

In the Indian villages, aspirations began to shift in secondary school as many children come to recognise that salaried employment is beyond their reach

Shikshak = teacher; Kisan = farmer; Mazdoor = labourer



Drawing rural livelihoods outside school in Lesotho

Certain widely available rural occupations are actively stigmatised through the education system. In Lesotho, herding is a common occupation for boys and young men. Yet, teachers associate it with idleness, crime and destruction of school property. In Lesotho teachers do not allow students to wear blankets, gumboots or kupa hats at school because this is seen as herd boy outfit which is incompatible with the figure of the learner (as students are called in Lesotho). Similarly, in the Lao context various textbook exercises ask students to explain how swidden cultivation – the main agricultural activity in remote rural Laos – is environmentally destructive. Such exercises depict parents of remote rural students as enemies of the environment and fail to teach students on how to practice swidden cultivation in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Occasionally, textbooks also include attempts to encourage students to think differently about the future. The picture of a female village chief in a Lao textbook is the case in point. Only a small minority of village chiefs in Laos are female, and this share is even smaller in remote rural areas. In order to have these representations realise their intended effect, the message needs to be carefully reinforced by rural teachers.

Many young people demonstrate little conviction that the occupations they say they aspire to will actually materialise. Over days, weeks, months or years their expressed preferences shift between the four popular jobs; when outside school they speak of alternative (more local) livelihoods; and they express a desire for future lives that are incompatible with their chosen salaried 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.



If you could choose any job, what would your first choice be? (Data from pilot survey)

	Laos – attending school		Laos – out of school		Lesotho – attending school		Lesotho – out of school	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Teacher	31	33	41	43	21	17	11	13
Police officer	11	12	9	9	9	7	7	8
Soldier	23	25	15	16	22	18	17	18
Nurse	0	0	0	0	35	29	13	14
Doctor/ nurse	21	21	13	14	7	6	2	2
The above 5 jobs	86	92	78	81	94	77	50	65
Other	7	8	18	19	28	23	33	35
Total	93	100	96	100	122	100	83	100

## Recommendations

- ⇒ Revise/rewrite rural school textbooks to better reflect and represent the lives, livelihoods and prospective career opportunities of rural communities.
- ⇒ Integrate discussions about accessible and realistic rural livelihoods and future occupations into teacher training.
- ⇒ Encourage schools to invite individuals who have been successful in a range of occupations, both within the rural community and further afield, to talk to students about their career paths.
- ⇒ Develop websites available through mobile apps that enable young people to find information about diverse livelihoods, how to access them, and experiences of people who undertake them.



classes largely to those elements that are familiar and employ methods they are confident with. [\[See Briefing 2: Innovating in rural education.\]](#)

**Assessment** policies are also influential. 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. 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. Failure also represents a failure to progress – a failure to 'move forward' in the manner education systems symbolically advocate.

**Textbooks** may be commissioned by government to support the curriculum, but interpret and select, particularly in the examples and illustrations they use, emphasising certain elements more than others. Where 'official' textbooks are in short supply, books provided by international organisations or local NGOs may be more dominant in the classroom. These were particularly common in Laos. Textbooks provide powerful messages to students about their futures, suggesting what they should aim for and what might be attainable. 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.

Didactic **pedagogies** and rote learning continue to predominate in rural classrooms. These 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 if used in ways that do not discourage students. Even where these are encouraged in teachers' guides and textbooks, however, teachers express reluctance to experiment with pedagogy. In part this is because they feel they lack the skills to do so, and in part because they do not fully believe in what these methods 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. [\[See Briefing 3: The roles of rural teachers.\]](#) Thus any reform of education requires efforts to gain the buy-in of current and prospective teachers.

Where alternative pedagogies are introduced, these can impact on young people's aspirations in diverse ways. For instance, when group work is employed by teachers in Lesotho, specific roles are given to individual children on the basis of their perceived talents. One teacher explained:

Every group must have a leader, a leader of a group *akere* [isn't it] ... We are making the leaders of the future, so they must have responsibility of being a leader. 'This is my group; I must work hard *ebile* [actually].' It improves competition because the other group do not

like to be defeated by other groups, every group like to be...*e be bona ba sebetsang hantle* [they want to be the best performers]; they compete in order to work hard well in the class.

In the teacher's guide to the syllabus, it is emphasised that students should be given various tasks, such as being peer tutors, helpers or 'class leaders'. While the curriculum emphasises that these assignments should be changed regularly so that all learners experience a range of roles, in practice school teachers often focused on those perceived as particularly talented. For instance, during the sports competition, only a few were selected to run. Similarly, when assigning a task involving drawing, the teacher commanded that: 'only those ones who can draw should draw': most students simply watched.

### Messages from fiction

Through encounters with **fiction**, children receive normative 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. Two of the novels that children read in primary school have been in use for more than two decades.

#### Edith Matšelis Lesupi, 1997 *Bophelo ba Lillo* (the life of Lillo), Longman

This story presents adolescence as a dangerous life stage. Young Basotho girls in the book are advised to stay away from relationships and encouraged to listen to their parents. They are advised not to rush into adulthood. Interestingly, Lillo did not go to school herself but was educated – she knew how to send letters to young people giving them advice. She did not have money but could still achieve success as a domestic worker.

#### Congo Bhembe 1995 *A Crooked Path*, Macmillan Botswana

This story presents urban lifestyles as slightly dangerous. A school boy called Michael from an urban area moves to a village in Swaziland to attend school and encourages a boy called Sandile to steal, skip school and engage in drinking. Both of them go to the urban area and Sandile is attracted by these lifestyles; however, they return to the village and cheat during exams. Michael eventually gets dismissed and never reappears, whereas Sandile gets put back on track with his father's help. This text strongly promotes the idea that effort in school brings future rewards, and warns of the dangers of being led astray. As Sandile explains:

*'School has always been very important to me, right from the very first day. I got a first class pass at the end of standard 5 and again at the end of form 3. I know that my parents are very proud of me. And so are my school mates. Although to be honest, some of them are jealous and think that it is sheer luck that I pass so well. No way! I study hard. I listen to my parents and read the newspaper each day from front to back. I am always eager to increase my knowledge and improve my mind. I have plans for the future you see. I've had them a long time, and I want to make sure that they work out'.*

# Innovating in rural education

Educational innovations are being implemented in all three research settings, partly in response to global concerns about poor learning outcomes that contributed to the formulation of Sustainable Development Goal 4. The country at the most advanced stage of implementing innovation is Lesotho, with its new 'Integrated Curriculum' introduced gradually from 2009, intended to radically overhaul both content and pedagogy for the first 10 years of school. Broadly, the new curriculum seeks to replace the narrative that education leads to a specified (formal sector, urban) future with one in which children are agents in their own futures – equipping them with the knowledge and skills to plan their own lives and livelihoods within their own geographical context. In practice, however, children's experiences of education have changed less as a result of the new curriculum than might be expected, and they continue to associate schooling with salaried jobs rather than rural businesses.

## Learning areas

Lesotho's integrated curriculum, developed by the Ministry of Education with UN and World Bank support, aims 'to deliver Education for Individual and Social Development, equipping both individual citizens and the Nation as a whole to meet the challenges of the increasingly globalised world' (Ministry of Education and Training 2015). It moves away from the traditional focus on narrow academic disciplines, towards broader more functional subject areas. The previous 14-subject primary school curriculum has been reduced to five 'learning areas' that in theory reflect 'practical life challenges'. One of these, 'Creativity and Entrepreneurship', is explicitly a response to the lack of jobs available in the formal economy. Schooling is seemingly being recast as preparation for an entrepreneurial future, rather than a salaried job.

There is also a stronger focus on the development of skills: 'The syllabus is designed to help learners acquire facts and knowledge, and develop skills which will serve them for their whole lives' (Grade 7 Teacher's Guide). The skills highlighted in the teachers' guides are decision making and problem solving (to make 'constructive informed choices'), creative thinking, creativity, effective communication (verbal and non-verbal), learning to learn, resisting peer pressure and refusal skills, critical thinking, logical thinking and scientific skills. These are seen as skills for use in planning one's future and responding to situations, encouraging young people to develop individualised aspirations rather than assuming a particular white-collar future.

### LEARNING AREAS

#### Linguistic and literacy

(Sesotho, English, art and crafts, drama, music and other languages – compulsory subjects Sesotho and English)

#### Numerical and mathematical

(mathematics – compulsory subject mathematics)

#### Personal, spiritual and social

(history, religious education, health and physical education, development studies, lifeskills – compulsory subject lifeskills)

#### Scientific and technological

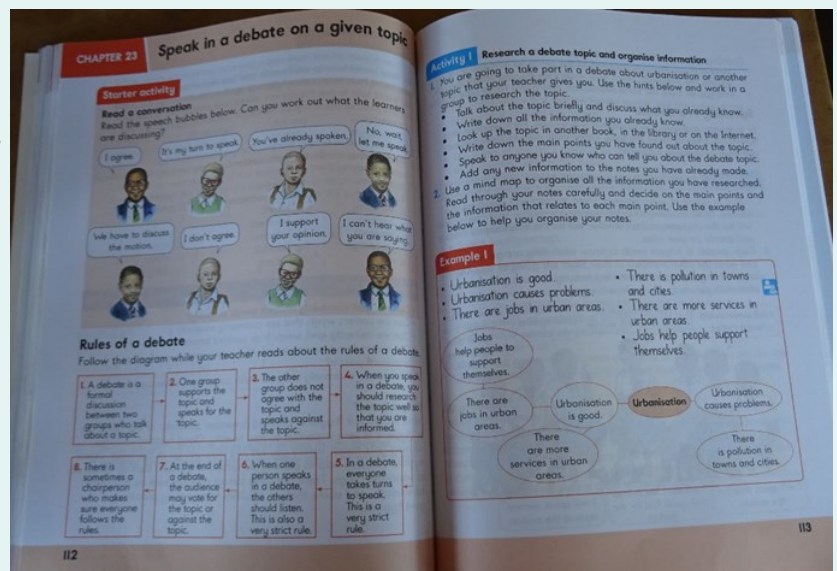
(science, geography, agricultural science, technical subjects – compulsory subject science)

#### Creativity and entrepreneurial

(business education, home economics, ICT – compulsory subject any)

## Pedagogy

The new curriculum is also to be taught and assessed in new ways. The intention is to develop the specific talents of individual children (now labelled 'learners'). Teachers' guides outline the expected learner-centred pedagogy involving devices such as 'story line', 'brainstorming', 'dramatization', 'role play', 'use of resource persons' (inc from outside school), 'learning to apply principles' and 'experiential learning'. Multi-grade classrooms are to be seen as an opportunity, and order is to be secured through the use of positive discipline. Learners are to take greater responsibility for their own learning and their own futures, as well as assisting other children.



## Assessment

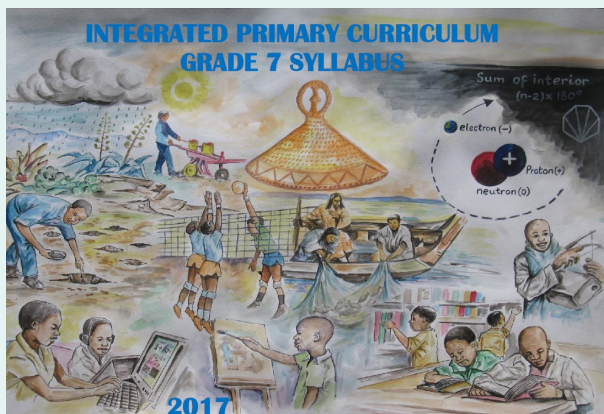
Learners are expected to debate topics such as urbanisation

Continuous assessment, which is 'focused, collaborative, ongoing and immediate' is replacing end-of-year exams, resulting in the removal of barriers to children progressing from one class to the next. Accomplishment in 'soft skills' is to be recorded alongside academic knowledge and understanding. Hence, for example, children are to be awarded points for self-esteem when debating.

Without national examinations at the end of primary school (Grade 7), secondary schools are not supposed to select entrants based on academic performance. Gone is the competitive funnel that sheds the weaker students at each stage or leaves 18-year-olds struggling to reach the end of primary school, but schooling remains linear in structure, indicating an automatic progression toward a set future.

## Implementing the integrated curriculum in rural Lesotho: teachers' perspectives

While the curriculum seems impressive, its implementation falls short of its ambitions; teachers are unconvinced by the content, pedagogy and assessment principles. They complain there is too much content (it is indeed extensive) and that not all can be covered. Some elements seem trivial (several pages on making tea; a section on playing chess). Others are seen as too remote from the lives of rural children. As one teacher put it: 'Because now if I am teaching in the rural area far from here those kids there they don't even know what a television is, so how will they know a computer!'



Some topics cannot be taught effectively without additional resources (making a smoothie without electricity). Teachers also complain they lack training or basic knowledge of the many new topics. Consequently, they confine their teaching to the familiar – to material covered in the previous curriculum. Without external assessment, it seems unnecessary to attempt to teach the entire syllabus.

In terms of pedagogy, too, teachers stay with the familiar. A lot of time is spent copying from the blackboard and filling in blank words. There may be question and answer sessions, but real discussion in the classroom is rare. Teachers talked about using group work and at two of the primary schools, group work and debating were sometimes employed. Children were, for instance, asked to work in groups to look up words in their dictionaries.

Continuous assessment of students is viewed as time-consuming and not helpful for learning. Teachers are required to list learning outcomes for every lesson and may be responsible for multiple classes at any one time, exacerbated when other teachers are absent. Despite injunctions to use positive discipline, learners continue to be punished for getting answers wrong, which many teachers see as necessary to secure good behaviour and understanding. Teachers are particularly concerned that learners promoted to a higher class without having demonstrated their grasp of the foundational material will be ill prepared for their new lessons.

In the absence of frequent monitoring and with relatively little training or preparation, compounded by multigrade teaching, it is perhaps unsurprising that rural schools are not fully implementing the new curriculum.

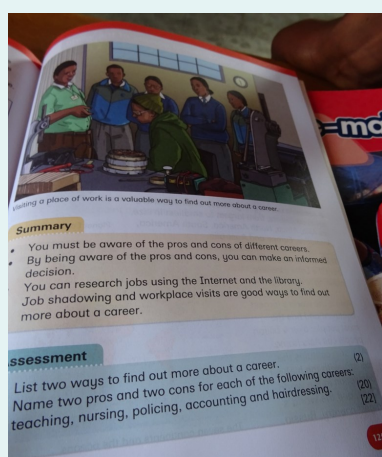


## Education for alternative futures? The limitations of reform

Children's futures are very prominent in the new curriculum. Textbooks across the learning areas contain many pages where occupations are depicted, entrepreneurship has its own 'learning area' and children are taught planning and goal setting. The approach, however, is rather contradictory. The occupations referenced in syllabuses and textbooks tend to be formal sector, salaried ones. Teachers, nurses, police officers and soldiers are no less prevalent than elsewhere, despite the curriculum's ostensible focus on entrepreneurship and practical subjects. Alternative rural careers, such as herding, appear only occasionally. Moreover, there is generally little explanation of what occupations entail, or how to attain them.

<p>27. describe the <b>advantages and disadvantages</b> of different careers.</p>	<p><b>Concepts</b> pros and cons of different careers: teaching nursing policing doctor hairdressing</p> <p><b>Skills</b> Information-finding Decision-making Critical thinking Self-awareness</p> <p><b>Values and Attitudes</b> Awareness Appreciation Respect Acceptance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learners revise different types of careers.</li> <li>Teacher explains pros and cons of being a teacher.</li> <li>Learners find information about pros and cons of different careers.</li> <li>Teacher and learners discuss pros and cons of different careers.</li> <li>Teacher and learners take excursion to the places of work.</li> <li>Learners role-play different careers.</li> </ul>	<p>find information on pros and cons of different careers.</p> <p>describe pros and cons of different careers.</p> <p>role-play different careers.</p>	<p>Teacher's Guide</p>
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Careers in the Grade 6 syllabus, 2015



Tasks may be impractical in a rural setting

Equally, however prominently careers appear in the curriculum, learners reported that they receive little career guidance. Teachers instead focus on the topics that are likely to come up in exams, and that will help primary school children to climb up the ladder of further schooling.

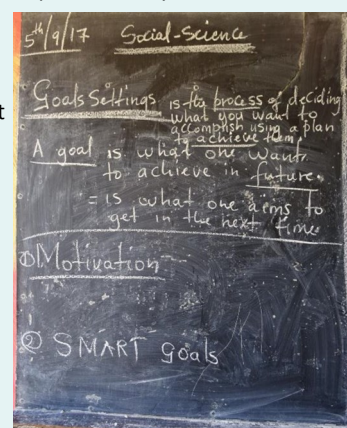
At the time of our research, the new curriculum had been implemented throughout the primary system, hence we cannot compare children's aspirations between this and the previous curriculum. We can perhaps gauge how thoroughly and with what effects entrepreneurship education has been delivered. Despite being nominally a focus of one of the five learning areas, **entrepreneurship** was seldom explicitly taught, perhaps because it was taught after lunch when the rain for instance could cancel school or teachers would go home early. One primary school class was observed which focused on **goal setting**, planning the future. Learners were expected to define goal setting and motivation, which was illustrated with a drawing of a train on the blackboard that should not get derailed. Given the almost total absence of trains in Lesotho, the concepts were very abstract and did not prove memorable for the students.

The message of such teaching delivers the neoliberal idea that individuals are **agents of their own futures**, determining and responsible for their own destiny (in contrast to modernist view – becoming functionaries of state with secure long-term employment). This can be risky to young people's wellbeing as it also implies that failure is attributable to their personal lack of effort or lack of character.

The teacher developed the lesson into one in which he actively encouraged children to consider the potential rewards from **business**, and in particular livestock rearing. At the end of the lesson, however, the teacher asked the students to move to a corner of the room depending on which occupation appealed to them, and the learners allocated the corners for teachers, nurses, police and business. The latter was the smallest group and included a bank teller and a car mechanic.

On another occasion, outside school, we asked three children to act out a scene in which the school principal decided to remove Creativity and Entrepreneurship from the school timetable. The lengthy scenario they invented indicated no awareness of any value in the content of this learning area. The child playing the principal argued that the subject should be cut and taught only in high school, since children did not understand it. The child who acted the learner on the other hand argued that subjects should not be cut but rather introduced earlier, since they might prove useful even if they were not immediately understood.

Children are not unfamiliar with or entirely reluctant to engage in small-scale business. They refer to being able to fend for themselves (*ho phelisa*) or working for themselves (*ho itsebelletsa*), and can cite countless ways of generating income. At the end of the research, we asked a classroom of Grade 6 and 7 students what they could do to survive if they didn't immediately find a job when they finished their education.



Suggestions included becoming nannies, building houses, selling vegetables, selling beer, wool and mohair, dancing in exchange for money, selling pigs, brooms, clothes, honey, chickens, repairing shoes, planting trees, herding, making maize sacks or sewing school uniforms and many others. Their capacity to rapidly generate and articulate ideas might relate to the content and pedagogy of the new curriculum, but they did not see education as preparation for these forms of work.

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Although they envisaged running businesses as a back-up for survival, few children talked about aspiring to be 'business people'. Most imagined that starting a business would be risky. One secondary school girl expressed reluctance due to the risk of theft. Teachers, too, in spite of the curriculum, thought formal sector careers were what learners should aspire to, since they offered a secure income. Undoubtedly, both children and their teachers perceived these jobs to have higher status than informal sector work. Many students hoped to avoid 'dirty hands'. Unsurprisingly, from learners' perspectives, education continues to be viewed as principally about academic studies and a limited range of formal sector careers. The focus on the educated career as the driver of educational engagement is harmful to the majority of learners for whom it will always be illusory.

## Recommendations

In order for the majority of rural young people to view education as having a value for futures outside a narrow range of formal sector careers:

- ⇒ Teachers should be supported in encouraging children to think about alternative possible futures.
- ⇒ Speakers should be invited to talk about their livelihood experiences in ways that make them 'real' for rural children.
- ⇒ When textbooks are revised, greater attention should be given to non-salaried livelihoods and prospective career opportunities that will be accessible to a larger number of rural children.

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#### INDIA

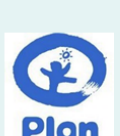
Dr Peggy Froerer, Brunel University

Dr Arshima Dost, Brunel University

Mr Muniv Shukla, Gram Mitra Samaj Sevi Sanstha, Chhattisgarh

#### LAOS

Dr Roy Huijsmans, ISS, Erasmus University



# The roles of rural teachers

**Teachers can be influential in shaping the aspirations of rural children, directly (by talking to them about possible future careers and lifestyles, both within and outside the classroom setting) and indirectly (as rare representatives of educated people in a rural setting). However, many teachers demonstrate little commitment to their charges and are frequently absent, in part because they lack conviction that they can make a difference in children's lives. Teachers need preparation, support and supervision to become better facilitators of learning, sources of information about potential career pathways and as embodied signifiers of education in a rural community.**

Primary school children in remote rural areas often say they want to become a teacher. Yet, for many who actually become teachers, it **represents a failure of their aspiration**. Across the three study contexts, teacher training colleges are often the most accessible option for secondary school graduates, benefiting from scholarships, lower entry requirements, and more places.



Rural schools are often poorly resourced. This Lesotho classroom doubles as a church

When asked why he became a teacher, one Lesotho teacher responded 'Because there was a shortage of jobs. There was nothing I could do.' Teaching is a job of last resort.

Teaching in rural areas is often particularly unpopular, in part because schools and accommodation lack the facilities of urban areas: electricity, running water, modern sanitation and mobile phone signals. Some teachers have a rural background but many (most of those in Lesotho and Laos) locate to the village, often after failing to secure jobs elsewhere. The unpopularity of rural teaching posts means many schools are short of qualified teachers, and consequently use temporary or volunteer teachers with lesser qualifications and salaries, and (particularly in smaller schools) multigrade teaching. In India, for instance, there may just be one teacher to teach Classes 1-5.



Two teachers absent from a rural Indian school, leaving one teacher to manage all five classes. The five classes are always taught in three groups: Class 1-2, Class 3-4, and Class 5.



## Teachers as facilitators of learning

Many teachers in rural schools fail to demonstrate real enthusiasm for, or commitment to, their role. This is most clearly evident in high levels of absenteeism. Rural teachers often spend considerable time travelling to meetings, collecting their pay and maintaining contact with distant family. Some absences are required of them: teachers in both India and Lesotho were sometimes called for training, leaving few (or no) teachers minding the school. Such excursions provide opportunities to remain away from school. The principal at one Lesotho primary school frequently visited the capital for reporting or on payday, combining this with visits to relatives (with the excuse that transport was infrequent), and returning several days later. In Laos, the schools typically started each new term a few days late because teachers had to travel back from family visits. Teachers also often left the village on Friday and returned on Monday, shortening the teaching week.

Teachers also devoted energies elsewhere in the rural environment. Some set up alternative, more desirable and/or more profitable livelihoods alongside their teaching jobs. The Indian research encountered teachers who provided rooms for rent, managed a road-side hotel, and operated a taxi service. The principal of one of the rural Lesotho schools employed several young men to look after her livestock, and some of the Lao teachers used their frequent trips between the village and the district centre to trade fish and forest products.



Teaching in rural Laos

The widespread lack of attentiveness to teaching was more overt in some contexts than others. In India, teachers openly mocked colleagues who worked until the end of the day when the headteacher had already left the premises. Overall however, teachers had little belief in the quality of the schools they taught in, or the prospects of the children. In Lesotho, community members commented critically on the teachers' failure to send their own children to the local school. 'All the teachers teaching there, none of them has their children attending there, they have all taken them to other schools.'

## Teachers as career advisors

The perceived poor quality of rural schools, alongside other forms of rural disadvantage, doubtless contributes to relatively poor learning outcomes. Teachers believe the students they teach are likely to fail educationally, and will thus be unable to secure a salaried job. Consequently, they are not only less motivated to teach but less likely to offer career guidance. Even in Lesotho, where textbooks are littered with depictions of different occupations and decision-making for the future is prominent in syllabuses, teachers give these little attention. They occasionally refer to jobs, but devote little energy to parts of the curriculum that are not examined. Some teachers themselves may have limited exposure to formal sector careers beyond teaching.

If teachers come to view schooling in relation to more wide-ranging futures, they might be more inclined and better able to advise and facilitate. Teachers do engage in diverse rural livelihood options, as noted above, and should be well placed to provide insight into these. In India, teachers said that they would be more motivated to teach if they knew it would help children to achieve their aspirations. If the purpose of education were reframed as preparation for more diverse futures, and teachers were encouraged to help children develop meaningful aspirations, motivation and engagement might improve among both teachers and students.

## Teachers as model educated persons



A class 4 girl in rural India painted herself as a madam (teacher) because she likes teaching.

It is not only through talking about career choices that teachers convey ideas about what education can lead to. Teachers also serve as models of the 'educated person'. A 14-year-old boy in Lesotho said he admired his primary school principal because she was living a good life, in a good house, and able to buy animals. In India, several primary children said they wanted to become teachers like their own sir or madam; most of the children wanted to grow up to own a home like the most colourful cement house in the village, which belonged to a family of teachers.

In Laos, Ms Tona, a 17-year-old Hmong secondary school student said two people inspired her: her uncle who was a district governor and the only Hmong and local teacher in her local primary school, because both had achieved more than others from her village. A Hmong father also admired the local Hmong teacher because he



A teacher's much-admired house in rural India

'has knowledge, dignity (*kiat*) and salary'.

In both Lesotho and Laos, however, most teachers were outsiders to the rural communities, and in Laos they were also of a different ethnic and linguistic group. In all three sites, outsider teachers often had family commitments elsewhere, and unless they married locally were unlikely to stay long or show commitment to the community. Some were placed in remote rural schools as punishment for poor performance or misbehaving. Unsurprisingly, outsider teachers were sometimes viewed with suspicion rather than as desirable role models. In an Indian school, parents complained that the headmaster came drunk to school. In one of the Lesotho villages they were accused of taking school lunch food to their own (non-resident) families and in the other,

two were sent to the chief to be disciplined for uttering insults. Lifestyle differences may also cause frictions. In rural India, female teachers may be criticised for remaining unmarried too long, or travelling alone through the forest.

## Training, supervising and supporting rural teachers

Given the roles expected of teachers in rural communities, the selection and training of teachers should be attentive not only to academic matters. Experience in rural classrooms and discussion of the challenges of rural schools would be valuable.

Teachers also wish for ongoing support and supervision after their training. In rural areas, particularly in Lesotho and India, this is often sparse. Teachers at one of the Lesotho schools complained they'd had no visit from a local resource teacher for over 5 years; they believed the teacher had died. In India, teachers, educational authorities, children and parents all raised lack of supervision as an issue. Possibilities may exist for greater use of technology to support rural teachers.

Infrequency of supervision means, however, that rural teachers and especially principals are more powerful than their urban counterparts. They are able to make decisions and interpret rules, and local communities are relatively less likely or able to challenge them. In Lesotho one school principal insisted she wouldn't implement the new government policy of 'automatic progression' to secondary school or from one grade to the next, but would continue to require children to pass end of year exams. In another of the Lesotho schools, teachers required children to wear uniforms, despite a government decree that they should not. Conversely, in one of the Laos schools, the teachers chose not to punish children who failed to wear uniform. Such relative autonomy might be used effectively to support the specific needs of rural children



Trainee teachers' in Chhattisgarh

In both Lesotho and Laos, incentives have been used to entice teachers to rural areas. In Laos higher salaries are paid to teachers in remote schools. Nonetheless, secondary school students in one of the villages explained that both ICT and Arts were omitted from the curriculum because there was no one to teach them. In Lesotho, benefits were offered in the past, for teachers teaching in remote rural areas. One school principal mentioned feeling motivated by a 'mountain benefit' of around M3100 which lasted for 2½ years, until 2014. Nominally, this was intended for transport and some of it for calling relatives.

Description	Bonus for multigrade teaching	Principal position	Poorest district
Base-Salary 100%	+25% of base (two classes)	+58,000LAK/month for diploma degree	+40%-50% of base
Bachelor: 1.6 million LAK	+50 % of base (three classes)	+80,000LAK/month for bachelor degree	
Diploma: 1.3-1.5 million LAK			
Certificate: 1.2 million LAK			

Teachers' salary structures in Laos



## Recommendations

To motivate teachers to become better facilitators of learning, sources of career information and representatives of education, there is a need for:

- ⇒ Teacher education that challenges the narrative that schooling is about academic success and salaried jobs
- ⇒ A curriculum more relevant to rural children, in which they are able to demonstrate success (and are therefore seen as 'worth teaching')
- ⇒ Teacher education that addresses the roles, challenges and expectations of rural teachers
- ⇒ Teacher mentoring (from peers or trainers) that provides ongoing support and capacity building of rural teachers, including through the use of mobile apps and other technology.

## 2 How are the aspirations of young people living in remote rural areas produced in relation to both schooling and their wider social, economic and cultural contexts?

The aspirations young people express are distinctly contextual. Whether they are asked at home or at school has a bearing on the answer, as does whether there are other adults or children present, and their caste, ethnic or religious affiliation. Aspects of what is learned or experienced in school emerge when talking to young people in the research in the village, but experience in the home and community is important too. While the aspirations expressed in school tend to be idealised, those referred to in the village are sometimes more concrete. Aspirations are often formed collectively, for instance when children discuss their future careers in groups or when they converse at home. Families may be explicit about what is or isn't appropriate for their children, sometimes referring to what is customary in the community.

**Parents** play a particularly significant role. In Lesotho, parents generally have some clear views on their children's futures. They may want them to have employment, such as working as a teacher, or not want them to work in South Africa, where the fruit plantations are viewed as particularly dangerous. However, it should be emphasised that many parents in Lesotho say they do not want to make career decisions for their children, and that they have moved on from the past when this was common practice.

Education is valued highly in the Lesotho communities, where it is said that 'education is life' or a 'light' (*thuto ke leseli*) that can take you to places and can show you what to do. Sometimes parents explain that education can help children acquire money in the future. Many parents want their children to go to school elsewhere than the village, in Maseru or another town, or to English medium schools where the quality of education is perceived to be better, particularly as it is no longer possible to rely on livestock farming.

Education is seldom seen as the only requirement for a good future. Some parents mention that the education system does not help their children start a business, for instance in agriculture. Rather, it divorces them from the environment and teaches them skills that are abstract such as the components of a plant or the planets of the solar system. Although rural people are enthusiastic about schooling, schooling is often less positive about rural life. [\[See Briefing 4: Rural children's access to the content of education.\]](#) There is a strong perception that idleness is problematic and that hard work, for instance through agriculture, is a way of achieving. Moreover, respect is considered crucial, as a young Lesotho teacher remarked: 'those who do not respect, they end up being thieves'.

In the Indian case study villages, most parents do not talk to their children about school or their future, particularly if they themselves are not educated. Few parents sit and help their children to dedicate time to homework, or help them read and write. Parents generally leave it to their children to decide what they want to do and how to do it. If children do not engage successfully or systematically with education, then their parents view them as lazy, or uninterested in doing well in their studies.

Young people's **economic context** shapes both their aspirations and the ways in which they (are able to) engage with schooling. Market forces have infiltrated even remote rural places, making

consumer goods more available than in the past. Children aspire to such goods, and sometimes this provides motivation to attain employment with a high income to be able to purchase a car, a phone or an impressive house. Changing local economic contexts also shape ideas about the future livelihoods that might be possible, and the extent to which they will be able to support a desirable lifestyle. Customary livelihoods may, for instance, be constrained by insufficient agricultural land or diminishing markets, and thus become unappealing. Conversely, new opportunities arise. In Laos, for example, railway construction has brought large numbers of Chinese workers who are perceived as a market for many types of business. Young people also have opportunities to migrate for work that does not necessarily require education. For young people in Lesotho, such opportunities include domestic work (in other villages, in town or across the border in South Africa) as well as work on fruit and vegetable plantations. In India, new forms of labour migration (including borewell construction) have been introduced in recent years, creating different livelihood and income-generation opportunities for (mainly) young men.

In terms of the impact of the economic context on educational engagement, **widespread poverty** in rural areas means that parents have fewer means to support their children through education than their urban peers. Even if schooling is formally free of charge, there is still a cost. Stationery, books and school uniforms may need to be

#### When having money leads to ending school

Although the main problem is one of lack of funds, having money may also open up other life options that are incompatible with schooling. When asked why his (male) friends had left school, and 17-year-old secondary 4 student in Laos explained: 'Because they have money, so they got married'

purchased. In Laos, the widespread practice of giving children petty cash to buy snacks on the way to school and the expectation to buy presents for teachers at the end of the school year and for teacher's day also contribute to the cost of education. Attending school might also come with opportunity costs in terms of foregone income or contributions to the domestic economy. Lastly, economic constraints mean that the impoverished rural home is hardly a conducive space for studying. It is not designed for studying or storing books and notebooks and without access to electricity it is difficult to finish school work after dark.

For rural households, the cost of education increases significantly when children have to relocate for furthering their education, which may be necessary for post-primary schooling. In addition to transport costs, students who cannot stay with relatives have to pay for board and lodging when studying away from home. Current scholarship schemes in Laos and India tend to be selective and only support the most promising rural students to further their studies beyond the village. In Lesotho, secondary education is generally dependent on family resources, other than for those deemed particularly in need, such as double-orphaned children. Aspirations to secondary education, or to future employment that requires this, may be tempered by recognition of an economic barrier. Moreover, cash-constrained rural parents may be forced to decide which children to support in studying beyond the village school. These decisions may reflect considerations of both gender and birth order.

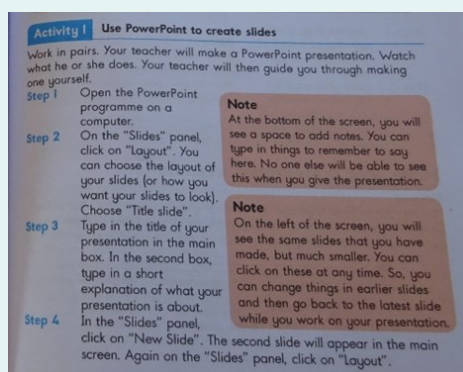
Despite a gradual process of rural change, for many rural households farming remains an important pillar of **rural livelihoods**. This is especially true in remote rural settings in which only very few households can rely solely on non-farm sources of incomes. A key feature of peasant households is

# Rural children's access to the content of education

The content of education is an obstacle in rural children's learning. The subject matter and the way in which it is taught render learning more abstract for rural children. The language of education is often different from rural children's home language. Rural life is underrepresented in textbooks, and the partial depictions of village life that have made it into textbooks are often out of sync with children's lived reality. The content of education must be revisited to stimulate children to envisage the relevance of schooling for current and future rural lives.

Compared to their urban peers, rural children's lives are **more distant from the content of education**. This includes the subject matter featuring in the curriculum as well as the context in which this is presented. For example, in Lesotho the curriculum prescribes teaching the game of chess and teaching about computers. Without ever having seen a chessboard or computer such lessons become highly abstract experiences, reduced to talking about a picture of a computer.

How to create slides in power point (from Grade 6, Scientific and Technological, Lesotho)



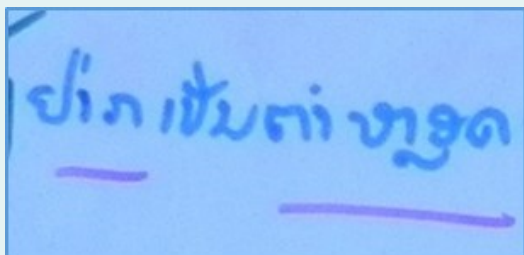
Going to the funfair (from Primary 1 The World Around Us, Laos)

Similarly, a Lao primary textbook includes a picture of a funfair – something that children in remote rural areas are unlikely to have seen. When asked, they thought the picture showed parents bringing their children to school. In the Indian context textbooks include examples of occupations rural children have never heard of, depict images of people that dress in very different ways from what is common in remote rural areas and include pictures of a wide range of household items that are not found in the average rural household.

Subject matter that is in principle not place-specific, such as mathematics, is made unnecessarily abstract because it is presented in a context that privileges the urban student. For example, a maths exercise asked children to calculate the expenses of driving a car from the Lao capital of Vientiane to the zoo in the village of *Baan Keun*. This is a popular weekend trip for the Vientiane middle-class but in a classroom in northern rural Laos very few children had ever heard of *Baan Keun* or the concept of a zoo. These examples show that learning is often unnecessarily more abstract for rural children. Importantly, teachers have the capacity to either reinforce or reduce these abstractions. For example, rather than having students copy from the blackboard the story about the car trip to *Baan Keun*, the teacher could easily have placed the maths exercise in a relevant context by asking students to propose a destination and a purpose for a trip in the district by motorbike. This would have given students an active role in their own learning and would have put the subject matter in a concrete context to which rural students can easily relate.

**Language** is both a subject and an important medium through which learning takes place. If the language of school, or the ways in which it is used, differs substantially from the language of the home this puts students at a twofold disadvantage. First, the absence of teaching the mother tongue is a loss in its own right in both educational terms and in terms of other opportunities. Second, it also means that these children have a weaker basis to acquire subsequent languages. In Lesotho, many of the textbooks are in English. Although parents and children aspire to learn English, the English medium makes the textbooks less accessible for both students and teachers. Teachers are encouraged to teach in English from grade 4 and upwards but rarely do so in practice. The teachers rarely speak English amongst themselves and mainly give orders in English. In Laos, the textbooks are written in the Lao language. This poses a real problem for students whose mother tongue is classified as belonging to an entirely different language family than Lao. This is true for Hmong speakers for example (Hmong-Mien vs Tai-Kadai language group). In the Indian context, the gap between Hindi as the language of the textbook and Chhattisgarhi or Chetriboli as a mother tongue creates similar challenges for students in remote rural areas. A stark drop is evident in learning maths, science or social science when children whose families can afford private schooling shift from a Hindi-medium state primary school to an English-medium middle school.

A gap between the language of the school and the language of the home may also lead to particular spelling problems persisting even when children have mastered becoming literate in the school language. Since the Lao language is spelled phonetically and reading and writing is taught in this way, ethnic Khmu and Hmong students make many typical spelling errors because they pronounce Lao words with an ethnic accent yet are taught to spell phonetically (see image).



Two spelling errors (underlined) in the short sentence '[I] want to be a police officer'



Hmong script: acquired only outside school

Since schools do not teach ethnic languages, the potential that comes with being literate in the ethnic mother tongue in addition to the national language remains unrealised. For example, unlike the Lao language, the Hmong language is Romanised (see image). Given the large global Hmong diaspora there are plenty of songs, films and also educational material available online in Hmong. For those Hmong people who are literate in their own language, this significantly increases their exposure to life and possibilities beyond the village. Yet, learning to read and write in Hmong is something children must do themselves. The Lao education system does not support it even though the teachers interviewed agreed that students who could read and write in Hmong usually also do well in English language (which is taught as a second language) and had more opportunities in the labour market (e.g. working for INGOs with Hmong communities).



On the whole **rural life is underrepresented** in education, and where it is depicted, it is not necessarily familiar to all rural children. Rural lives differ between geographical regions, with distinctive livelihood patterns that are not shared nationally. Rural diversity is poorly reflected in textbooks. For example, a lesson in a Lao textbook is entitled ‘occupations of villagers’. All farm work depicted is situated in lowland rural spaces predominantly inhabited by ethnic Lao people. This lesson on ‘rural occupations’ thus excludes agricultural activities relevant to ethnic populations residing in rural upland locations (see image below), such as swidden cultivation, dry rice production and the collection of non-timber forest products.



‘Occupations of villagers’




Where national education systems seek to be inclusive in their representations of rural life by attending to differences in ethnicity, caste and religion, this easily leads to stereotypical and essentialised representations of rural diversity. For example, in the Lao context there are close to fifty officially recognised ethnic groups. In the textbooks these are reduced to just three groups (Khmu, Lao and Hmong). Moreover, ethnicity is represented through traditional dress that children (and their parents) only wear on special occasions. It is typically girls, and rarely boys, that are used to represent ethnic diversity – which maps onto a larger Lao national discourse in which women are given the responsibility of protecting ‘fine culture’.

In instances in which the rural is realistically depicted, it is done in order to have students reflect on rural problems which are often associated with the livelihoods of households in remote rural settings. For example, this Lesotho textbook depicts a realistic image of a rural site yet one of the questions ask students to mention the causes of soil damage, thereby contributing to the stigmatisation of pastoral livelihoods.

Despite the limitations in attempts at diversity in the representation of rurality in rural textbooks even such partial and stereotypical attempts may be better than nothing. For example, when discussing a lesson in a primary 1 textbook in Laos that featured an ethnic Lao girl and her family and an ethnic Hmong girl and her family, the Hmong students that participated in the research quickly remembered the name of the ethnic Hmong girl but had forgotten the details of the ethnic Lao girl. In the Indian context, concrete examples of villagers from different parts of the state or country, conveying the diversity of an ethnically rich nation, are missing.



## Recommendations

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- ⇒ Textbooks and curricula could illustrate ideas and concepts through concrete examples that are familiar to rural students
  - ⇒ More varied and authentic representations of rural life would assist children to relate their education to their own current and future lives
  - ⇒ Greater use of children's home languages in school would likewise make schooling more accessible and appear more relevant to futures in that don't revolve around salaried employment
  - ⇒ (Aspiring) rural teachers should be encouraged to work more flexibly with the standard content and adapt it more to the realities of remote rural context in terms of enforcement of school uniform policies, classroom language, adapting textbook examples, or merely engaging rural students in exercises that stimulate them to identify how their own lives relate to textbook representations

that the household is a site of production which depends on unpaid family labour – including that of young members of the household. This affects both the aspirations and educational engagement of young people.

The table below indicates that student absenteeism is a common feature of rural schooling in Laos. Rates of absenteeism are especially high on Mondays and Fridays. This reflects an effort of at least some rural parents to combine swidden cultivation with the schooling of their children. They extend the weekend and take their children with them to work in distant fields and ensure their children are in the village and attend school on mid-week days. Note, too, the gendered pattern of student absenteeism.

**Student absenteeism in a primary school in remote rural Laos**

	15 March, Wednesday	16 March, Thursday	17 March, Friday
Grade 1	5 absentees (m/f: 3/2)	6 absentees (m/f: 2/4)	11 absentees (m/f: 3/8)
Grade 2	4 absentees (m/f: 2/2)	None	3 absentees (m/f: 2/1)
Grade 3	5 absentees (m/f: 1/4)	5 absentees (m/f: 3/2)	8 absentees (m/f: 1/7)
Grade 4	None	None	1 absentee (m/f: 1/0)
Grade 5	None	None	1 absentee (m/f: 1/0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>14 (m/f: 6/8)</b>	<b>11 (m/f: 5/6)</b>	<b>24 (m/f: 8/16)</b>

The expectation that children contribute to domestic work and farm work is a major reason for frequent student absenteeism. Indeed, when asked how parents support their children in their studies, a common answer among Lao children was ‘by not letting me work on the farm so that I have time to study’. A similar situation prevails in India, where seasonal agricultural demands (harvesting rice, collecting non-timber forest products, or looking after livestock) impact on

**Girls’ role in domestic work**

‘I often keep one daughter [8 years, Primary 2] at home for looking after her younger siblings when I am working in the fields...I wish for all my children to complete 12 years of education...but I am not sure I will be able to do so [financially]’ (30 year old father of six children, Laos)

children’s school attendance and ability to engage effectively with their school work.

A broader problem in Laos and Lesotho is the friction between the location of the rural school and the mobile nature of key livelihood activities: herding in rural Lesotho and swidden cultivation in rural Laos. Herding is performed by young men and requires attention to livestock throughout the hours of daylight. In summer it also involves staying away from

the village in cattle posts in the mountains. This work is difficult to combine with regular school attendance.

In Laos, school and swidden cultivation represent different development pathways that are at odds. The Lao government follows a development policy in which it relocates people to larger villages in roadside locations where basic social services are provided – most notably primary schools. In addition, swidden cultivation is heavily policed as it is seen as causing environmental degradation. Yet, it remains the mainstay of ethnic populations in remote rural Laos. In the absence of alternative livelihoods, many of the ethnic Khmu and ethnic Hmong people in the Lao study sites continue to rely on their swidden fields which are often at several hours walking distance (if not more) from the village to which they have been relocated. This conflict between government’s development aspirations and villagers’ livelihoods means villagers have to choose between sending their children to school and maintaining their rural livelihood. The consequences are most noticeable in the early years of primary school. Parents cannot leave their young children alone in the village while they are away in their fields, leading to late enrolment especially for first born children.

The conflict between national-level aspirations for development that shape the form and content of the provisioning of education, and the realities of rural life in the upland spaces of Southeast Asia render schooling a highly ambivalent project for rural villagers of various ethnic groups (see Christie 2015).

Whereas in urban areas of the case study countries, single adulthood is not uncommon, the rural children and youth we have worked with generally expect to get married, even if some express resistance to the idea. Children and youth are very conscious of the relation between **marriage** and schooling. For example, in rural Laos both young men and young women expect to get married and have children in the future, yet they express the aim of first finishing their education and only get married thereafter. This reflects an awareness that once married, the time for studying has passed. Interviews with parents show that parents expect their children to marry but also hope that they first complete their education. Despite these stated ambitions, early marriage remains very common in rural Laos and often arises from romantic relationships and affairs started by young people themselves. In case of pregnancy, parents or parents-in-law might exert pressure on young people to get married, yet the research also discovered cases in which young people got married despite wishes of their parents that they should first complete their studies.

#### Alienating children from their parents’

Lao textbooks include exercises that attribute environmental degradation to the practice of swidden cultivation. Students are then expected to identify the main livelihood activity of the parents as contributing to environmental degradation. Another exercise asks students to reflect on the practice of swidden cultivation with the question ‘what do you think its effects will be on human beings and the environment?’

In rural Lesotho, young people's discussion on marriage were more gendered. Girls would speak firmly of not wanting to get married prior to finishing school and describe marriage as a 'struggle'. Some girls were concerned about the manual labour that would be expected of them in their in-laws' household. Others saw childrearing as the problem. One girl, for instance, explained 'a child would set you backwards' (*ngoana o khutlisetsa morao*), by preventing her from going to school, getting a job and escaping poverty. Some boys on the other hand were looking forward to getting married after finishing school, arguing that having a wife would release them from many domestic duties.

In rural India, girls and boys are resigned to the inevitability of marriage. In the past, girls' education was likely to be curtailed because of marriage, which even a decade ago was

typically arranged to take place a year or two after the completion of primary school. Nowadays, however, girls are increasingly permitted to finish their education (e.g., to study until they 'fail', or even until Class 10 or 12), before their marriages are arranged. Boys' marriages also take place after their education is completed, though on average their marriages occur 2-4 years after their female peers.

### Girls' talk of school and marriage

Since marriage during the teenage years is common in rural Laos school going youth will friends who are already married leading to discussions about schooling and marriage as the interview excerpt with a female student in secondary 3:

*I: Friends who married and have a family, do they tell you anything about it?*

*R: Some do, some don't*

*I: What do they say?*

*R: Some have a good married life, they say good things about marriage. Some people don't have a good married life, they would say do not marry yet. They also say wait till you have a good life then marry because if you are married, you will have a difficult life with just working in the farm.*

*I: How about the ones who have a good life, what do they say to you?*

*R: They tell me to complete my education and have a job that is the way I will have a good life and not be poor.*

### School-community relations

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. In some contexts, community members have a formal role in the governance of schools, albeit this can cause friction rather than harmony. 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. In Lesotho, it was apparently more common in the past for community members to visit schools to teach students about traditional dances or handicrafts. This might require some form of remuneration to be successful and sustainable. Local communities might also represent valuable resources for education that is more relevant to rural life, as well as providing mentors from within the community. Children could be asked to survey the resources of their communities, to consider ways of generating new, more productive livelihoods that would be



of benefit to themselves and others. Often, though, schools create boundaries between spaces of learning and spaces of livelihood. Lesotho's ban on rural attire has been mentioned above. According to teachers at one Lesotho school, dressing in uniform makes children think differently.

### 3 How do young people's aspirations shape their educational engagement and learning outcomes?

One might expect that young people with well-developed aspirations will be more motivated, but also have a clearer sense of what they need to achieve and where to place their energies, as well as being better prepared to face life beyond school. However, it is very difficult to know young people's aspirations, and how firmly or consistently held they are, and people's retrospective accounts of their career pathways are notoriously unreliable, infused as they are by post-hoc rationalisation. It is thus extremely **difficult to assess** how far aspirations drive educational engagement, let alone learning outcomes. Our research has sought to understand whether children's professed aspirations are sufficiently deeply held to inspire them to put significant effort into education. It is also important to ask whether, if they do exert themselves, the education they experience is of the quality necessary to achieve the learning outcomes required to pursue their aspirations.

The relationship between effort and future outcome is not universally recognised. As noted earlier in this report, some religious and cultural traditions are more inclined than others to view success as something to be achieved through effort. If the future is viewed as arbitrary and related to luck or to witchcraft, they may be less inclined to exert effort. Nonetheless, some young people certainly **talk about being motivated to work hard or pay attention** because of the potential rewards. In Lesotho, children talk of working hard in school (*ho sebeta ka thata ku shuri*), but in India the verb 'work' tends to be restricted to manual work and in Laos both children and adults talk about 'paying attention' in school, which suggests a less active engagement. In any case, how fully children really commit themselves, and whether what they perceive as effort has the potential to bring success is open to question. Young people's sense of 'working hard' or 'paying attention' may not equate to effective learning.

Aspiration is sometimes used **instrumentally** to motivate children to engage with education. In Laos, while teachers say they do not encourage children at primary school to plan for the future (they are not yet in a position to do so), they do encourage them to dream. Giving children a dream – such as becoming a nurse – is a way to keep them attending school. In Lesotho, reference to aspiration is used to discipline: children are told 'if you keep on behaving the way that you are doing you will never become a teacher/policeman/soldier'.

The significance of aspiration to children's motivation is more apparent if examined from the perspective of **changing aspirations** over time, and ultimately decisions to drop out of school. As they grow older, children become aware of the distance (physical, social, in status) between themselves and the urban / foreign other. What seemed to be an attractive future in childhood, for many children appears more rather than less distant as they grow older. In India, particularly, young people clearly revised their job aspirations as they progressed through school, particularly as they came to recognise their own abilities in relation to their classmates. As they came to aspire to local artisanal livelihoods rather than urban professions, for example, education seemed less vital to their lives.

Children **drop out** for various reasons. Across the three settings, young people cited a range of similar reasons. The following were specified in Lesotho: lack of money for secondary fees, due to not liking teachers for various reasons, wanting to go to initiation school, pregnancy (mostly in secondary school), failure of exams (particularly in previous years in Lesotho when these were a barrier to progression), and the sense that they are unlikely to achieve what they hope for. Opportunities to earn an income by herding, or by migrating to work on apple plantations in South Africa offer an alternative and more accessible aspiration, which does not require continued schooling. Some young people who have dropped out express a desire to go back to school, in order to secure a salaried job, but this is relatively unusual.

In part, disengagement with education reflects a combination of diminishing aspiration and loss of focus. In India, the 16-18 years still wanted to make their parents proud, but faced many distractions in the village, and little discipline, in Lesotho, some children expressed appreciation for the discipline and physical punishment that teachers meted out to them: they said it helps them to study hard and achieve their aspirations. Aspiration without discipline was viewed as insufficient. Others, conversely, were discouraged by frequent punishments.

Many young people saw a choice of two possible futures: salaried work as a teacher, nurse, soldier or a police officer, or the rural struggle of their parents' generation, perhaps in more challenging circumstances. For those few Indian youth who reach the end of 10+2 years of education, many find that what they learn at school does not materialise into opportunities. Young people experience *Udasinta* – deep sadness – and refer to shattered dreams. There are a few exceptions, who serve to mould the aspirations of the younger generation, but for the majority, aspirations begin abstract, and remain abstract.

Attending school on a day to day basis may be the outcome of much shorter-term aspirations. Schools in all three countries in theory had school feeding programmes, though in Laos where the community was meant to provide the labour on a voluntary basis, the food supplied remained in storage. In both Lesotho and India, however, the prospect of free hot food at lunch time sometimes motivated children to go to school. In Lesotho, one parent said their motivation for sending children to school was fear of prosecution, rather than a long-term aspiration.

## Recommendations

**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 abstract and 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.

Changes are needed to divert aspirations from a limited range of superficially desired, and for most unattainable, formal careers (nurse, teacher, police, soldier) and encourage the idea that school can prepare young people for alternative (rural) livelihoods. This must involve the entire education system, most notably education policy, the design and development of textbooks and curricula, and in teacher education (pre- and in-service). Given that aspirations are produced relationally, interventions should target the relationships between school and community, teachers and learners.

Changes should focus in particular on the following objectives:

- **Encourage young people to develop aspirations that are diverse, socially useful, matched to their aptitudes and interests, and achievable**

Curricula, textbooks and teachers have a role to play in better enabling all children to envisage futures for themselves that are attractive, inspiring and potentially accessible and that education can help them achieve. Syllabuses should move away from the near-exclusive focus on a narrow range of salaried jobs, and given greater emphasis to diverse futures that children can relate to (or have practical access to) and view as worth working toward. Changes in the formal curriculum alone have limited impact, given the role played by teachers (particularly in rural areas) and children's own expectations (shaped by their families and communities etc). Support and training for teachers is therefore crucial.

- **Encourage creativity, imagination and versatility in relation to future livelihoods and roles.**

Pedagogy in rural schools tends to emphasise rote learning for exams, which may have some value for the few who will actually gain educational qualifications, but does little to encourage children to think creatively and respond flexibly to possibilities. This is not simply about encouraging entrepreneurship, but being able to think about, access and respond to information.

- **Provide better information about (and opportunities of engagement with) diverse livelihood possibilities (both conventional and alternative), what they entail and how to attain them.**

If children were aware of more varied possibilities, they would not only be able to make better informed decisions, but they might see greater value in education and be inspired to engage more proactively with their studies. Teachers themselves may fail to see non-salaried work as worthwhile and may feel they lack knowledge of any occupations apart from their own. There is clearly then a need for teachers to be trained and resources to be provided. Much is achievable within the local community. As aspirations are produced relationally, engaging parents and community members in education about future livelihoods has potential to shape children's aspirations more than abstract descriptions in textbooks. Community members can also be encouraged and supported to take a more active role in the learning process including through discussions, demonstrations, mentoring, and developing young people's skills.

- **Develop young people's knowledge and skills so that they are better placed to achieve a sense of success.**

Enabling young people to develop achievable aspirations cannot be separated from providing the education needed to achieve these. If children do not learn skills in school that could be implemented in a particular livelihood, they are less likely to consider that livelihood as a viable/useful opportunity for the future, or to engage with schooling in order to achieve it. This implies that knowledge and skills relevant to (rural) livelihoods need to appear on the curriculum and in textbooks, that time and resources need to be made available for them in school, and that they need to be taught well. With better development of relevant knowledge and skills, children could move from school into meaningful and productive occupations and feel that they have achieved something worthwhile through the years that they have devoted to education.

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