

Educating 'surplus population': uses and abuses of aspiration in the rural peripheries of a globalising world

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Increasing school enrolment has been a focus of investment, even in remote rural areas whose populations are surplus to the requirements of the global economy. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in primary schools and their neighbouring communities in rural areas of Lesotho, India and Laos, we explore how young people, their parents and teachers experience schooling in places where the prospects of incorporation into professional employment (or any well rewarded economic activity) are slim. We show how schooling uses aspiration, holding out a promise of a 'better future' remote from the lives of rural children. However, children's attachment to such promises is tenuous, boosted yet troubled by the small minority who defy the odds and succeed. We question why education systems continue to promote occupational aspirations that are unattainable by most, and why donors and governments invest so heavily in increasing human capital that cannot be absorbed.

Keywords: schooling, aspiration, surplus population, Lesotho, India, Laos

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This paper is situated in relation to two trends that are shaping the lives of people in remote rural areas of the global south. Firstly, rural areas are increasingly home to 'surplus population': people superfluous to the requirements of the global economy (Li 2010). Many rural people are unable to sustain themselves in environments rendered hostile by climate change or alienated from land that is claimed for other purposes by governments or put to 'more productive' – but low labour intensity – use by global corporations. Capital has little alternative use for them, and many face lives of unemployment or underemployment. Policy responses to surplus populations differ. Depending on social forces, they may, in Li's terms, be 'let die' under governments that have little concern, or 'made live' through, for instance, investment in social safety nets and universal health care.

The second global trend is the dramatic expansion of basic education. Even in the remotest places, most children now spend a few years attending school. The provision of education to 'surplus populations' cannot be explained in the same way as the provision of health care or social protection. Schooling is not primarily about sustaining life in the present but preparing children for a future. The actors funding free primary education (notably the World Bank) speak of investing in human capital. Moreover, they use the promise of a 'better future' to inspire and mobilise children, families and national governments, despite little evidence that the futures they propose are attainable (Jakimow 2016).

The paper focuses on the contradictions between the promises that increasingly globalised education ostensibly offers to rural youth and the constrained yet dynamic contexts in which they are growing up. Drawing on ethnographic research undertaken in rural schools and their neighbouring communities, we explore how education is delivered to and experienced by children in remote rural areas of three very different lower middle-income countries: India, Laos and Lesotho. In all three, children are encouraged at school to aspire to a future in formal employment. They express the 'correct' motivations, but few appear to believe the promise held out to them.

We begin by outlining how rural populations are being rendered 'surplus' through economic and political change, and ways in which policy communities are responding. We explore contemporary global processes through which education increasingly figures in future making for rural youth, and the role played in this by promoting aspiration. We introduce our three research settings and the research that was undertaken and then focus on three aspects: the ways in which education in these settings puts forward promises of particular futures; the limited conviction with which most children and their teachers subscribe to these promised futures; and the effects of the confounding complication that a small minority of rural children do secure the futures held out by education. The paper concludes by considering why it is that education systems push aspiration and why governments and donors support education in contexts where its overt aims are largely unattainable.

The global periphery and surplus population

Remote rural areas are important frontiers of the global economy and are transforming rapidly. Mobile connectivity is offering new exposure to modern lifestyles, while opportunities to pursue viable agrarian livelihoods are in many places diminishing. Environmental change is challenging the sustainability of traditional rural livelihoods. Where rural areas are incorporated into national, regional and global economies, rural dwellers are often alienated from land and resources. Land is put to 'more productive' use, but rural labour is surplus to requirement.

The idea of a growing worldwide 'surplus population' has been advanced by, among others, Li (2017, 1249) who refers to "about a billion people whose tiny incomes and low life expectancy confirm their limited relevance to capital at any scale". The global capitalist economy functions without making use of the labour of those in marginalised places. In some cases, "places (or their resources) are useful, but the people are not" (Li 2010, 69). People are dispossessed from land which governments, seduced by the prospect of economic growth, transfer to corporations trading in world markets. Commoditisation of land through tenure reforms raises its value and makes it less accessible to the young, offering fewer possibilities of land-based livelihoods (Rigg *et al.* 2016). Yet the economic growth generated through such measures seldom leads to employment for the people displaced, as capital seeks 'efficiencies' through labour-saving technologies. Apart from direct dispossession by capital, much agricultural land is rendered unproductive by climate change or other ecological challenges. Rural

people are increasingly surplus not only to the needs of the modern sector, but also the transforming rural economy. Deprived of rural resources, populations are pushed into migration, "swelling the cities where they try to squeeze yet one more tray of goods for sale onto a crowded pavement"(Li 2017, 1249). Such activities may bring people a small share of income but are not productive: no one really benefits from there being a choice of vendors selling the same mobile phone credit within metres of one another. Contemporary global capitalism may have produced abundant work opportunities in the past but, with mechanisation and digitisation is increasingly incapable of absorbing expanding supplies of labour and in a post-productivist future, jobs will become scarcer globally (Ferguson 2015).

The rural surplus population includes both those left behind by global capitalism and those actively impoverished by it (Rigg 2018). Rigg suggests that policy focuses on those he terms the residual poor – those who have missed out on development – who are assumed to need incorporating into a development strategy. However, he also draws attention to the 'produced poor', who have been impoverished through the processes that generated growth, including mainstream development interventions. Elsewhere Rigg and colleagues (2016) examine how integration into global markets exposes some livelihoods to shocks and stresses. The removal of barriers to international trade, for instance, undermines the livelihoods of local producers who cannot compete with cheap imports. Both market and policy can contribute to 'immiserising growth', inducing precarity for some (see also Standing 2011) while enriching others.

The dominant narrative of a linear agrarian transition in which agricultural peasants become industrial or service sector workers is flawed (Li 2010). Partly this is due to a failure to recognise the spatial logic of capitalism (Massey 1984; Smith 1984). It is assumed that economic growth will lead to job creation within the nation state. Yet capitalism is inherently spatially uneven and new spatial divisions of labour produce mismatches between population and labour demand. Hence while rural land is progressively accumulated by global capital, the jobs produced are likely to be elsewhere. Consequently, the technical fixes to rural dispossession and unemployment proposed by, for instance, the ILO and World Bank – job training, investments in human capital, attempts to connect people with jobs through provision of information, or the promotion of micro-credit and entrepreneurial attitudes – cannot work because capital simply does not require these people's labour in these locations (Li 2017). Some may access jobs through transnational migration, but this option is not available to all, and some can only migrate on adverse terms, dependent on labour brokers and susceptible to cheating or indebtedness (Li 2010).

While surplus population can be a direct effect of capital (and not simply the effect of its lack of penetration), Li (2010) argues that the production of surplus population is not a deliberate strategy of global capital. Whereas in the nineteenth century, pauperisation (the use of workhouses for instance) served to keep European industrial wages low, and dispossession of land created African labour reserve economies dependent on migrant wage labour, Li (2010) argues that today's surplus populations simply have no relevance to capital at any scale. As a result, and in contrast to earlier eras of capitalist accumulation, there is no market incentive to keep people alive day to day or from generation to generation. In this situation, it is unsurprising that investment in social reproduction often diminishes (Katz 2011). Children commonly bear the brunt of this. Katz (2011) has described how boys in rural Sudan are displaced from meaningful, survivable futures in agriculture, and thereby cast as 'waste', the effort invested in their upbringing failing to bring rewards to them or their communities because the livelihood skills they have developed cannot be profitably employed. The global south today is characterised by "a large and burgeoning population that is chronically under-reproduced, and precariously employed" (Li 2017, 1249).

Not everywhere are surplus populations entirely abandoned – 'let die' by the state or wider society (Li 2010). Li cites India's 'right to food' programme as indicative of its government's willingness to try to keep people alive, and explores the role of activism in achieving this. Where significant populations lack either direct access to the means of production or a living wage, interventions become necessary to enable people to live (Li 2010). Recent investments by governments and other agencies in social cash transfers and universal health care arguably represent efforts to sustain those superfluous to economic requirements. A desire to keep people alive cannot, however, explain the concomitant growth in investment in education which appears to focus on preparing a future workforce in an environment where labour absorption is no longer possible.

The global expansion of schooling and production of aspiration

Educational enrolment has expanded dramatically worldwide over the past two decades. Donor agencies (notably the World Bank) and national governments invested heavily in basic education in response to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Free Primary Education programmes, in particular, helped reduce the number of out-of-school children of primary school age from 100 million in 2000 to 57 million in 2015 (UN 2015). In lower middle-income countries, 91% of children now complete primary school (World Bank 2019).

The scale of investment by international agencies reflects a view that education promotes 'international development', understood in terms of human rights, gender equality and poverty reduction. Among governments, education is viewed as instrumental in instilling a sense of nationhood, promoting a national language and controlling potentially troublesome youth (Boyden 1990). International agencies are inspired partly by the work of scholars including Sen (2000) who claim that education is intrinsically valuable and also plays a role in enabling participation in democratic politics, empowering women and supporting decision making on health and fertility (see Dyson 2019). But dominating the reasoning of both national and international actors is an implicit association between education and economic growth. In the past, schooling contributed to the productivity of labour largely by instilling habits of discipline, punctuality and obedience (Bowles & Gintis 1976; Apple 1982). With mechanisation, digitisation and deindustrialisation, such traits are no longer in such demand. Today, prosperity within the global economy is said to rely increasingly on knowledge-based activities and, with globalisation, human capital growth through education is considered crucial to gaining economic advantage, not only in the more affluent parts of the world, but globally (Brown *et al.* 2012). World Bank investment is explicitly aimed at increasing the competitiveness of labour in the global economy (Tarabini 2010).

The human capital argument underlay investment in free education in the MDG era. Today, it is apparent that increasing enrolment alone is not delivering workers for a knowledge economy. UNESCO (2012) reported that although only 57 million children worldwide were out-of-school, 250 million could not read and write by the time they should reach grade 4. This is partly attributed to curricula and pedagogy which have changed little across Asia and Africa since colonial times. Schooling then was designed to select and prepare a minority to become teachers, nurses and administrators, students of weaker aptitude being eliminated through frequent testing. Didactic teaching and academic tests persist despite the massification of schooling.

Today's knowledge economy is said to demand not memorisation skills but flexibility, entrepreneurship and self-responsibility. This is inspiring some reforms to curricula and pedagogy. In a quest to produce neoliberal subjects, suited to knowledge work, constructivist approaches to learning are being introduced, which shape how young people view themselves and their future lives (Vavrus 2009).

A neoliberal subjectivity is aspirational. The neoliberal turn in several countries' education systems has inspired a deliberate focus on producing aspirational actors who actively plan for their individualised futures (cf. Gooptu 2013). Radcliffe and Webb (2014) describe how Chile's neoliberal education shapes indigenous Mapuche teenagers' views of their future lives. They may not fully embrace the futures mapped out for them, but do respond to efforts to turn them into responsible entrepreneurs, producers and consumers.

To some extent schooling has always relied on and sought to instil aspiration. Those who attend any kind of school see themselves differently and have different expectations from those who do not (Nieuwenhuys 1996). Through schooling, the future becomes an important focus in life, suffused with alternative possibilities and worth expending effort on. Intentionally, or inadvertently, schooling prompts children to engage in aspiration, defined by Quaglia and Cobb (1996) as a process of identifying, setting and being inspired to work towards future goals.

Among education policymakers, aspiration is often viewed instrumentally. Children may enrol in school due to legislation, but regular attendance and effective learning require commitment and motivation. The widespread view that schooling is the primary means of accessing available opportunities and escaping poverty and the hard labour of agriculture (Ames 2013; Boyden 2013) is actively encouraged by governments and other organisations. Malaysia's Ministry of Education has

recommended that rural indigenous parents “must be persuaded to realise the importance of education” (Suhakam 2009, 9). Young people in most rural communities already aspire to ever higher levels of education (White 2012), many believing it will transform their lives (Posti-Ahokas & Palojoiki 2014). Oxford University's Young Lives project, for instance, found 75% of poor Ethiopian 14–15-year-olds would like a university degree, and 90% of these expected to achieve it (Abrahams 2014).

Beyond driving educational engagement, aspiration is considered a force for good, with the power both to transform individual lives (Harper *et al.* 2003) and enable collective action and social change. Appadurai (2004, 59) argues that with a greater ‘capacity to aspire’ “the poor could ... contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty”. From a more neoliberal perspective, instilling aspiration is often about promising people that they can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and create their own jobs (Li 2017). The 2015 World Development Report (World Bank 2014a) repeatedly emphasises how ‘raising aspiration’ (desire for social advancement and material wealth in particular) could serve to reduce poverty. More widely, ‘raising aspirations’ has become a mantra among agencies and governments, including the UK, keen to secure a knowledge-based competitive edge in the global economy (St Clair *et al.* 2013; Kintrea *et al.* 2015). Education's economic role today is not simply to supply skilled or compliant workers, but aspirational individuals.

The notion that expanding school enrolment, or raising children's aspirations, will grow human capital and thereby contribute to economic growth is hard to square with the experience of school leavers in remote rural areas. Numbers of young people aspiring to higher education or professional employment far exceed the opportunities available even in urban environments (Jeffrey *et al.* 2008). Despite their expectations, only 3% of Ethiopian youth actually go to college (Abrahams 2014). Education systems penetrate rural areas and incorporate children into a new relation with the future, but for most the promise is illusory. Aspirations, which derive both from education and increasing media penetration, often entail out-migration. If, as in the Nepali Terai, youth have few local opportunities for anything ‘better’ than farming, they can only cash in their education through migration, either to the city or overseas (Rigg *et al.* 2016). This, however, is not possible for all, and girls face particular constraints.

Education cannot deliver for most rural youth the futures it encourages them to aspire to in a world of surplus population, but neither does it prepare them for conventional rural livelihoods. In natural resource dependent upland regions of Vietnam and China, increasing emphasis on education and out-migration is reducing young people's labour contributions (Punch & Sugden 2013). In Nepal's Terai, once agricultural families invest in their children's education, ‘wasting’ this on farming makes little sense (Rigg *et al.* 2016). However, diverting their learning away from natural resource-based livelihoods means ecological knowledge is lost (Punch & Sugden 2013). Thus, in rural areas, education may actually deskill young people for traditional livelihoods (Rival 1996; Camfield 2011).²

Since the 1990s, education has been written about as a ‘contradictory resource’ (Levinson & Holland 1996). Research in some contexts has found young people to be relatively satisfied with the lives their education has led to. Jones (2020), for instance, observes that young men in eastern Uganda felt some sense of an educated identity, despite school's very limited impact on their fortunes, and Dyson (2019) finds girls in north India appreciated the new opportunities they had to study, albeit having to negotiate new forms of patriarchy. In many cases, however, even if it sometimes produces some of the benefits suggested by Sen (2000), education leads to adverse consequences. These include the reproduction of social inequalities associated with class, caste and religion (e.g. Froerer 2015) and gender (Marrow 2013; Ansell 2016). Considerable attention has been given to the failure of schooling to deliver salaried work and the questions this raises for the value of education (Mains 2012; Newell 2012). Education's failure to bring the expected rewards breeds resentment and loss of hope. Here, Jeffrey's (2010) study of educated unemployed youth in India and Mains' (2012) research with young men in urban Ethiopia stand out.

Explanations of the failure of education to secure social mobility, and its role in perpetuating and even producing new forms of social separation commonly draw on Bourdieu's (1990) theorisation of social reproduction through education (e.g. Froerer 2011) or ideas of governmentality (e.g. Morarji 2014). These explanations focus on schooling itself and the ways in which it is delivered. In this paper, we look beyond the education system itself to explore its role within a wider economy that cannot absorb the labour of those who pass through it.

Schooling, of course, has always functioned as part of economic structures (see Mitchell 2017), differentiating between children, directing them into different positions in the economy according to their relative achievements (Bowles & Gintis 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). Desirable jobs are 'positional resources' that were never available to all, and increasing access to education will not change this (Brown *et al.* 2012), but in the past school leavers could expect to be allocated to some productive role. Katz (2018, 733) observes, "this sorting mechanism worked beautifully when factory or farm work was widely available, but now when those conditions no longer obtain (or, more accurately, their geographies are stretched globally), the grounds of education are changed". Education in areas of surplus population cannot assign young people to a spectrum of active positions; many are left with no clear contribution to make. Yet political concerns generally focus on the perceived productive sectors of the economy, neglecting the needs of those who remain distant from these (Gupta 2009).

Numerous accounts have observed that rural young people leave school disillusioned and with a sense of failure (Ansell 2004; Froerer 2011, 2012; Morrow 2013). If the economy cannot make meaningful use of rural people's labour, 'aspiration raising', even if it improves learning outcomes, could be considered cruel (cf. Berlant 2011). The remainder of this paper details research that sought to understand how aspiration raising through rural education intersects with changing rural contexts to produce experiences of schooling.

The research settings

The two-year project that generated the data for this paper involved ethnographic research in remote rural areas of three very different lower-middle-income countries: Lesotho, India and Laos. A comparative case study approach was adopted in order to attain insights into how global dimensions of education systems and of rural economic change intersect with more localised phenomena to shape aspiration and experiences of schooling.

In Lesotho, we worked in the Maluti Mountains and the Senqu Valley. Rural Lesotho from the late nineteenth century served as a labour reserve for the South African mining industry. Dispossessed of its agricultural land (the 'conquered territories' lost to the Boers), the mountain environment could not sustain a population, and teenage boys and men found waged employment as migrant workers. Meanwhile women, children and elderly people were confined to Lesotho where they engaged in subsistence agriculture and livestock rearing. This not only subsidised the social reproduction of mine labour, it signalled the South African authorities' refusal of any obligation towards those not directly employed on its territory.

Missionary schools were introduced across Lesotho in the nineteenth century and female literacy rates have long been high, but until this century a significant proportion of boys herded livestock rather than attending school, only basic education being required for mine work. Since apartheid formally ended in the 1990s, however, employment in mining has become much more elusive. Rural employment opportunities are negligible, and other livelihood options are declining as climate change reduces the reliability of agriculture while wool and mohair prices are subject to unstable commodity prices and unfavourable trading arrangements. The absence of barriers to trade between Lesotho and South Africa has also undermined local livelihoods. Chinese traders with greater capital buy wholesale in South Africa to stock shops that sell more products more cheaply than local businesses while the low cost of imported maize deters farmers from investing in planting their own fields. Some rural people (women particularly) migrate to work in garment factories in the lowlands, and others cross the border, sometimes illegally, to find domestic or seasonal agricultural work.

Free primary education was introduced from 2000 and became compulsory for 6–13-year-olds in 2010, funded in part through the World Bank Education for All Fast Track Initiative. Despite spending an exceptionally high proportion of national income on education, quality is a concern. The 2007 SACMEQ survey found 25% of Grade 6 students in rural schools were functionally illiterate and 47% functionally innumerate (Spaull 2012), with attainment lower in rural areas. In response, and under World Bank influence (Nhlapo & Maharajh 2017), Lesotho has gone further than India³ or Laos in reforming its curriculum to address the needs of a wider cross-section of children, focusing on skills,

values, child-centred pedagogy and the integration of 'creativity and entrepreneurship' as a subject area (MOET 2009; Dungey & Ansell 2020a).

Our research in Laos took place in a rural district in the mountainous north-west of the country. This area, populated largely by non-Lao ethnic groups (Hmong and Khmu), has only recently been encroached on by the state and as such belongs to what Scott (2009, after van Schendel 2002) has termed 'Zomia'. By Southeast Asian standards, Laos is a poor, sparsely populated agrarian society and 70% of workers are employed mainly in small-scale agriculture (World Bank 2014b). Yet, large scale concession of farmland to (foreign) investors over recent years has interrupted both the generational transfer of farmland to the young and family cultivation of uncleared land (Barney 2012). Li (2010) classes the enforced movement by the state of ethnic groups from upland areas of cultivation, purportedly to conserve forest, to roadside and lowland settlements as an instance of surplus populations being actively 'let die', arguing that in lowland resettlement sites "arable land is extremely scarce, there is little work, and hunger and disease prove fatal for many" (Li 2010, 76). While High (2008) suggests a more nuanced picture, dispossession of land has led many young people to migrate for work in urban areas and especially neighbouring Thailand (Senties Portilla 2017).

The communities with which we worked had been required to move to roadside locations and were also experiencing other rapid change. One village was adjacent to a construction site for a major new railway – part of China's 'belt and road' initiative. While villagers were temporarily employed in construction and also providing services to the many Chinese workers, completion of the railway will result in permanent loss of land but few new opportunities away from the line's widely spaced stations.

Another relative innovation in these communities is schooling. Under French colonial rule, education was minimal beyond the temple-based schooling of Buddhist boys (Bilodeau *et al.* 1955). During the 1960/1970s civil war and beyond, schooling remained limited, although the revolutionary Pathet Lao set up adult education in the 'liberated zones' and sent promising youngsters to North Vietnam for schooling (Brown & Zasloff 1986; Pholsena 2012). Education campaigns continued following the 1975 establishment of the Lao PDR. Primary education became compulsory for 6–14-year-olds in 1996, reiterated in the 2006 Children's Law. Laos has made impressive progress in school provision, but the 2012 Early Grade Reading Assessment revealed 18% of 4th graders unable to comprehend written text (World Bank 2014b). Moreover, in the study district, where mass schooling is very new, and at least in part aimed at state-building, 35.1% of children drop out from primary school within the first year and only 42.1% of girls survive to Grade 5 (MOES 2014).

The India research took place in Korba district, in the central-eastern state of Chhattisgarh. Over one third of Chhattisgarh's 25 million-strong population is categorized as *adivasi*, or Scheduled Tribe (ST), most of whom live in rural areas, relying on subsistence agriculture and the sale of forest produce for their livelihoods. Some households now supplement their agricultural yields by selling poultry, vegetables or small goods, or by tailoring; others participate in government schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which guarantees 100 days of paid labour to adults from poor rural households. Most are classified as living 'below the poverty line' ('BPL'), despite the economic liberalisation processes, initiated nationwide in the early 1990s, which catapulted India to the ranks of a global economic powerhouse and resulted in dramatic increases in wealth and opportunity, especially amongst educated urban middle classes (cf. Brosius 2010; Gupta & Sivaramakrishnan 2011).

The areas we worked in had no formal schools until the mid-1970s, and few individuals availed of education until the 1980s–1990s as its utility was questionable and it was not compulsory. Across India, formal schooling was mooted under colonial rule as early as 1835 and written into law in the 1930s, but was not implemented (Bajpai 2006). Nonetheless, the idea that education is intrinsically beneficial and should be compulsory influenced the modernization agendas of postcolonial leaders (Kumar 1994). Article 45 of India's 1949 Constitution embraced free and compulsory education as a 'directive principle'. This was not achieved within a decade, as intended, but a constitutional amendment in 2002 made education legally free and compulsory for 6–14-year-olds (Bajpai 2006). Alongside growing pressure from international agencies and campaigns (Rose & Dyer 2008), this provoked a campaign to universalize primary schooling. In 2010 the government passed the Right to Education (RTE) Act, guaranteeing free primary education. RTE has increased both primary and

secondary enrolment nationally (Tilak 2005), but provision remains far from universal and educational achievement remains extremely poor, particularly amongst rural, marginalized populations. The 2012 Annual Status of Education Report, for instance, reveals how post-RTE increases in Chhattisgarh's rural school enrolment were accompanied by dramatic decreases in attendance and literacy.

The research

Aspirations are not easy to research: they are socially produced, contextual, normative, fluid and difficult to articulate (Huijsmans *et al.* 2021). 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 of the future and construct their own narratives. This intensive and sustained approach helped reveal contradictions and inconsistencies in the views expressed, as well as apparently more long-term and firmly held aspirations.

In each country nine months of ethnographic research was conducted in two communities and their local primary schools. Some research was also undertaken at the local middle or secondary schools, though these were up to 20 km from the villages. 'Remote rural' is not easily defined and the communities were remote in rather different ways. One of the Lesotho villages was only about a 3-hour drive from the capital, but lacked amenities such as electricity and running water, and the closest secondary school was a 2-3 hour walk away. The Indian villages were comparatively near to a main road, 6 km from the block capital and only 40 km from the district capital, but also lacked amenities. The Lao villages were larger and had more amenities but were much further from any large settlement.

Authors Dungey, Dost and Piti each deployed a range of ethnographic methods in one of the three case study countries. Dost and Piti both have close relationships with the countries in which they undertook the research (India and Laos) whereas Dungey had not previously visited Lesotho but had undertaken doctoral research elsewhere in rural Africa. None of the three was entirely proficient in the language or dialect of the children, owing to differences of ethnicity; all three could communicate at a simple level but required assistance for a more nuanced understanding of their research participants. The three field researchers used participant observation, interviews, group discussions and participatory activities (drawings, drama, job ranking exercises) with children of different ages, both in and out of school, and their families, teachers and other community members. The combination of methods differed with the aptitudes and experiences of the researchers. Dungey lived in her two villages for the duration of the fieldwork, whereas Dost stayed in a nearby small town and Piti made lengthy visits and stayed with teachers. This influenced their interactions and how they were perceived. The researchers' positionality also doubtless shaped the findings. The entire team embodied the perceived benefits of education. Piti, for instance, displayed his educational capital in everyday ways, such as speaking correct Lao in village meetings and in the classroom, quoting laws and legal regulations in response to villagers' queries. His larger body and Toyota Hilux represented the 'good life' often held out as the promise of education.

The team has also undertaken thematic textual analysis of school textbooks, curricula and exams, and interviews and workshops with national and local policymakers and other key informants. Between 4 and 6 months after the completion of the main fieldwork, team members returned to the villages and ran feedback and dissemination workshops with children, teachers, communities and policymakers.

The promise of education

In all three national settings, aspiration is part of the discourse of education, used to varying degrees to motivate engagement. It exists in the practice of schooling, both implicitly and explicitly. Orientation to the future is, for instance, institutionalised in the progression children are expected to make through a series of hierarchically ordered classes. Children are expected to 'move forward' (*aage badhna* in Hindi), completing stages, always with a view to the future (Dost & Froerer in press). Life is presented as a trajectory along which to travel in a forward direction. When 14-year-old irregular

school-going boys in Chhattisgarh were asked what happens when you study, they explained that your "future increases" (literally) and you can do anything. A 17-year-old girl in secondary school said: "A successful person thinks about the future, and goes to school to prepare for that future". Similarly, Mohatu⁴, a secondary school student in Lesotho, explained why he attends school: "You know what, I want to end up seeing what kind of future I can have in life, you see? ... A bright future."

The extent to which the link between education and a 'bright future' is explicitly promoted in school differs somewhat between the three contexts. In Lesotho, where the future figures prominently across school life, children read moralistic short novels about those who pursue the wrong goals in life. *A crooked path* (Bhembe 1995), read in Grades 6 and 7, recounts the story of Sandile who 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. (Bhembe 1995, 9)

Sandile is soon befriended by Michael who entices Sandile to stray from his good habits. The boys engage in a sequence of drinking, crime and exam cheating and are both expelled from school. A remorseful Sandile is readmitted, but Michael disappears, never to return.

Aspirations encouraged relate to the type of person one should become and the lifestyles that are desirable. Aspiring to pursue education in preference to other goals is presented as virtuous in all three settings. For most young people, however, education is not simply an end in itself but a route to a higher status. When rural Basotho say 'education is life' (*thuto ke bophelo*), they are valuing it instrumentally⁵. Young people said that education would enable them to fend for themselves (*ho iphelisa*) (Dungey & Ansell 2020b), get beautiful houses and cars, or have an easy life where they can be 'fat' and eat well. Indian children felt that education would enable them to gain the confidence and income to travel, see new sights, eat novel foods, buy more clothes, marry better off spouses, and take care of their family and community. Children in Laos also said they wanted to make their village a better place but their drawings and other evidence hinted at aspirations to consumer goods such as smartphones, motorcycles or even cars, and wearing fashionable clothes and jewellery. Figure 1, a drawing found on a classroom wall in Laos, suggests its author imagines a life where she wears her hair loose and chats on a mobile phone.



Fig. 1. Child's drawing from classroom wall, Laos.

Figures 2a and b are typical of what Class 4 girls in the Chhattisgarh schools drew when asked to depict their futures: a big cement house, a garden with flowers, and practical (but expensive) household items (gas cylinder and gas stove, household items, motor scooters and mobile phones) and even a helicopter⁶. Boys' drawings (Fig. 2c and d) were dominated by technology – tractors, agricultural and construction equipment, mobile phones (old and new) and helicopters.

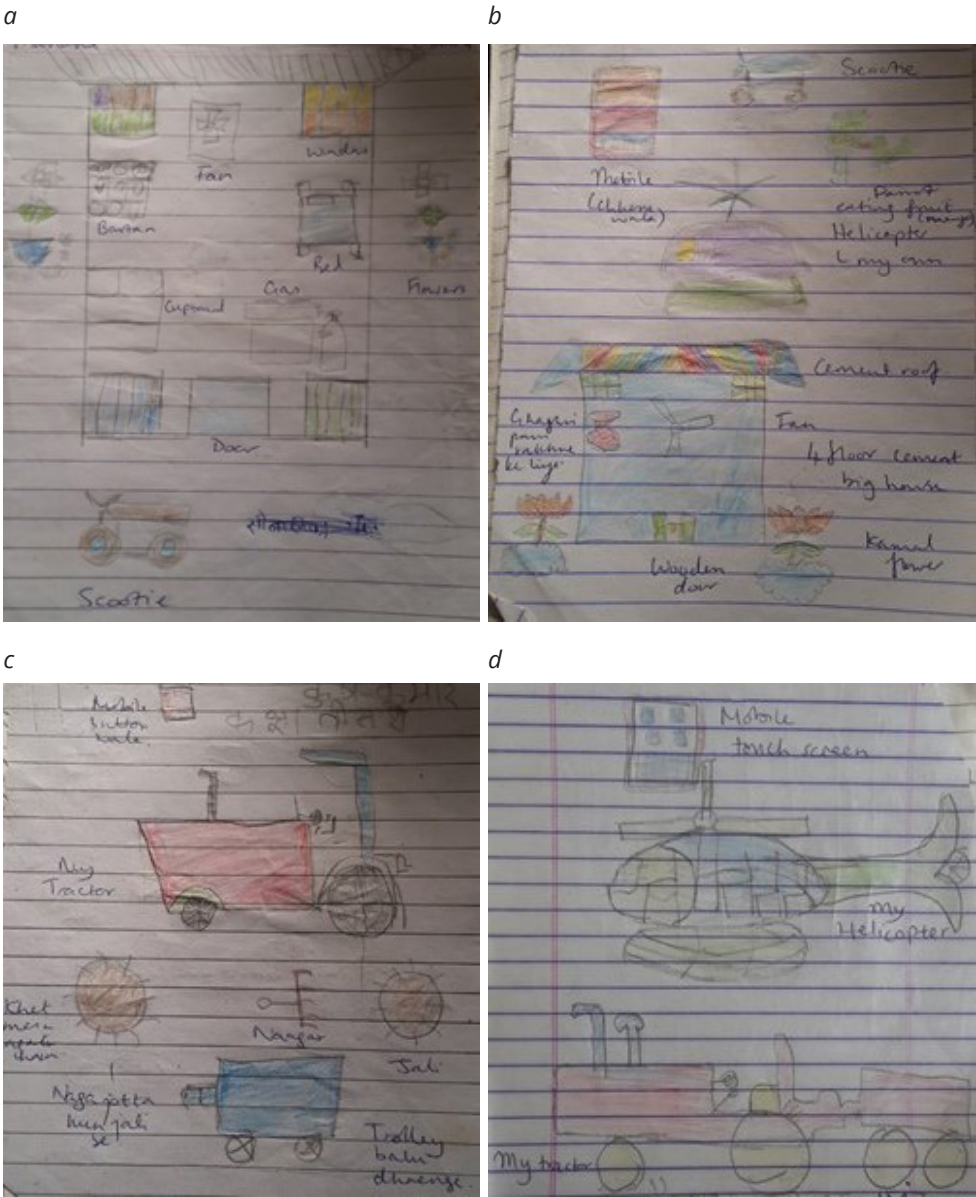


Fig. 2. Drawings by Class 4, Chhattisgarh.

These images partly reflect the lives of more prosperous villagers, but affluent lifestyles are also encountered through the media. Ethnic Hmong children in Laos, for instance, sometimes access smartphones and watch Hmong videos produced in Thailand or the US. Children in India are exposed to modernity through television soaps. Even in the Lesotho villages, where smartphones were scarce

and television unavailable, children cut pictures of consumer goods (sofas, smartphones) from magazines that friends or siblings had brought from town or from South Africa. However, textbooks and the living examples of their teachers also illustrate materially more affluent lives.

Schooling is understood to give access to material assets and status through providing access to employment. Mamello, principal of one Lesotho primary school, explained that her purpose was that children should have a bright future, by which she meant: "If they are married they will work for themselves, they seek for jobs and find it *akere* [right?]. Because they have enough education to have good work, they will not suffer in their life."

Four occupations – teacher, nurse, soldier and police officer – feature with remarkable consistency across the otherwise very different textbooks in use in India, Laos and Lesotho (Fig. 3). A Laos textbook's lesson on '*asip*' (occupations) states: "there are many kinds of occupations, which are very different, these include: labourer, farmer, employee (teacher, nurse, soldier, police), trader..." (Fig. 4).

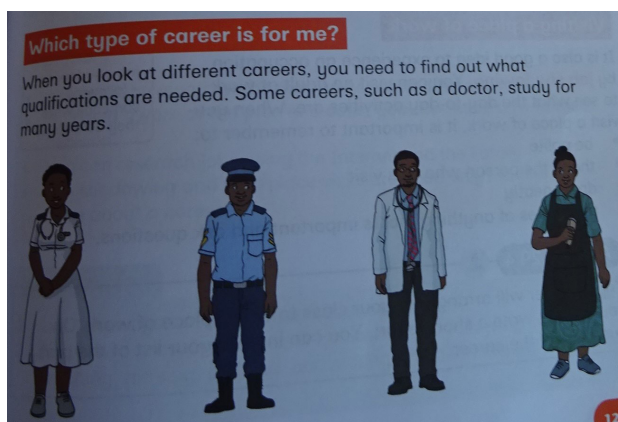


Fig. 3. Grade 5 textbook (Chaplin *et al.* 2017), Lesotho.



Fig. 4. Primary 4 textbook The World Around Us, Laos.

These four occupations (teacher, nurse, soldier, police) dominated young people's own expressions of their aspirations. A small survey was conducted in villages neighbouring the fieldsites following the ethnographic fieldwork. Of approximately 100 primary school-going children per country asked about their first choice of job, 92% in Laos, 77% in Lesotho and 74% in India named one of these four

occupations. Figure 5 illustrates some typical drawings by Chhattisgarh children. 5a was painted by a girl who aspired to attend college and become a nurse, drawing herself in a white nurse's uniform. 5b and c are by boys who aspired for careers with the police or as a doctor. It is notable that these are socially valued roles.⁷ Children talk about them not only as means to a salary or an 'easy life', but because they want to make their remote rural village a healthier, safer, and better educated place. In all three settings they talked of becoming a nurse to care for ill relatives, a teacher for the village, or a police officer to catch thieves within the community.⁸

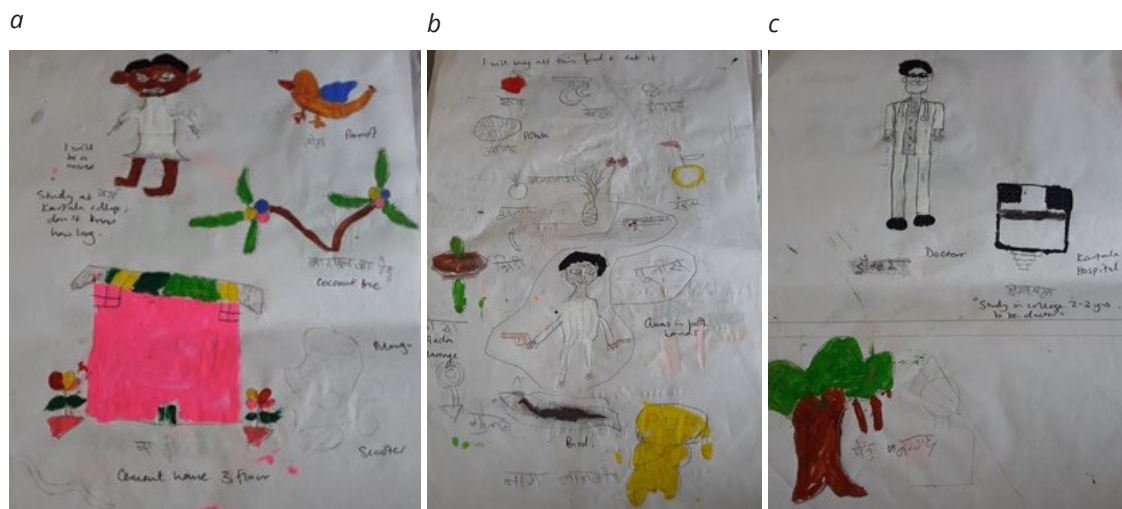


Fig. 5. Drawings from Chhattisgarh.

This emotional attachment to their communities existed in tension with a sense that the future lay elsewhere. Education in these rural places is generally associated with a future beyond the village. Progress through education is structured spatially as well as temporally and for children in four of the six villages, progress beyond primary school necessarily entails relocating to larger villages. Even where a secondary school existed within walking distance, more distant schools were generally regarded as preferable. Post-secondary (and often upper secondary) might require another onward move. As Corbett (2007) notes in relation to rural Canada, schooling is associated with mobility. Even within the village, schooling differentiates itself from rural life. In Lesotho, for instance, teachers prohibit boys from wearing blankets or gumboots – the attire of a shepherd – to school. Perhaps an inevitable corollary is an association of the remote rural with 'backwardness'. Certainly some young people in both India and Lesotho wanted to continue living in rural areas, albeit with the jobs and consumer goods of the city, there were others who insisted life was too boring in the village. Young people in Lesotho said that life happens in towns and they hoped to leave the village, whether for a nearby rural service centre, Maseru or South Africa to access better services and shops.

Whether focused on career or lifestyle, aspiration was at times used instrumentally in schools to motivate children to engage with education. In Laos, teachers said they did not encourage primary school children to plan for the future (they are not yet in a position to), but they did "give children a dream" – such as becoming a nurse – which helps 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". Aspiration is used to place demands on individual young people. They must work for their futures. While teachers in the Chhattisgarh primary schools did not directly use aspiration instrumentally in these ways, Figure 6 is taken from the wall of a classroom. Although children themselves could not read the English text, the words (and associated depiction of books) epitomise how schooling casts children as agents in securing their own destinies (see also Frye 2019). Asked in the survey what could help them succeed in their aspirations, over 70% of school-going children in each country gave an answer that the enumerators coded as 'hard work'.⁹

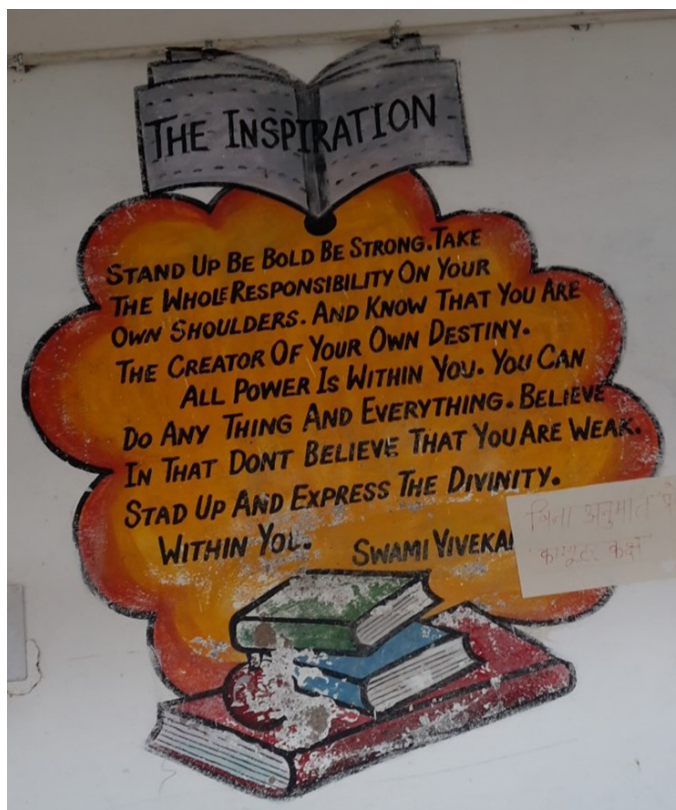


Fig. 6. Painting from a primary school classroom wall, India.

The tenuity of aspiration

Despite schools' promotion of particular futures, and their apparent embrace by children, evidence from all three settings suggests that belief in these promised futures is tenuous (see also Jakimow 2016). While most children when asked say they want to be a teacher, nurse, soldier or police officer, few demonstrate much conviction that these futures will materialise. Moreover, when outside school, children sometimes speak of alternative (more local) livelihoods. They also express a desire for future lifestyles that are incompatible with their chosen salaried career, such as being self-employed and continuing to stay in the village. Often they put forward different views on different occasions or even in the same conversation. A girl in grade 5 in Lesotho wrote: "I want to be a teacher when I have studied correctly. I want to work in the factories in Maseru."

In some respects, children are encouraged in school to attach themselves to a label rather than to envisage a tangible future. Textbook illustrations present occupations as static points of arrival. Rural children may see soldiers and nurses, in textbooks and real life, but acquire very little knowledge of what these jobs involve, the qualifications and processes required to secure them, or how much competition they would face.

The abstract treatment of jobs reflects how schooling connects only minimally with rural life. Textbook content is presented as familiar but, for rural children, can be hard to relate to. A Lao textbook illustration of a funfair, for instance, was interpreted by rural children as a picture of parents bringing their offspring to school, funfairs not featuring in their lives. In Lesotho, primary school textbooks explain how to use computer applications such as PowerPoint. Not only do most rural schools lack computers (or electricity), few rural children have even seen one. In these circumstances, schooling can be very abstract, and unrelated to children's daily lives.

Where rural activities are depicted, particularly those of more marginalised populations, they are often represented as problematic. In Laos, textbook exercises ask students to explain how swidden cultivation – the main agricultural activity in our fieldsites – is environmentally destructive. Such exercises imply students' parents are enemies of the environment and fail to teach students how to practise swidden cultivation sustainably. Similarly, a Lesotho textbook image of a rural environment is used to elicit causes of soil damage, doubtless anticipating that children will focus on harmful pastoral activities. Such messages risk stigmatising rural livelihoods and suggest that schooling's purpose is something other than preparation for rural life.

Lesotho's new primary curriculum (Kingdom of Lesotho 2008) includes 'Creativity and Entrepreneurship' as a key learning area, to inspire and prepare children to develop their own businesses in the absence of widespread employment opportunities. However, even this is taught in an abstract way. Children found it impossible to articulate how the subject might benefit them. A group of children in Lesotho was invited to role-play a situation in which a school principal announced Creativity and Entrepreneurship would no longer be taught. The boy who took the principal's role explained his decision thus: "Here in primary is it ended, the primary school students don't understand it at all; they are like a Brown-Swiss cow which doesn't understand." Children have been told that education is for a future in formal employment, and entrepreneurship lessons connected neither with this narrative nor with the many forms of entrepreneurship that children saw happening in the village (Dungey & Ansell 2020a). The new curriculum may insinuate hope for children rendered 'surplus', but in a context where opportunities for entrepreneurial futures are almost as scarce as professional jobs, it offers a future no more grounded in reality than more conventional schooling.

Few children in any of the schools demonstrated a convincing commitment to the futures they said they wanted. Despite the promise that hard work would be rewarded with a government job, children frequently skipped classes and many ultimately opted to marry, migrate or take on informal work, even where this cut short their schooling. Two girls dropped out from one of the Lesotho primary schools during the fieldwork. Khothatso became pregnant and got married. Limpho moved away having been accused of stealing in the village and subsequently married. 20-year-old Tun from Laos reported he had to leave secondary school because his parents were poor, and he, too, quickly married. While causes varied, decisions often appeared to reflect a lack of conviction that education would pay off as depicted. There were some students who appeared genuinely committed to their goals but, as Jakimow (2016) describes based on her research in Telangana, India, most young people are (or quite quickly become) resigned to the likelihood of failure.

Significantly, teachers were also unconvinced that their students would achieve the careers set out for them. Most subscribed to the narrative that schooling's purpose is to enable children to pass exams that eventually give access to formal sector careers. However, they believed the rural students they taught would fail those exams, and be unable to progress to salaried jobs.¹⁰ Mamello, who spoke of children going to school to get good jobs (cited above), was typical of the Lesotho teachers:

I: But what kinds of jobs do people from Ha Mabana in this area get?

R: Ache, it's not good work because they do not go to school *akere* [do they]? To have good job needs you to be educated, so they drop out even before they are even in standard 7 so what kind of job will be good for them? Nothing.

Teachers both recognise that structural constraints limit children's prospects and accuse rural families of failing to support their children's education. While they may encourage children to 'dream' in order to keep them focused on schooling, teachers' 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. Because of their narrow view of the purpose of schooling, many lack conviction that they can make a difference in children's lives.

In all three settings, teachers often lacked enthusiasm about their roles. In Lesotho, teaching was often a career of last resort (attractive, perhaps, to rural primary school children but less so to urban high school graduates). Places in teacher training colleges were relatively plentiful and entry requirements lower than for other government jobs, although actual teaching posts were limited. When asked why he became a teacher, one Lesotho teacher responded "Because there was a shortage

of jobs. There was nothing I could do." In India and (more so) Laos teaching had a higher status but even here the poor infrastructure (electricity, running water, mobile phone signal, roads) added to the sense of futility to make rural schools unpopular. This manifested most clearly in absenteeism. Teachers from most of the schools spent considerable time travelling to meetings, collecting their pay and maintaining contact with distant family. Their lives often revolved around distant places, some spending their time seeking work elsewhere. In Laos, the schools typically started each new term a few days late when teachers arrived back from family visits. Teachers also often left the village on Friday and returned on Monday, shortening the teaching week. Those who stayed in the rural environment commonly devoted energies elsewhere than teaching. Some set up alternative, more desirable and/or more profitable parallel livelihoods. The Indian research encountered one teacher who provided rooms for rent, managed a road-side hotel, and operated a taxi service. Yet the teachers did not actively acquaint children with the practicalities of establishing such livelihoods.

The teachers were not only sceptical of the prospects of the children they taught, they also had little belief in the quality of the schools. In India, most teachers in rural schools sent their own children to private schools. In Lesotho, community members commented critically: "all the teachers teaching there, none of them has their children attending there, they have all taken them to other schools," a practice that reinforced a sense that a better life is to be gained elsewhere.

The distinction between teachers' and students' performance of education as an aspirational endeavour and the scepticism apparent in their everyday engagement is not unique to these contexts. Zipin and colleagues (2015, 236) distinguish doxic aspirations – "dominant norms about worthy futures" circulating through media and policy discourse – from habituated aspirations – a "felt sense ... of situated possibility" (*ibid.*, 234) grounded in biographic-historical conditions (drawing on Bourdieu's notion of habitus). While doxic aspirations are seen as universally desirable futures that can be achieved through hard work, Zipin and colleagues (2015) argue that disadvantaged youth generally recognise tacitly, or subconsciously, that for them these futures are actually impossible. Life made visible in remote rural places, in the context of surplus population, tends to be far removed from the commonsense doxa. Despite the promise expressed on classroom walls, in textbooks and in the exhortations of teachers, the evidence of older siblings and acquaintances suggests that becoming a teacher, nurse, soldier or police officer is almost certainly a fiction to play along with, rather than a concrete future.

Success for the few and disillusionment for the many

An account of educational aspirations in remote rural places would be incomplete without acknowledging that the promise of a formal sector career becomes a reality for some.¹¹ A small minority of young people in each of the villages attained such jobs. In one of the Lesotho villages, people spoke of a local girl who had become a nurse and visited from time to time. 17-year-old Tona in Laos said she was inspired by Mr Sonphet, the only Hmong teacher at the local primary school who grew up in the village. Younger children may believe with conviction that they will be among those who succeed, albeit they are unclear what is required. Over time, many children recognise that their school performance is unlikely to be adequate, but a few high achievers hang on to the possibility that they will defeat the odds. And as they grow older, their awareness of those odds solidifies. An Indian male youth in college cited 3,000 applicants for one job. In Laos, teaching positions are regulated through a quota system, with large numbers working as unsalaried 'volunteers' in anticipation of eventually finding employment. The odds of securing jobs are never evenly distributed. Apart from academic success, social connections are important, and these may require bribery. In the Laos case, volunteer teachers seeking quota positions require evaluation reports from their schools and the village officials which can make them vulnerable to exploitation.

The fact that a small minority achieve salaried employment sustains some plausibility in the narrative of aspiration and success put forward through education (what Jakimow (2016, 11) refers to as "the *almost* impossibility of getting ahead through education"). Those who succeed feed the aspirations of the next generation as they progress through schooling. But beyond this, it hints at a functional purpose for mass schooling within the global economy. Prior to recent expansion, the purpose of schooling in all three countries was to select a minority for formal sector employment. Many children

failed exams and were screened out, with just a small elite reaching the level of education required for entry into government careers. Today the number of children persisting through education is much larger, but the availability of employment has not increased commensurably. Perhaps the intended beneficiaries of education are the small minority whose human capital will be of value within a global economy. The remainder who persist in education despite learning little cannot achieve the promise of education but – as surplus population – may be of minimal concern to policymakers.

While we have shown that a large share of rural youth in all three countries expect little to come of their education, this does not mean that schooling is irrelevant in their lives. For some, pursuing education involves significant commitment. Often, the longer they are able to stay in school, the more they vest in its promise. In Laos, for instance, going to secondary school requires commuting or staying in another village. At this stage students cease to imagine themselves pursuing farming futures (an educated person may become an agriculturalist, but not a farmer). When parents complained about poor labour market prospects, this was typically in relation to a young person who had finished (most of) secondary school. Their expectation was that the state should provide jobs (through a quota system). Such parents perhaps regarded this as a sort of social contract: they had played their part in supporting their children through secondary education and the state should in return deliver secure employment.

In the other settings, by contrast, children became more aware over time of their limited prospects of securing formal sector work. Growing older, they became conscious of the distance (physical, social, in status) between themselves and the urban/foreign other. What seemed an attractive future in childhood, would appear more, rather than less, distant as they grew older. In India, particularly, young people clearly revised their job aspirations as they came to recognise the limits of their own abilities in relation to their classmates. Gradually, they came to aspire to local artisanal livelihoods or resigned to futures as labourers rather than anticipating urban professions, and consequently education seemed less vital to their lives.

Upon realising that academic challenges and increasing costs (of fees or relocation) make it unlikely they will secure the level of education required for a formal sector job, young people see little value in pursuing education further. They do not view education as something that will help them to pursue a rural livelihood more effectively in a changing world. In part this reflects the entrenched discourse about the role of schooling. Even where (as in Lesotho) 'entrepreneurship' appears on the curriculum, children fail to associate it with their own futures. Rural livelihoods are understood to be learned in other ways than through schooling.

Ultimately, many young people saw 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.¹² For those few Indian youth who reach the end of 10+2 years of education, their learning seldom materialises into opportunities. Young people experience '*udasinta*' (deep sadness) and refer to shattered dreams. Education's main purpose is understood to be securing a salaried job, and when such prospects recede, young people both cease to engage with schooling and cannot conceive of applying their education in their rural context.

Conclusions

Our research revealed a broadly common pattern across the three case study countries. There were some differences. The future and the importance of aspiration figured more prominently in Lesotho, which is partly attributable to its new World Bank-inspired curriculum. Teachers were less clearly demotivated in Laos and Lesotho, where they were better paid and (particularly in Laos) had higher status. The specifics of education policy, as well as cultural differences, undoubtedly play a role. They do not, however, disguise a general pattern.

Children in all of our fieldsites, as doubtless in remote rural areas of many middle-income countries, attend school where they are encouraged to envisage lives that have no direct relation to their rural environment – as employees of a formal service sector. However, few are destined for such futures. Schooling mostly fails to deliver its ostensible purpose of equipping children for salaried professional jobs. This does not mean that it has no impacts. It introduces routine into young people's lives, acquaints them with professionals (in the form of teachers) who are often from elsewhere and have

very different backgrounds, and it extends the presence of national and global agendas into rural areas. It is one institution through which marginalised areas are increasingly touched by global processes. Nor is it the case that no children educated in rural schools gain formal employment. However, most rural children do not achieve what education promises and, despite attesting their desire to be a teacher, nurse, soldier or police officer, it seems that few really expect to. Moreover, schooling also fails to connect in meaningful ways with children's rural lives and as such offers little preparation for rural livelihoods (prospects of which are also diminishing).

Two major issues are raised by these research findings. First is the question of why young people are encouraged to aspire to futures that are out of reach to most. This is doubtless partly to persuade children and their families to engage with schooling. Aspiration, to a greater or lesser extent, motivates effort. Schools promote the idea that what one does today affects one's future, the idea that the future can be planned and controlled. Aspiration then justifies a sacrifice of time, effort and money for future reward. Children are encouraged to work hard in school to secure a better future. The corollary of this is that success and failure both tend to be explained in relation to 'hard work'. An education system focused around working toward an aspirational future is one that enables failure to be attributed to inadequacy of effort. The fact that a small minority are successful serves to reinforce this message. In line with the analysis of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), failure is individualised in a supposed meritocracy that masks the fact that most are destined for sub-optimal futures. Neoliberal education renders a class of people responsible for their own failure (Vavrus 2009). From this perspective it is less surprising that education systems promote a vision of an unattainable future. As Katz (2018, 733) observes: "if everyone's aspiration and capacity for employment were ratcheted upward ... the whole system of capital accumulation as we know it would collapse even further". Schooling does not reveal directly to children that the economy does not require them; rather it tells them they do not merit well-rewarded or respected roles in that economy.

The second question – perhaps a larger one – is why so much is invested in providing rural children with an education that appears unable to achieve its proclaimed objectives. Donors such as the World Bank as well as national governments of diverse persuasions, as illustrated by our three-country study, fund the expansion of education based to a large degree on a human capital argument (investment in future workers for a more productive economy), yet across our very diverse rural fieldsites, children learn relatively little and few will make a significant economic contribution. The school leavers most engaged in the global economy are probably the Basotho youth who pick fruit in South Africa, but it is unclear how schooling contributes to their productivity in this activity, particularly given that it is very much disapproved of in school. A small minority from Lesotho and Laos may find work in urban garment factories, but urban areas are not short of labour with the requisite basic skills. While neoliberal donors and governments might be expected to invest in human capital development, to do so in places of surplus population, where human capital has little potential seems dysfunctional.

The answer here is perhaps partly that schools are complex institutions that represent diverse interests. As Li (2005) observes in relation to development interventions, these do not emerge fully formed from a single source, but express objectives and practices of diverse provenance and are not wholly coherent. They do, however, "work on and through the practices and desires of their target populations" (*ibid.*, 383). Schooling has features, associated with its largely European origins and colonial and postcolonial histories, that are intransigent and perhaps responsible for the enduring emphasis on formal sector employment.

More profoundly, education is fundamental to the liberal worldview embraced by most global institutions and many governments and populations. Education's promise of social mobility is part of a myth that possibilities are open to all, that something worthwhile is on offer, even if it lies in the future. Legitimacy is conferred on the provider – alleviating them of the need to deliver a radical redistribution of resources. In effect, a focus on expanding education covers up the urgent need for structural change. Donors and states embrace the notion that girls' education will lower fertility rates (Moeller 2013), while government interests may also be furthered through the role schooling plays in nation building, particularly in rural areas, irrespective of whether children find employment. Ultimately, those designing and delivering education are perhaps not primarily concerned with rural children. Rural youth are marginal to the interests of those in power. Schools help recruit a small

minority into skilled productive roles or entrepreneurialism, but most are not viewed as key economic or political actors. In line with the arguments of Gidwani and Reddy (2011) or Katz (2018), such children are 'waste' – superfluous or residual. They are surplus to the needs of the modern economy – unusable, unwanted, excess. But they are "waste that must be managed and contained" (Katz 2018, 726), and schooling plays a role in this.

There are clear implications. Marginalised children are not, as education experts often suggest, failing to engage with schooling because they are constrained by their limited aspirations; rather they have a grasp of reality but are constrained by their limited options. The challenge, then, is less about raising children's aspirations (or providing better curricula or teachers) than about the structure of a globalising economy which cannot absorb school leavers' labour and, to some degree, actively deprives them of rural livelihood opportunities. Education cannot – and will not – solve this. It cannot deliver its doxic promise in rural places for most children. Neither will encouragement of entrepreneurship resolve the lack of available opportunities (Dungey & Ansell 2020a). Schooling might be made more relevant to rural children, but ultimately increasing human capital will do little for rural communities. Schooling in remote rural areas does not (and is not there to) integrate young people into a changing global economy; it also fails to equip them for life in remote but transforming rural places.

Schooling is about the future. It is not about 'making live' surplus populations in the way that health or social policy might. But can a different future be made through education? If "promises of universal prosperity cannot be met in an economy organized on capitalist lines" (Li 2017, 1253), can schooling be delinked from the requirements of the capitalist economy (rather than just seeking to fix this connection)? Is it possible to re-envisage the purpose of education outside the neoliberal paradigm? Schooling has at various times in history in different societies been a key site of social struggle. While surplus populations do not have the political leverage of workers (they cannot threaten to withdraw their labour (Li 2017)), there is perhaps scope for education to activate a politics that attaches intrinsic value to life and does not just value people as workers (Li 2010). Civil society in India was effective in securing the Right to Education Act. Perhaps a struggle is now needed for rights *in* education.

Notes

¹ Increases in life expectancy should be acknowledged (in part due to the 'make live' policies described by Li – see below), but wide discrepancies remain between more affluent and poorer parts of the world.

² In some contexts, young people do aspire to engage in rural and agricultural livelihoods, though due to the processes outlined above, the options available are very limited (Deuchar & Dyson 2020; White 2020).

³ India has introduced a new National Education Policy in 2020 which moves in a somewhat similar direction to Lesotho's.

⁴ Pseudonyms are used for all research participants and villages.

⁵ This is not to say that they see no intrinsic value in school going. Children in India, for instance, said they found school more interesting than staying at home and talked about their enjoyment of learning, play and socialising.

⁶ The Chhattisgarh Chief Minister had recently visited a nearby village by helicopter.

⁷ Education, healthcare, the military and the police force are also key to the project of national development.

⁸ This might partially explain why few young people talked of factory work or even other forms of formal or informal employment. In all three settings, migration for factory work or seasonal farm work is not unusual, but these options were not considered attractive. Moreover, they were not viewed as outcomes of education and were barely mentioned in school.

⁹ Other answers differed more between the contexts, with children in India talking of luck or good fortune (26%), Laos mentioning help from people or organisations (39%) and Lesotho referring to faith (11%). These differences partly reflect religious traditions.

¹⁰ In Laos, we observed teachers 'helping' students pass the exams, not because this would give them access to jobs but because they were mandated to achieve 100% primary school completion (see Huijsmans & Piti in press).

¹¹ Jakimow (2016) suggests this is key to understanding it.

¹² While in Laos, children's parents grew up amid war and the extreme impoverishment produced by the communist experiment, in India and Lesotho livelihoods have become more precarious with the loss of mining remittances and climate change.

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