

# Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings

An ESRC-DFID-funded collaborative research project (ES/N01037X/1)

## Rural children's access to the content of education

September 2018

Policy Brief

### The research

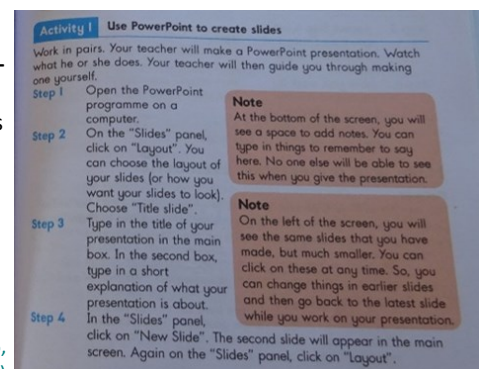


The findings reported here are based on a 2-year research project that explores connections between education systems and young people's aspirations in remote rural areas of Lesotho, India and Laos. In each of the three countries, ethnographic research was conducted in two rural communities and their local primary schools over a nine-month period in 2017.

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.

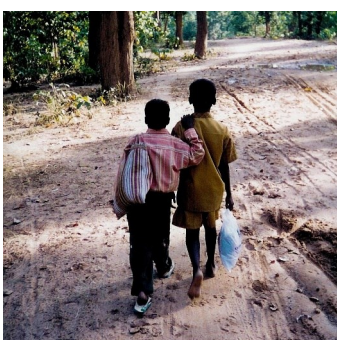
How to create slides in power point (from Grade 6, Scientific and Technological, Lesotho)



Going to the funfair (from *Moral Education, Primary 1, Laos*)

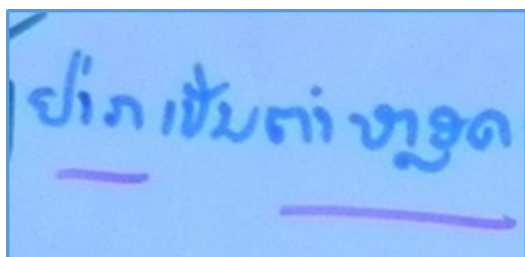
Similarly, a Lao primary textbook includes a picture of a funfair – something that children in remote rural areas are unlikely to have seen. When asked, they thought the picture showed parents bringing their children to school. In the Indian context textbooks include examples of occupations rural children 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 ethnic language 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 ethnic language 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 the language of the home 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).



Hmong script: acquired only outside school

Since schools do not teach ethnic languages, the potential that comes with being literate in such languages 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).

In Lesotho, English is introduced progressively through primary education, with teaching expected to be in English from Grade 4 onward. In practice, teachers (who are not always comfortable speaking English themselves) use Sesotho to explain anything beyond simple commands, but textbooks are written predominantly in English. This is more of a challenge to rural children, who have little exposure to English outside school, compared to their urban peers. Yet English is viewed as a potential key to salaried employment. Some of the wealthier rural parents are critical of the limited use of English in their local schools and elect to send their children instead to private 'English medium' schools in urban areas.

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





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 such as swidden cultivation, dry rice production and the collection of non-timber forest products.



‘Occupations of villagers’ (from *The World Around Us*, Primary 2, Laos)



Depiction of ethnic diversity (from *Moral Education*, Primary 4, Laos)

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 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.

(From *Thuto eat emo likolong tsa mathomo [Primary school agriculture]*, Grade 3, Lesotho)



## Recommendations

- ⇒ 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 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

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