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To cite this article: Claire Elisabeth Dungey & Nicola Ansell (2020) 'I go to school to survive': Facing physical, moral and economic uncertainties in rural Lesotho, *Children's Geographies*, 18:6, 614-628, DOI: [10.1080/14733285.2020.1822514](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2020.1822514)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2020.1822514>



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Published online: 18 Sep 2020.



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'I go to school to survive': Facing physical, moral and economic uncertainties in rural Lesotho

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ABSTRACT

In Lesotho, when children or adults talk about the importance of schooling, they frequently use the term *ho iphelisa*. This is usually translated as 'to survive', reflecting the uncertainties that people in this small country have confronted over recent decades: rapidly diminishing employment opportunities, extremely high HIV prevalence and environmental crises. Based on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in two rural primary schools and their neighbouring communities, we examine how the idea of survival motivates engagement with education. We find that 'survival' permeates the school curriculum and the discourse of children, parents and teachers, and encompasses three distinct but related dimensions: economic, moral and physical. We also highlight how these aspects of survival are both individual and collective, and operate across different temporalities. Through this, we contribute to understanding the complexities of educational aspiration and motivation in contexts of uncertainty.

KEYWORDS

Education; aspiration; survival; rural; Africa; uncertainty

1. Introduction

Education is central to the survival of both an individual and a society (MoET 2008, 13)

'Survival' is a remarkably prevalent theme in the discourse of education in Lesotho. The word appears 11 times in Lesotho's 2008 Curriculum and Assessment Policy (MoET 2008), which set the framework for a radical new curriculum for the first 10 years of 'basic' education. Survival is framed as a key purpose of this phase of education:

Basic Education is a minimum package of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes essential to enable individuals to survive (Moet 2008, 8)

The term also recurs persistently in discussions with teachers, parents and school children themselves. When, in the course of fieldwork, we asked Basotho children why they attended school, most answered 'I want to learn' or 'I want to be educated'. When asked why this is important, they commonly responded 'I want to survive'. While many individuals employed Sesotho equivalents of the term, some expressed themselves directly in English, to emphasise the point.

In this paper, we explore how children, their parents and teachers frame the purpose of education in terms of survival in conditions of uncertainty. In doing so, we build on a growing body of work that explores how young people encounter uncertainty, particularly in African contexts (e.g. Katz 2004; Weiss 2009; Cheney 2008), and how they are encouraged to manage their futures (Calkins

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2016). While in some situations uncertainty is seen to lead young people into inactive 'waithood' (e.g. Honwana 2012) or even to give up on the future (Mains 2007), other scholars have noted how some young people confront uncertainty as a source of possibility (e.g. Cooper and Pratten 2015; Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016; Stambach and Hall 2017). Our research uncovers a rather different way of engaging with future uncertainty, prevalent among young people, their communities and the education system in Lesotho – a view that the future is something to be actively survived.

We begin by contextualising the research in relation to previous studies of youth growing up amid uncertainty in Africa and of the production of futures through formal schooling. After describing some of the uncertainties young people face in Lesotho, and the ways in which the education sector is responding, we outline the research that we undertook in two small villages and the schools that serve them. We then explore how engagement with (or in some cases disengagement from) education is understood as a means of surviving uncertainties, across economic, moral and physical dimensions, and in both the immediate and longer term.

2. Growing up amid change; orienting to uncertain futures

When anyone talks of undertaking action in order to survive, it signals that they perceive their existence to be precarious. Growing up amid crisis and change has been a common theme of social science research on childhood and youth for some time, particularly in African contexts which are often characterised as perpetually in crisis (Weiss 2004). Ethnographic studies have focused on everyday experiences of young people growing up in a changing world economy, and how they orient to the future while embedded in social relations that structure their lives. Katz (2004), for instance, describes children's changing lives in village Sudan and urban America, two different environments both being transformed by movements of global capital. In particular, she demonstrates how a Sudanese development project left many young people displaced and deskilled. Weiss (2009), on the other hand, explores the role of hip hop among urban Tanzanian youth, revealing creative ways in which young people respond to economic crisis. Other ethnographic studies have focused on young people growing up in situations of political instability, violence and war. Cheney's (2008) work examines how the Ugandan state has discursively co-opted childhood and children to construct an imagined future of national pride and prosperity. Children there are viewed as agents of social change, through which to forge a new national identity. By contrast, Poluha (2004) explores how children have played a role in ensuring continuity in Ethiopia, despite apparently dramatic changes in political regime. Through entrenched hierarchical relations of age, generation and gender, dominant cultural schemas are reproduced over time.

Africa is widely portrayed as a continent in constant crisis (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004) where young people confront ongoing disruptions that manifest in a sense of uncertainty. As Bauman (2007) has noted, feeling insecure – an awareness of uncertainty – is part of the modern condition. Africa is beset by objective uncertainties, but uncertainty is also a dominant trope that has infiltrated subjective experience, giving rise to a routinised perception of uncertainty (Cooper and Pratten 2015). Uncertainty, then, is not simply a lack of information, but something that is felt (Hänsch, Kroeker, and Oldenburg 2017). Cooper and Pratten (2015, 1) describe 'uncertainty as a structure of feeling – the lived experience of a pervasive sense of vulnerability, anxiety, hope, and possibility'.

Moreover, uncertainty is a temporal phenomenon, not simply felt in the present but fundamentally about the future (Hänsch, Kroeker, and Oldenburg 2017). It implies an inability to confidently predict the future, and the feelings that arouses. Uncertainties may be experienced both in the near future and as hopes, fears and anxieties about the more distant future, which can be harder to plan and grasp (Guyer 2007). Pasts and futures are thus disconnected horizons of social practice, as people position themselves cognitively, morally, spiritually and practically in the present in relation to their future opportunities (Cole and Durham 2008).

It is in the iteration between present and future that young people act on uncertainties (Ansell et al. 2014). Where uncertainty is widely reflected upon, it influences how people, individually

and collectively, engage with the world and endeavour to manage their futures (Calkins 2016), seeking to introduce order to their lives, and thereby creating new social landscapes (Cooper and Pratten 2015).

There is a growing body of research examining young Africans' orientations to the future in conditions of uncertainty. In a neoliberal era preoccupied with securing the future, youth embody that future and consequently incite social anxieties and often moral panic (Weiss 2004; Ansell et al. 2019). There are at least three typical orientations to the future that have been identified in these studies of youth temporalities. The first, long established, approach understands youth as a time of 'waithood' (Honwana 2012) borne of frustration at being unable to secure what is required to attain social adulthood (Mains 2013; Engeler and Steuer 2017). The focus is largely on young men experiencing unemployment, lacking access to the resources or income needed to marry and start a family, and consequently feeling 'stuck'. Some, as Jeffrey (2010) describes in India, engage in 'timepass', waiting endlessly for an opening. Mains' (2013) book, *Hope is cut*, adopts a term used in Ethiopia to describe a situation where a person ceases to expect progress and the future becomes indistinguishable from the present.

The second approach, developed in recent edited collections and special issues (Cooper and Pratten 2015; Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016; Stambach and Hall 2017), focuses on more hopeful orientations to the future, and uncertainty as a source of possibility. Contributors cite young people for whom the future remains a motivation, as they cling to a belief that they will succeed, albeit aware of their uncertain circumstances. Many are convinced that they personally will find their dream job, or will rise socially or materially, after completing schooling (Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016; Oldenburg 2016). While they see older youths 'stuck' in their life paths, uncertainty affords the possibility that they may be the ones who defy the odds. For these young people, uncertainty can be seen as a type of social resource (Cooper and Pratten 2015).

A third, less commonly articulated, approach draws attention to young people who are relatively satisfied with their lives and neither particularly frustrated nor hopeful about the future. Hope and waiting may be key responses to uncertainty (Hänsch, Kroeker, and Oldenburg 2017), but they are not universal. Jones (2020), for instance, reports on his research with young men in eastern Uganda who express little frustration that their education has not radically transformed their lives, having appreciated the social aspect of schooling and feeling some sense of an educated identity. Pursuit of education can for some be as important as its ends (Hefner 2017).

3. Schooling and the production of futures

In line with modernist and neoliberal concerns with managing uncertainty, schooling is part of a quest to fix the future but also uses the future to inspire. Across Africa, engagement with schooling is often motivated by the concept of a successful future. It promises variously economic prosperity, jobs, health, social security or income, and young people come to see it as framing their future possibilities (Weiss 2009; Cole and Durham 2008; Riggan 2016; Stambach 2017). As Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein (2016, 12) observe, Western schooling has hugely influenced African societies, instilling an 'unshakable individual belief in personal success through education'.

Both state and global discourses shape school children's perspectives on the future (Laube 2016; Maurus 2016). As reported by Poluha (2004) in relation to Ethiopia and Riggan (2016) in neighbouring Eritrea, the state often has a strong interest in inciting particular imagined futures that will inspire young people to serve the economic and even military needs of the nation. Yet schools are not always successful in transforming young people's aspirations. Riggan (2016) reports on Eritrean youth's rejection of their government's nationalist agendas, while Maurus (2016) points to how Hamar children in rural Ethiopia retain a desire to be immersed in cyclical agro-pastoral life, whereas their urban counterparts are convinced by schooling to imagine linear futures leading to more formal jobs.

For those who do embrace the futures set out through schooling, reality can prove disappointing. Laube (2016) describes the firm belief among rural children, parents and teachers in northern Ghana that formal education and professional jobs are the only possible route to success, yet with poor quality schools and limited employment prospects, most experience a vast gap between expectations and reality that they refer to as a 'deep fall'. Those with more education may fall further. Engeler and Steuer (2017) recount how even graduates are unable to employ their expensively acquired degrees. In Tanzania, a proliferation of universities, aiming to satisfy the demand for higher education, has exacerbated graduate unemployment (Sambaiger 2017). Some graduates, having been led to expect white-collar positions, reject low status poorly paid positions, preferring to remain unemployed (Jeffrey 2010; Honwana 2012; Mains 2013). Unsurprisingly, many youths express a sense of schooling having failed them (Stambach 2017), the promise education in situations of economic hardship evoking Berlant's (2011) notion of 'cruel optimism'.

The promise that education sells is not, however, firmly fixed. Children are encouraged to imagine, to dream. The futures on offer are 'full of possibility' (Stambach 2017), albeit generally unattainable. As Dungey and Meinert (2017) observe, in preparing young people to expect professional jobs, schools might contribute to young people becoming 'stuck' but at the same time enable them collectively to hope for better times. Moreover, 'present actions are directed towards a vision of the future which merely serves as a guide-line rather than a potential reality' (Hänsch, Kroeker, and Oldenburg 2017, 5). The future schools present serves other purposes than simply a referent against which to judge success.

What then of the promise of 'survival'? This seems a much more modest and less open offer than the futures usually held out by governments and schools. The next section of this paper places the discourse of survival through education in the Lesotho context, exploring the uncertainties faced by young people within the kingdom, and some of the ways in which schooling is envisaged to intervene.

4. Lesotho: an uncertain context and an education system for survival

Lesotho, a small country surrounded by South Africa, has in recent decades been confronted with increasing food insecurity, unemployment and poverty (Rantšo 2016). While fiercely defending its independent status, Lesotho's political economy has always functioned in close relation to its larger neighbour. Historically, Lesotho supplied migrant labour to South Africa: Basotho men worked in the gold mines and sent remittances home, sustaining the national economy (Ferguson 1990). The end of apartheid in the 1990s brought a radical shift in labour patterns: employment opportunities for Basotho men diminished as South African workers gained favour with the new government. Meanwhile increasing numbers of women (previously prohibited) migrated to South Africa as domestic workers or commercial farm workers but on significantly lower wages than miners (Crush and Dodson 2010). Currently, around 200,000 of Lesotho's 2 million citizens live across the border.

Domestically, a trade agreement with the USA (the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act) has brought East Asian garment manufacturers to the country, creating 45,000 factory jobs. Despite the low pay, women (alone or with children) have been attracted to the lowland urban peripheries where the factories are located. The shift in migration patterns is changing how children navigate towards the future and imagine (gendered) employment trajectories. For boys, it is possible to find work in the rural areas as herders, albeit this is seldom lucrative or secure. While mine work is scarce, there are other possibilities for those who migrate, including commercial farm work, security and construction. For girls, there are very few prospects in rural areas, but domestic and farm work in South Africa or factory work in Lesotho are credible options.

Compounding the dramatic labour market changes, Lesotho also has the world's second-highest HIV prevalence (Tchuenche et al. 2018). Prevalence is around 25% of the adult population (Low et al. 2019) and is rising, especially among women (Tchuenche et al. 2018). Recurrent food crises

have afflicted the country over the past two decades. In 2014–2015, southern Africa experienced a period of extreme drought leading to food shortages in 2016, and inflated food prices. A 67% reduction in maize production meant that families could no longer rely on their staple (Low et al. 2019). Young people in Lesotho are thus experiencing multiple and simultaneous routinised uncertainties.

In response to growing poverty and worsening employment prospects, a new Curriculum and Assessment Policy (MoET 2008) introduced an ‘integrated curriculum’ that aims to equip schoolchildren in grades 1–10 with skills for dealing with various ‘life challenges’. The curriculum is radical in its ambition to move away from a purely academic focus, driven by examinations in siloed academic subjects. Intended to progress the socio-economic development of both the individual and society, the curriculum sets out a mission to promote survival and save a young generation from poverty through education. It elaborates:

... the formulation of this Policy Framework is oriented towards approaches placing primacy on survival of a learner, not only in his/her daily school routine but also as a member of a broad community life, today and tomorrow, locally and globally (MoET 2008, 4)

To this end, the curriculum incorporates compulsory topics such as lifeskills (in the new learning area ‘Personal, Spiritual and Social’) and business education (within the learning area ‘Creativity and Entrepreneurship’). Lifeskills was introduced to Lesotho’s schools more than a decade ago (Ansell 2009), addressing the three dimensions of survival that we discuss in this paper: the preservation of life, morality and gainful livelihoods were understood to be inherently linked. The introduction of education for creativity and entrepreneurship is intended to bring a focus on practical subjects that are relevant within the immediate environment (Dungey and Ansell 2020). Lesotho, then, is a country in which young people are exposed to threats to both economic and physical wellbeing. These threats have informed the shape of schooling, and are reflected in people’s attitudes to the role of education.

5. The research

The fieldwork reported in this paper was conducted in two villages. Both lacked electricity and drew water from springs or standpipes. Mabana¹ comprised 55 households and was closer to the capital city, Maseru, but had an unstable phone signal and was served by only one minibus a day. Paleneng had 118 households, was slightly better connected by regular minibuses to the district capital and was much closer to the South African border. Mabana’s primary school was a 40-min walk from the village and the closest secondary school was a 10–15 km mountain walk away. Many children attended schools in Maseru, partly to avoid the long walk, but also due to the perceived higher quality of education. Paleneng had one primary school within easy walking distance, and a primary and secondary school about 30 min’ walk away, with classes up to grade 10. Again, some children attended school elsewhere, with a number moving to South Africa for secondary school.

The research formed part of a larger project that explored the relationship between aspiration and education in three country settings – Lesotho, India and Laos – from 2016 to 2018. In collecting the Lesotho data, Claire Elisabeth Dungey spent 9½ months conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the two villages, and Nicola Ansell visited the field sites three times for 2–3 week visits. We mostly interacted with those who were about to finish primary school and hence making important decisions about their futures. Children in grade 7 ranged from 12 to 18 years old, depending on the age at which they started school, periods of absence, and repetition of classes.

The analysis presented here draws upon multiple methods. Participant observation was conducted in classrooms and in everyday practices such as harvesting. We also conducted semi-structured interviews and group activities with parents, community leaders, teachers and children (some attending primary or secondary school and others who had dropped out), and with education policy-makers (116 interviews in total). Most were conducted in Sesotho.² Additional data was produced

through (video-recorded) roleplays focused on problems that young people might encounter in the villages. Roleplay is a child-friendly method that produces data with research participants (Ansell et al. 2012). While the plays did not directly represent participants' realities (they are acts of fiction delivered with a spirit of fun), they did reveal the types of action, forms of narrative, and categories of understanding that children use to make sense of school, the perceived impact of leaving school, and how these relate to survival.

6. Ho iphelisa – the discourse of survival

When speaking about the purpose of education, children, parents and teachers use the verbs *ho phela* and *ho iphelisa*. These are variously translated as 'to live', 'to earn/make a living' or 'to survive'. The English term 'survive' is also widely deployed, not only in policy documents as cited above, but when children or adults want to stress what they mean. Asked why they want formal sector jobs that will bring them lots of money, a group of secondary school learners responded:

Learner 6: *Ke batla ho phela hamonate*. [I want to live a good life.]

Interviewer: *Ho phela hamonate, ho phela hamonate keng?* [To live a good life, what is 'ho phela hamonate'?)

Learner 5: To survive.

Learner 6: *Ke hore ke ... Ho khotsofatsa tlhoko tsa ka kaofela*. [It is to satisfy all my needs.]

Learner 4: To survive.

The use of these terms is usually associated with economic sustenance and particularly access to food (an ongoing preoccupation in drought-hit rural Lesotho). The connection with education is seen as linear. Education gives access to formal sector jobs which provide income and in turn enable survival. Sometimes this association was made very explicit. One of the male teachers explained that these days, without a permanent job, 'you can't survive'.

Ho iphelisa was also translated as 'to fend for oneself' or 'work for oneself'. It was associated with having a salary or other means of income generation or food production and was generally seen in relation to the individual. However, a closely related term, *ho phelisa*, refers to enabling the survival of others. While less commonly uttered, some children spoke of using their education to get work to assist their parents. 18-year-old school leaver Tiisetso, for instance, spoke of wanting work in the mines because 'It is said that there is a lot of money there, so I can be able to work there hence be able to help relatives to survive'.³ Likewise parents referred to the purpose of educating their children. Rethabile explained: 'They should be able to live well and nicely, and they should also help me survive as their mother'.

The discourse of survival did not appear to presuppose extreme existential uncertainty. Rather it concerned being able to live well or nicely (*phela hantle* or *hamonate*) and was contrasted with 'struggle' (*ho sokola*). 22-year-old Poloko referred to struggling in the village due to the absence of water taps and shops, and also of 'braai packs' – packaged cuts of meat for the barbecue. He was not preoccupied with luxury: rather than an expensive house, he said he would build a basic house leaving him enough money to eat well. 20-year-old Tefo, however, wanted something more than mere survival: he wanted to return to education, saying of those uneducated youth that remained in the village: 'They still survive but I don't want to live like them'. Tefo wanted education to provide him with a better form of survival through a career beyond the village.

The other widely used antonym of 'survive' was 'destroy' (*ho senya*). It was said of those young people who dropped out of school and became herders, or simply loitered around the village in the absence of employment, that their lives or their futures were 'destroyed'. Not only were their own lives destroyed, but they were destroyed for their parents, wasting the resources expended upon them and becoming a burden.

The discourses of destruction and survival in Lesotho point to the existence of three distinct but related dimensions: economic, moral and physical. Schooling is seen to intervene in all three. In the moral realm, there was a concern for young people's moral integrity that was understood to be harmed (or destroyed) when loitering (associated with dropping out of school) led to drinking, drug taking or extra-marital sex. Like economic survival, moral survival is not purely an individual aspiration but relates to respectability and one's place in a family and community. Moral survival was intimately connected with physical survival. Drug and alcohol use and illicit sex were feared for their health consequences, but so too were certain types of work and migration that were considered to expose bodies to ill health, violence, and potentially an early death. Schooling was believed to help children avoid these pitfalls. In all three dimensions, then, education was understood to play a broadly positive and protective role.

In the remainder of this paper, we explore the three dimensions of survival – economic, moral and physical – in turn. In so doing, we make two key contributions to the growing literature on young people's futures and how they are produced through schooling. First, our data points to a more modest set of aspirations than recent studies (e.g. Laube 2016; Sambaiger 2017), have highlighted. Rather than a breadth of exciting possibilities (Stambach 2017), education is valued as a means to a 'struggle-free' existence – a secure and relatively comfortable life. Second, following Hänsch, Kroeker, and Oldenburg (2017), we emphasise the multi-scalar temporality of aspiration. Securing survival in relation to the complex uncertainties that shape young people's lives is an ongoing demand. Education may be viewed as a pathway to survival in the long term, but also (as the policy document cited above revealed) in the immediate term. Immediate needs do not simply stand in the way of long-term aspiration, but the short and long terms are different scales in the same social field. The imperative to survive is not always best served by pursuing schooling, but sometimes alternative routes to survival in its various dimensions need to be weighed against each other.

7. Economic survival

The economic foundation of 'survival' or 'a good life' were apparent in many conversations. Realeboha, a father from Mabana, said that surviving meant 'whatever you need, you don't struggle to get it', referring to 'eating and clothing; even things like having money'. Thabo, who attended Mabana primary school, described what he meant by a 'struggle-free life': 'That is the kind of life in which, if I have cravings for a certain thing, I can just go and buy it'. The key to this, he said, was quality education. The idea that schooling offers a means of survival (*mekhoa ea boipheliso*) was widespread in both villages. According to Ntate Lefa, chief Mabana's 'right-hand-man', 'when they are not educated, the means of survival becomes hard as opposed to that of the educated ones, it is easy for the educated ones'.

The idea of self-reliance was almost equally prominent. 21-year-old school dropout, Botle, explained that she wanted 'to work for myself with my own hands and bit by bit buy things for myself'. Attaining self-sufficiency was a challenge though, and not easily accomplished. Elderly Ntate Tsela said he could name no one successful in Mabana 'Because these people are still all struggling here. There is no self-sufficient person here'.

Both parents and teachers expressed concern that children would fail to attain a desirable level of education and consequently would remain reliant on their families. Thus, schooling was not only about the survival of the individual, but also generational responsibilities. Paballo, who attended secondary school in Paleneng, explained 'I am going to help my family in that by the time I start working, I will have to build my mother a shop which will earn her a survival'. Mpatsi, from Paleneng, who was 13, wanted to be a policewoman in Maseru, unlike her mother who worked in a factory⁴, and her father who was a driver. She reasoned that she could help her family with funeral expenses or repair their house since as a policewoman she would earn more than her parents could. Young people were expected both to relieve their parents of the burden of their care, and actively support

them as they grew older. Rethabile remarked of her children: 'Now had they got educated, I wouldn't be saying that I am stricken by hunger'.

Education was understood to play various roles in enabling survival. Ntate Tsela saw literacy as the crucial element: 'If you don't know how to read, you would be unable to do everything for yourself by yourself. Realebaha described how he had to go to the mines in order to survive but his children, through their education, should be able to rely on their intellect. One teacher, embracing the new curriculum's emphasis on entrepreneurship and developing every child's talents, pointed to children selling sweets at school as a starting point for a means of survival. He talked about nurturing talents such as football or singing in school, that might enable children to survive, contrasting this with education in the past when the requirement to pass English in order to get a certificate destroyed many children's futures. Like Mpatsi, however, many believed education's promise of survival rested on formal sector employment. Lebo, a 19-year-old who had left school and married, said she admired the nurses in a nearby village as they were able to fend for themselves.

Nonetheless, some saw livestock and farming as equally valid routes to survival that did not require education. 22-year-old Poloko left school after grade 3 having learned to read and do sums. He said he was no longer using these skills but by 'going to the veldt' (working as a herder) he would acquire animals of his own through which he would be able to survive. Others also talked of the value of having animals they could sell them to 'make ends meet'. Ntate Tsela said he would like his grandchildren to plough for themselves 'Because they will survive through that food'. When asked 'Which of the two do you find to be more important, taking you children to school or letting them take care of the animals?' Ntate Mokhotlong responded 'No, they are similar, because I survive through them', again emphasising the generational dependence on young people. He did, however, suggest that by sending his son to the cattle post, he was destroying his future, and that it would be better to send him to school in Maseru to avoid this temptation. Even a teacher at Mabana primary school suggested that when it came to survival, livestock rearing and farming were of equal importance with going to school.

To some extent, these divergent views reflected a historical change. Making a comparison with the past, Me Mpokeng, a mother explained '... in the old days, seven people would live in one household and relying on just one person who has gone out to work, but now, everyone is able to go out and fend for himself or herself'. This perhaps relates to a time when a miner's salary could support a household. On the other hand, she acknowledged, it is now harder to get fields to plough, so it is better to find a job. Others noted the unreliability of farming in recent years.

These different approaches also reflect different temporalities. Using education to get a job is a long-term approach to securing survival. For some young people, threats to survival, or the desire for a 'good life' are more immediate. Me Mosela, who taught at Mabana primary school, said some young people who had sponsorship for secondary school nonetheless dropped out and got work in South Africa 'because they are in need of fashionable clothes'.

In contrast to research elsewhere in Africa, such as that elaborated by Honwana (2012) or in the volumes edited by Cooper and Pratten (2015) or Stambach and Hall (2017), our study found that Basotho young people's orientation to the future was not characterised strongly either by resignation or hope. Instead, they prioritised achieving a degree of comfort and self-sufficiency that would benefit themselves or their families. The possibility of achieving an income for short-term 'survival', even at the cost of a better paying job in the future, could make leaving school the most reasonable option.

8. Moral survival

Besides securing economic survival, education was expected to play a role in preventing children's futures from being destroyed morally. Parents and teachers sought to orient them to the future morally (Cooper and Pratten 2015) by raising respectable, law-abiding young people, and were anxious that if children were not kept busy, they might 'loiter' and become 'out of control'. This

anxiety was not only about the child's individual moral survival, but also the generational transmission of values such as respect (*tlhompho*) or listening (*ho mamela*) to elders. Drinking, uttering insults and smoking marijuana were perceived as practices that could threaten the survival of everyone as violence could occur in the village. As one parent in Mabana said:

When they come back from school, they stop at the bar and drink beer ... They sniff glue ... They smoke marijuana. Children of these days, they are disrespectful.

Echoing these concerns, 45-year-old mother of five Me Keneiloe said that some young people would end up with their lives destroyed due to drugs, and that children end up not listening to their parents, with negative impacts on their collective futures.

Some right now, like maybe we now get a pension, right? They torture their parents by taking that money from them because they are not working, so they will take the money and buy alcohol with it and waste it; they even end up killing their parents, it's one of the things that they torture their parents with.

The association with joblessness was also raised by Ntate Tlotliso, a father from Mabana. He spoke of how children loitering around the village make a parent's soul sick. Such children are not working for themselves or for their parents, but just 'destroy'. They go out, come back, want food and then 'When they are full, they leave and go to the bars'. Moral destruction has implications for economic survival, both of the individual young person and their family.

A connection was drawn between leaving school prematurely, failing to obtain paid work and loitering, resulting in moral destruction. Ntate Teboho, a Paleneng teacher, explained how even boys who drop out of school to herd livestock have no independent income⁵ and are therefore tempted into stealing and end up in prison. He spoke of one boy from the village who stole sheep from his father. Schooling, then, is seen as a means of occupying children, so that they survive morally in the short term, as well as providing them with the means to survive economically in the future, and avoid the temptations of addiction and crime. These distinct yet related temporalities echo the writing of Guyer (2007) as well as the special issue of *Tsantsa* edited by Hänsch, Kroeker, and Oldenburg (2017).

A group of primary school learners was encouraged to devise a roleplay about a situation where one child wants to leave school and the child's friends offer advice. The play, which was performed away from the school premises, focused on a boy who disliked schooling. He was caught hiding in the school's latrine area and beaten. There followed an altercation in the classroom with a policeman, in which the boy hit his teacher, complaining about always being beaten. Once at home, he was caught by his grandfather, and the following exchange took place.

Good friend: Please attend school and study and listen to your parents

Bad friend: School is useless

Sister: What do you mean it is useless?

Grandfather: What day was it when I was telling you to love school, and you felt like I am daydreaming?

Bad friend: We get lashed each and every day (Role play, Lesotho, September 2017)

The boy was then summoned to a village meeting where he blew marijuana smoke in the face of the chief, and beat the chief and villagers with a stick in a show of extreme disregard for authority.

While the scenario is far-fetched, the children communicated an understanding that if they do not engage with education their moral futures might be destroyed. At school, children were often taught about how friends could be negative influencers. The 'good' friends here promoted schooling, whereas the 'bad friends' argued it was useless and encouraged the boy to drop out. Various characters advised him to go to school in order to be able to feed himself: a parent warned him that if he stayed away from school, he would sleep on an empty stomach and the village chief refused

repeatedly to give him money or food. Perceived links between economic and moral survival were made clear.

As with economic survival, however, there are occasions when moral survival demands a disengagement from education, whether in the short or longer term. A narrative that illustrates this well is that of Nthabiseng, a 16-year-old girl who believed strongly in her parents' advice that schooling was a positive and that certificates could facilitate employment. When interviewed, Nthabiseng was pregnant and had recently dropped out of secondary school. She explained her favourite subjects were English, Sesotho, mathematics and 'lifeskills' (using the English word). When asked what lifeskills means, she said 'I think it is life – a good life'. Describing this further, she said a good life was to be disciplined, you do what you are told to do, go where you are sent to go, echoing Poluha's (2004) discussion of how young people have to fit into hierarchies of respect. Discipline and the good (moral) life were important to Nthabiseng. In her dream of becoming a schoolteacher she would offer counselling to 'vulnerable' orphans to ensure they 'avoid any bad practices and evil acts that they might come across', such as girls sleeping with boys.

But Nthabiseng had experienced what Johnson-Hanks (2002) calls a 'vital conjuncture' – a life-changing moment. When asked why she got married she explained that one Friday after school she was abducted by a man who took her phone and broke the sim card, stole her money, and took her to his place where he locked the door, holding her against her wishes. In the morning the man went with a friend to Nthabiseng's parent's house to ask permission to marry her since they had spent the night together. This practice, known as 'elopement' (*ho shobela*) is relatively common. To refuse marriage in such circumstances risks rendering a young woman unmarriageable, thereby destroying her future. But on marriage, young women are expected (often required) to leave school.

Nthabiseng had married her abductor and was pregnant but hoped to continue her education at a specialist high school that accepted young mothers. She still believed education offered moral benefits, as well as providing income to support the economic survival of her family. But as Realeboha observed, when young women marry – which often happens if they leave school and have no job – they end up struggling even more.

Schooling is understood to play various roles in relation to children's moral survival – saving them from destruction in the present and future. As elsewhere in the world (Cole and Durham 2008), future-making for youth requires investment in morality. Moral lessons populate the textbooks and pervade the classrooms intended to enable young people to confront uncertainties with moral confidence.

9. Physical survival

There was an anxiety in both communities about threats to young people's physical safety and health. While, perhaps surprisingly, the English term 'survive' was barely used in relation to these risks, it is noteworthy that the word for 'health' (*bophelo*) stems from *ho phela* (to live or survive) and questions about life are often interpreted as questions about health. Anxieties about physical survival were connected in close and complex ways with concerns about both moral and economic survival. Drugs, alcohol and unprotected sex were all associated with physical as well as moral dangers. Ha Paleneng's community councillor explained how dropping out of school and visiting shebeens can destroy young people's lives:

Sometimes they can be sick or get older quickly or even infected by diseases because some drugs are dangerous or again, they even go there without eating very well and just drinking and smoking and making them weak or something and tired every time, so when time goes on, you will see big problems.

The most commonly cited risk to life and health in Paleneng was dropping out of school to work in the Ceres fruit plantations in South Africa's Western Cape (referred to as *Kapa* or *Serese*). For those without tertiary education, who cannot find other employment, the plantations offer a means of individual economic survival and the possibility of contributing to family survival.

However, teachers from the local schools talked of young people returning sick or dead. Ntate Teboho asserted that 30% of his own classmates ‘died when they came back from that *nyei* [one], *Kapa*’. The main perceived threat was HIV, which is a source of anxiety for many in Lesotho, given the very high prevalence (Tchuenche et al. 2018). However, the teachers also talked of the hard physical work of carrying sacks of oranges on one’s shoulder, and of the violence experienced in the plantations.

Me Mosela who taught at a primary school said the young people ‘don’t even make five years, they come back sick’, a situation she attributed to the freedoms that life in a foreign country offered for unprotected sex and many boyfriends. In her view, ‘they don’t make a living [survive], they don’t make a living at all, because they come back sick, sick. They die’. Ntate Leauoa explained the dangers posed by the living conditions: ‘You can hear they say they are in one house and about five to ten people in there, it is not safe’.

Nonetheless, for school leavers amid the uncertainties of life in Lesotho, having work had to be weighed against not having work. Some teachers considered working on the plantations preferable to doing nothing in the village, as the latter might lead young people to stealing. Me Kamahelo, while clear that the best option was to remain safe in school, observed: ‘They are working at the fields, but it is better than staying doing nothing’. Staying at home would not support economic survival and also carried a moral risk. ‘Because they have nothing to eat. If you don’t have anything, when you are growing your needs are more and more and more, and your parents can’t afford [to spend] that money [in] Ntate Tseliso’s shop, they want to steal, they are stealing, they are drinking’.

Children and their families had to navigate existential uncertainties in various ways in their everyday practices. This resonates with the encounters with hunger, sickness and death that Calkins (2016) notes colour people’s engagement with the future in north-eastern Sudan. Usually, parents did not recommend children to go to South Africa while they were still at school and had not learnt to ‘respect’ (*tlhompo*), which might cause them to end up in dangerous situations. Some young people waited to migrate until they were 18 or 20, when they were perceived to be more mature (as Punch 2015 also notes in rural Bolivian youth migration to Argentina). Teachers and some parents, however, reported they could not control whether young people migrated after they finished schooling. They advised them to stay in school, both because primary education was compulsory but also because, in the post-apartheid context, young people could no longer secure, dependable work in the mines, and plantation work was insecure.

Other potential jobs (including mining) were also considered to carry risks to physical survival. There were some that children themselves were conscious of and that shaped their own aspirations. When asked to generate and rank a set of possible future jobs, the physical effort and dangers involved were among children’s considerations. 14-year-old Kutloisiso insisted ‘People’s lives are in danger when they work in the mines’.

In other cases, teachers warned children of the risks jobs might expose them to. Me Kamahelo was concerned about boys being attracted to becoming security guards. ‘They see them in the shops and they think that is a very good job. When they see a man holding a gun standing there, they think that is a very good job’. But, she said, the children do not realise that the work is hard, the pay is low and conditions harsh. ‘You can imagine standing there outside, getting cold’. She believed rural children who dropped out of school were vulnerable:

That is a not a job of educated people, because even any person can be a security guard, you are just given a gun there. You stand there you watch for the people who are doing stealing or who that are not accepted in the shop or anywhere you are just standing there. So you are risking your life sometimes. I remember some of them was killed, shot killed there in another shop at Mount Moorosi. ... Their families are left without someone who can help them.

Once again, risks are framed in terms of outcomes of schooling, and the prospects of individual physical survival linked with the family’s economic survival.

Apart from schooling keeping children away from unsafe jobs, or educating them for jobs that carried fewer risks, the lifeskills curriculum was viewed as a means of developing children's skills to navigate both moral and physical risks. Nthabiseng, cited above, talked of the value of lifeskills for a good (moral) life. Teboho, a primary school teacher in Paleneng, described lifeskills as preparing children 'to solve social problems ... like, how to overcome peer pressure ... Yes all about what they need to learn in life so that they could survive'. Me Arabang, a teacher at Mabana primary school, related the value of lifeskills education to the Basotho norm that children and parents cannot 'talk about issues that relate to teenagers'. Because children are afraid to discuss such issues with their parents, lifeskills teaches children about caring for themselves for 'good health and behaviour'.

10. Conclusions

This paper is a contribution to a growing body of literature that calls attention to crisis as constant in the subjective experience of many African youth, and uncertainty as the norm rather than the exception (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004; Cooper and Pratten 2015; Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016). We also add to scholarship on education and the role it plays in shaping young people's orientations to the future (Weiss 2009; Cole and Durham 2008; Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016; Riggan 2016; Stambach 2017)

Uncertainties (economic, health, environmental) shape the perceived purpose and experiences of education in Lesotho. Basic education's purpose is framed by the government, teachers, parents and children alike in terms not so much of hope and possibility, as literature has noted elsewhere (Cole and Durham 2008; Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016; Stambach and Hall 2017), but rather of survival. There is an expectation that life for today's young people, given both national and global economic conditions, will not be easy. Survival, though, is characterised not simply in relation to existential threats, but as avoidance of the need to struggle. Uncertainty is not viewed as a field that generates hope and creativity, as Cooper and Pratten (2015), Stambach (2017) and others suggest, nor as a situation to be waited out, as Jeffrey (2010) or Honwana (2012) describe, rather as something to be overcome. Young people do not embrace uncertainties but want to navigate them in order to avoid being destroyed by them. Importantly, though, the framing is not a simple binary of survival versus destruction (securing versus losing), but different degrees of survival are possible. The research thus shows that young people's relations to the future may be more nuanced and context specific than has hitherto been recognised.

There are three distinct but related dimensions to the discourse of survival in Lesotho. Primary among these is economic survival – being able to afford a relatively comfortable life, and certainly having enough to eat. But there is also a concern to avoid moral and physical destruction. In line with other research that draws attention to the efforts of education to enable young people to take control of uncertain futures (Hänsch, Kroeker, and Oldenburg 2017; Stambach 2017), we show how schools in Lesotho are intended to equip young people with skills, values and practices that might be relevant for the unstable job market, but we argue that they also aim to save young people's futures by giving them 'lifeskills' and educating them on 'moral values' and uncertain situations. The precarity of (respectable) life means this is welcomed by children and their parents.

It is also noteworthy that when people talk about education, they view it as a means of survival that extends beyond the individual learner. While the term *ho iphelisa* refers to an individual's ability to fend for themselves, this is seen as having benefits for the family and the wider community. Sometimes the verb *ho phelisa* is used to refer directly to the survival of others, but often the concern is that young people should cease to be 'a burden' on their parents and wider families, and progressively become contributors (as Punch 2015 has noted in rural Bolivia). Parents and teachers expressed a fear of losing children to South Africa, as even those who planned to return might be exposed to violence or illness. Engagement with education, then, concerns the survival of families and communities, and in the view of government society as a whole, rather than just the children who attend school. This collective purpose for education – distinct from the nationalist function that has

been the focus of a number of studies (e.g. Poluha 2004; Cheney 2008; Riggan 2016) – is often overlooked by scholars.

The research also contributes to work on the temporalities of schooling. Schooling is promoted as an institution that will help young people manage their immediate and distant futures, ‘today and tomorrow’ as the policy framework advises (MoET 2008). While perhaps enabling young people to earn an income in the long term, it is also seen by parents, teachers and children as a means of avoiding trouble or danger in the immediate term, thus protecting moral and physical survival. Yet present and future survival sometimes come into tension, and one risk has to be weighed against others. Short-term possibilities to secure income for family survival may conflict with longer-term aspirations, and an immediate need to preserve reputation through marriage may compromise prospects of economic survival. There is an important lesson here for research on education and youth futures: schooling decisions need to be understood temporally. Rather than immediate circumstances intervening in aspirations, they belong to the same social field. Decisions to disengage from education are also about survival. From this perspective of modest ambition, and perhaps in line with Jones’ (2020) observations in Uganda, school dropout is not so much a disaster as a proportionate course of action. Managing the future cannot be undertaken without regard for the immediate term. This observation may illuminate other situations where many young people appear to leave school on a whim, despite expressions of faith vested in schooling as essential to success in life, thus contributing to the emerging conceptualisation of the relation between education and youth futures.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for villages and individuals.
2. Most extracts are translated from Sesotho.
3. Although there are few opportunities for mine work today, after generations of history, this continues to be viewed as a lucrative and desirable job.
4. Despite the relative availability of factory work, this was seldom mentioned by the young people as an aspiration.
5. Boys who herd for an unrelated person are generally paid one cow after a year’s employment, though this is not always forthcoming. Those who herd for their own families are often unpaid.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the young people, parents and teachers who participated in this research as well as Dr Pulane Lefoka from the National University of Lesotho for her support. We would like to thank Nthabeleng Sekese, Thabang Hloele and Motena Samonyane who provided useful assistance in the field. Thabang Hloele transcribed endless audio/sound recordings carefully. We would also like to thank the organisers and participants at the conference ‘Education and visions of future(s)’ at Bayreuth University, Germany for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

ESRC-DFID Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems ES/N01037X/1.

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