

# Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings

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

## The roles of rural teachers

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 .

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 in remote rural settings 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 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.

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.



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



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.

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.'



Teaching in rural Laos

## 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

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



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





A teacher's much-admired house in rural India

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 '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 district 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 and they may receive an additional monthly bonus for multi-grade teaching. 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.

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