

Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings

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

Innovating in rural 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.



Lesotho's new 'Integrated Curriculum', introduced in 2009, aims to radically overhaul both content and pedagogy for the first 10 years of school. This provides a useful case study as the reforms seek to address some of the challenges that we have identified through our research in rural Laos and India, as well as Lesotho. 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. The research points to useful lessons for future curricular reform in India, Laos and elsewhere.

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

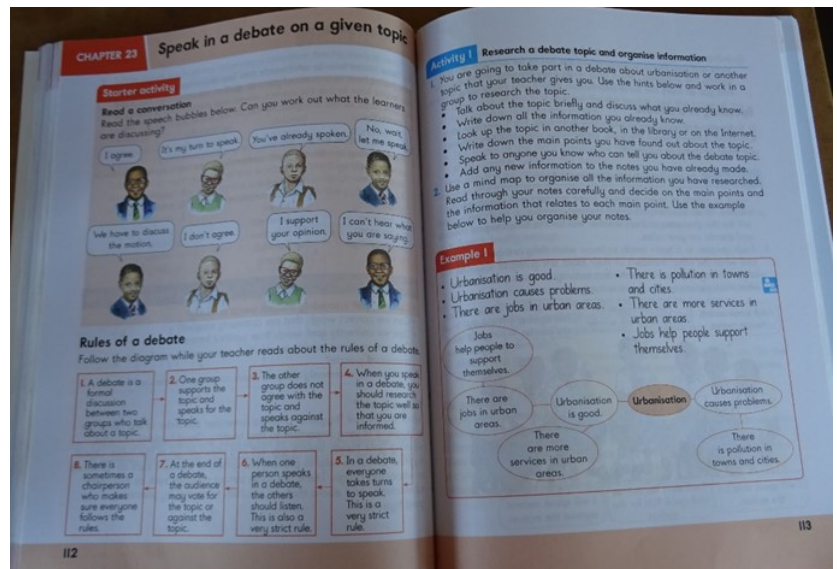
(science, geography, agricultural science, technical subjects – compulsory subject science)

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.



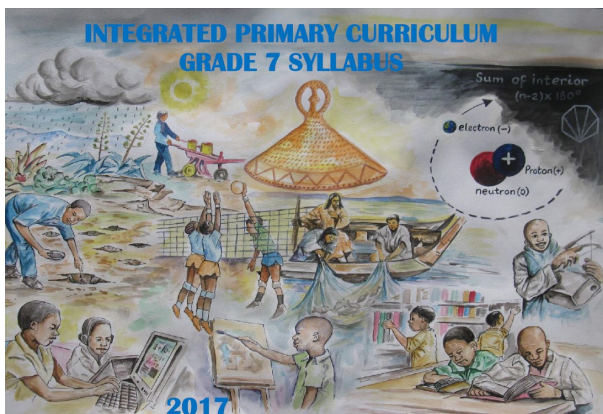
Assessment

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.

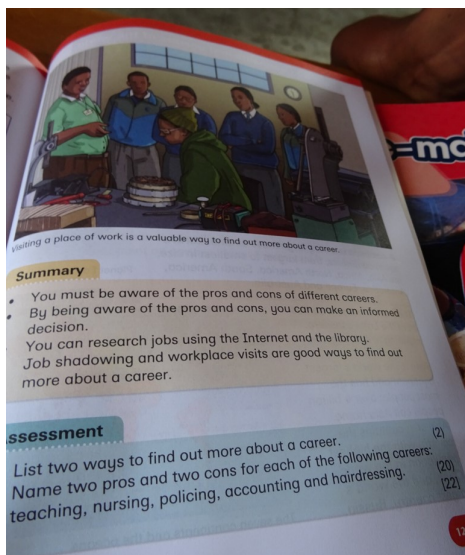
In the absence of frequent monitoring and with relatively little training or preparation, compounded by multigrade teaching, it is perhaps unsurprising that rural schools are not fully implementing the new curriculum.

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.

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

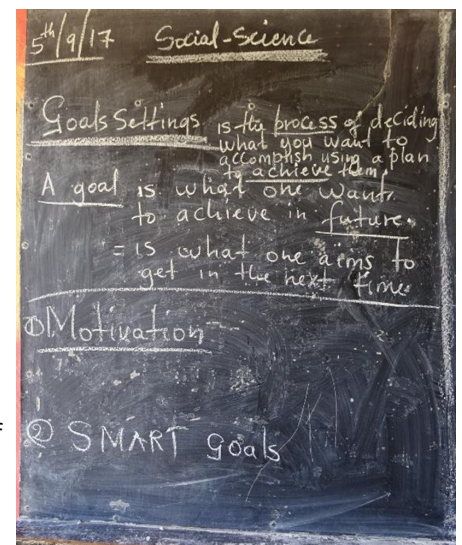
The neoliberal idea that individuals are **agents of their own futures**, determining and responsible for their own destiny (in contrast to modernist view – becoming functionaries of state with secure long-term employment). This can be risky to young people's wellbeing as it also implies that failure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

The teacher developed from this a lesson 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.

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

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.

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.

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

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Research jointly supported by the ESRC and DFID