

Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings

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

The representation of occupations in school

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 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 *The World Around Us*, Primary 4, Laos)

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 *Personal, Spiritual and Social*, Grade 6, Lesotho). 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)

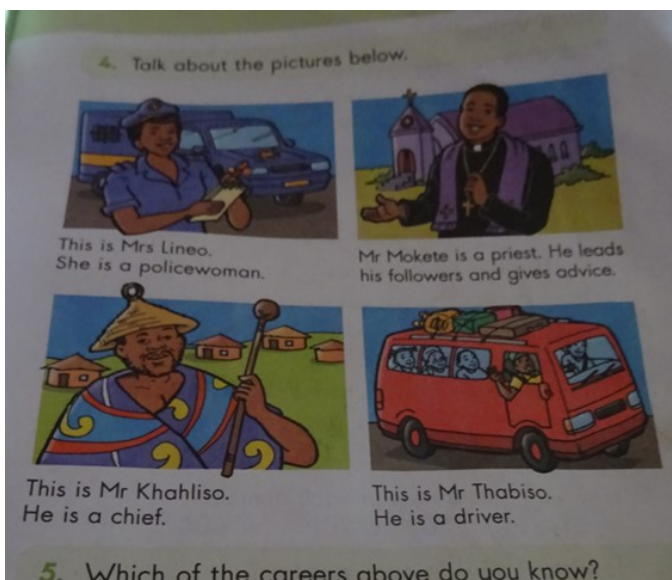
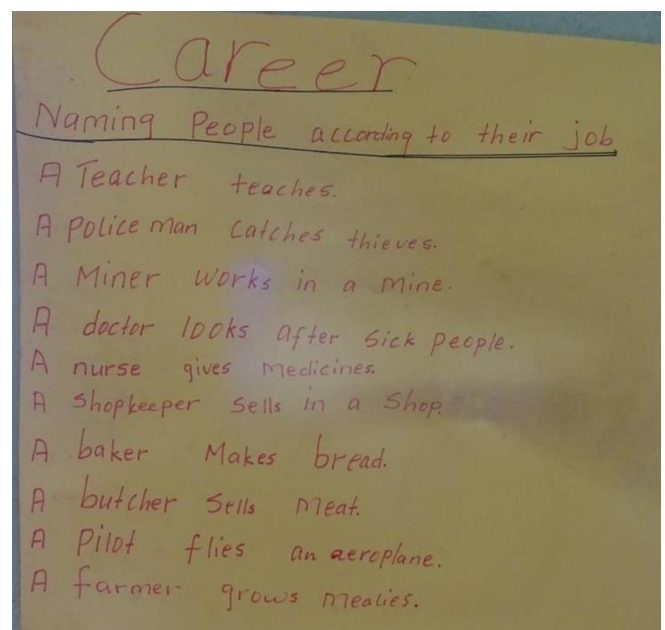


Primary school girl's painting, Chhattisgarh

	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

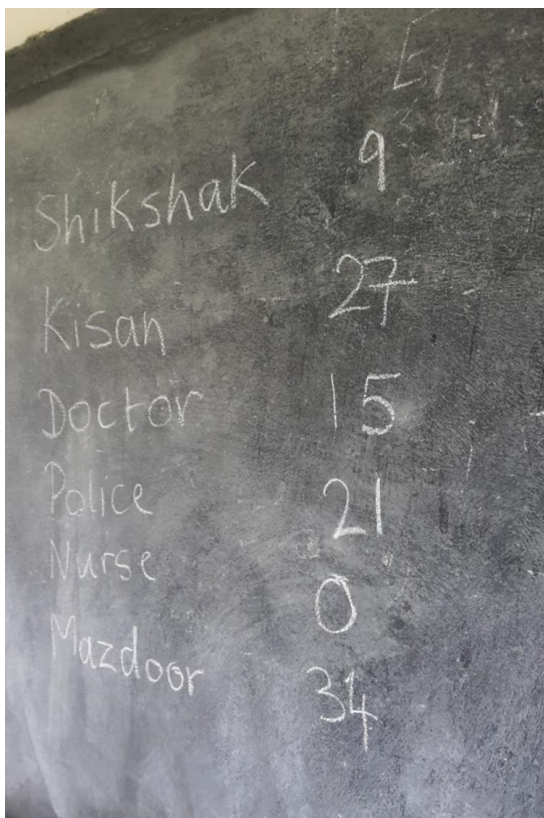
Aspirations expressed by a group of Primary 3, 4 and 5 children (aged 9-13) in rural Laos

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.



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 how to practise 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.



A female chief from: Moral Education, Primary 5, Laos

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 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.

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