

HEART

HIGH-QUALITY TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FOR RESULTS



ESRC – FCDO RAISING LEARNING OUTCOMES (RLO) PROGRAMME

A synthesis of outputs produced from Call 2:
'Challenging Contexts'

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List of abbreviations

RLO	Raising Learning Outcomes
SLM	School leadership and management

1 Introduction: Improving learning outcomes in challenging contexts

Education systems and student learning do not occur in a vacuum and are heavily influenced by the environment in which they exist. Context is crucial in determining a child's learning outcomes. The complex relationship between the education contexts and interventions and learning outcomes can be further understood via examination of education systems through a contextual lens. This context refers to social, political, economic, institutional, cultural, structural and geographic factors. Recognising the importance of context, the second funding call in 2015 under the ESRC-DFID Raising Learning Outcomes (RLO) programme focused on funding new research into 'challenging contexts'. This call sought to specially fund a portfolio of research focused on three contexts in which education systems face challenges: remote rural areas, urban slums and border cities.

The RLO programme aimed to enable more effective policies and interventions by providing policymakers and practitioners with concrete ideas on how to improve learning for all and an understanding of how these ideas will translate to their specific contexts and institutions. A portfolio of research was funded with the intention of improving the knowledge base pertaining to the complex relationships between elements of the education system, the context in which they are embedded, and the dynamics operating within the system and how they impact on efforts to raise learning outcomes for all. Three annual research calls have taken a different but complementary theme within this overall focus on interactions between system elements, context and dynamics and how these impact on raising learning outcomes. Whilst Call 1 focused on effective teaching as a system element (see the synthesis paper on 'Effective Teaching'), Call 2 focused on challenging contexts, and Call 3 focused on the dynamic of accountability (see the synthesis paper on 'Accountability'). In total, 30 projects were funded through the RLO programme across these three themes (ESRC & DFID, 2019).

A sizeable body of evidence has found that learning levels and access to schooling have been particularly challenging in remote rural areas. There are numerous studies globally that have identified belonging to a rural region or remote community as an additional factor that can prevent children and especially those who are more disadvantaged from accessing quality schooling (UNESCO, 2014). However, data pertaining to these contexts often lacks disaggregation beyond rural categorisation, failing to consider other cross-cutting, critical factors (Westbrook *et al.*, 2013). These contexts face additional challenges in terms of teacher recruitment and retention, and attendance rates of teachers and students, as well as other aspects such as weak management of decentralisation reforms. Similarly, there is also evidence showing that within urban slums, inequities in poor urban environments can often get hidden when urban/rural comparisons are made (Jones *et al.*, 2014). Finally, and relevant for this call, research has shown that cities near or on national borders between two education systems can often be neglected due to weak service delivery, transient populations, or the effects of conflicts/humanitarian crises (UNESCO, 2011).

The three challenging contexts have been further impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Globally, at its height, the pandemic resulted in school closures for over 1.6 billion children (UNESCO, 2021). These school closures and ongoing disruptions have further threatened to widen the existing 'learning crisis' wherein many students across the globe were in school but learning very little even before the pandemic hit (World Bank, 2018). Learners in remote rural areas, urban slums and other similar challenging contexts have faced additional challenges during the pandemic and have been shown to have been disproportionately affected in terms of access and learning (see Aslam & Rawal, 2021). Developing evidence as the world emerges from this tremendous health shock indicates that the detrimental effects on children's learning will be far greater than anticipated (GEEAP, 2022). There is also evidence to suggest that the pandemic has further widened the educational inequalities that had already existed prior to the crisis. In particular, data from the peak

of the Covid-19 crisis from 2020 and 2021 have shown that inequality in low-income and middle-income country contexts has increased along several dimensions, including gender, geography, socio-economic background, age-grade and school type (see The World Bank, UNESCO, & UNICEF, 2021; Azevedo *et al.*, 2021). The food insecurity created by the pandemic has further exacerbated childhood malnutrition and is predicted to increase with further, long-term implications for learning opportunities experienced by those affected, along with economic and other life outcomes (GEEAP, 2022). While the bulk of RLO research occurred before the onset of the pandemic, the lessons drawn from these studies on challenging contexts have become even more relevant in the ongoing Covid-19 era.

This paper synthesises the evidence produced by five projects funded under Call 2 for challenging contexts.¹ This synthesis is based on review of the available literature produced by the RLO-funded projects across the second call as well as relevant outputs from the Impact Initiative.² It forms the second of three such syntheses, with the other two focusing on 'Effective Teaching' (Call 1) and 'Accountability' (Call 3). These syntheses aim to present common and differentiated findings across the RLO research grants – focusing particularly on what the research tells us regarding how to improve learning outcomes, how these findings are situated within the wider literature on education and improving learning outcomes, and the policy lessons and achieving impact emerging from this analysis. The syntheses focus specifically on important cross-cutting themes such as gender and girls' education, education for children with disabilities, and education systems. Table 1 summarises the evidence discussed within this synthesis paper. Figure 1 illustrates the geographic spread of where the projects under this theme are based.

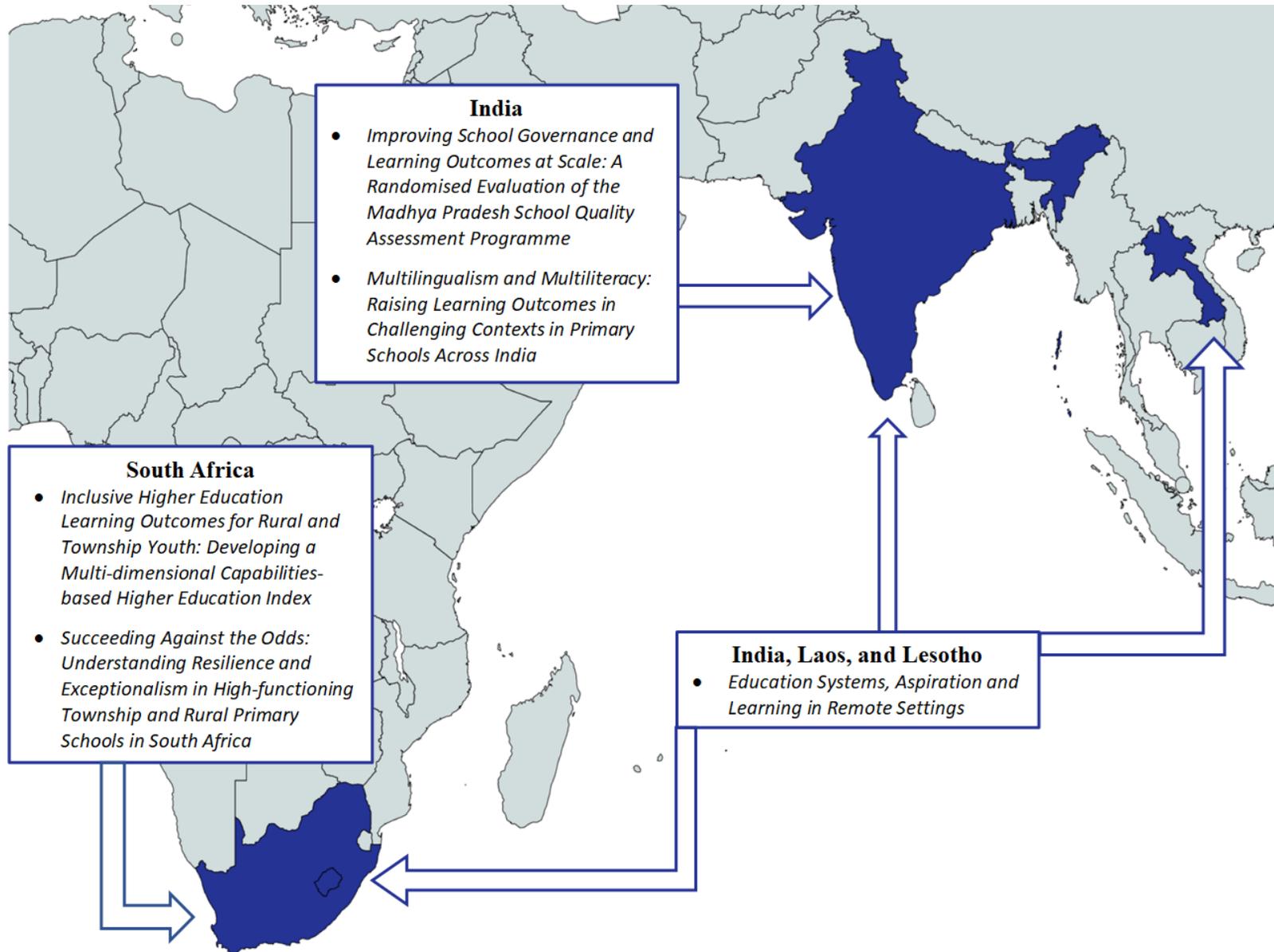
Table 1: RLO evidence on 'Challenging Contexts'

	Number of outputs
Journal article	19
Book chapter(s)	4
Working paper, technical paper, or background report	2
Conference paper, presentation, or abstract	-
Policy brief	-
TOTAL	25

¹ Blogs are an important tool for reporting programme impact, especially given their immediacy and the longer timeframe needed to produce formal outputs through journals, book chapters, and book publications. Blogs were reviewed as a form of programme output, but they were not included in this paper, as the blogs reviewed reflected themes and findings that were later formalised in other outputs.

² The Impact Initiative website is linked [here](#). Relevant outputs include four Research for Policy and Practice reports, nine Impact Stories and one briefing paper.

Figure 2: Geographic spread of projects under the 'Challenging Contexts' theme



2 Methodology

This synthesis report began with a full scoping of the outputs published in association with the 30 RLO projects. Each grant holder disseminated published outputs on the Impact Initiative website (linked in the footnote above), as well as the UK Research and Innovation Gateway to Research website.³ ESRC also maintains a spreadsheet of all reported outputs categorised by project/grant.⁴ To locate actual copies of these outputs, searches were made across academic databases, Google, and conference websites (to find specific abstracts or presentations). In total, searches resulted in the location of 134 actual copies of published outputs across the three calls. Researchers then created an Excel spreadsheet categorising each of these outputs by both call and associated project to better identify common themes and connections. Methodologies and summaries of each output were added to the excel sheet to serve as a robust database of RLO outputs.

A challenge in the initial phases of data synthesis for this report came in the form of locating accessible copies of all the listed outputs for RLO projects. Every author self-reports outputs to ESRC (see footnote below), and the databases and websites only keep track of citation information and do not link to actual copies of the documents themselves. Thus, more than 30 self-reported outputs were not located with initial search methods. Of these, the vast majority were classified as conference papers, presentations or abstracts. Due to the nature of these outputs, most or all of them simply may not have been digitally archived in any form, as there was no expectation that these types of outputs would have a digital presence. Nearly all of the remaining unlocated resources were categorised as books or book chapters. For these, researchers emailed the individual authors directly to obtain assistance in tracking down soft copies. For the books and book chapters listed, three of the five contacted authors responded by providing copies of materials, resulting in five additional outputs for a final total of 139. Consequently, this challenge should not be considered a gap in this synthesis report as the authors utilised all available data at the time of writing.

The acquired sources had a broad range of output types, lengths, and depth of research explored. Therefore, each document was carefully evaluated for quality, relevancy and redundancy before making the final list of outputs for each synthesis. In the challenging contexts call, 25 of the original 29 documents are highlighted in this report. For more information regarding each of the utilised sources, including a brief overview of their methodologies, the contexts covered, and type of document, refer to Appendix C. To better see how these outputs aligned with the different RLO projects highlighted in Figure 1, refer to Appendix A for a breakdown of project titles, contexts, intended objectives, and the number of outputs this report utilised for each project. Of note, several projects that fall under the challenging contexts call have yet to produce publicly available outputs at the time of analysis for the synthesis report. Appendix B highlights these projects, the contexts they are working in, and an overview of their aims.

The final list of outputs for the challenging contexts call was synthesised using a narrative synthesis approach along thematic lines. Though each individual project focuses on a specific context or theme, which allowed for natural categorization, further analysis highlighted more

³ <https://gtr.ukri.org>

⁴ It is important to note that the library of outputs available for these synthesis papers was limited to what was available at the time of writing (January to March 2022). In a dissemination workshop held with grant holders at the end of the revision process (May 2022), grant holders noted that there were outputs published that were not included amongst the materials reviewed in the three papers. This is because the Gateway to Research site, which collates grant holder submissions via ResearchFish, would not be updated to show the latest round of ResearchFish submissions until after the writing and feedback period, meaning that much of what was submitted in 2021-2022 is not reflected in these three papers.

interconnected categories, and four major sub-themes emerged around challenging contexts. These four sub-themes provide the structure for Section 3. Other background documents and pertinent literature have been included in this synthesis to provide context and additional information surrounding these categories. After utilising similar methods for the other two synthesis reports in this series, final analysis consisted of discovering cross-cutting themes across all of the RLO programme's outputs (see synthesis reports on 'Effective Teaching' and 'Accountability' as well as notes in this report for more detail).

3 Key findings on Challenging Contexts from the RLO work

The section below presents findings that have emerged from projects funded under the second call of the RLO umbrella. These have been presented below according to the following sub-themes: research that has explored the aspirations of young people and the role that this plays in determining their learning in remote rural and challenging urban settings; the challenges of teaching in multilingual classrooms in difficult contexts; capabilities and epistemic justice; and finally, the role of school leadership and governance for children in challenging contexts.

3.1 Realising the aspirations generated by education in challenging contexts

Much of the evidence under this sub-theme has emerged from one RLO project: 'Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote settings', which uses data collected in three contexts, namely India, Laos and Lesotho. This project focused on how education systems can create policies and interventions to work with young people's aspirations to enhance learning outcomes in remote rural places. Specifically, evidence from this research has tended to focus on aspirations as an orientation towards a desired future and sought a balanced intervention in both research and practice with concern to young people's aspirations in relation to their development (Huijsmans *et al.*, 2021). Field work in the three countries occurred over two years, with researchers collecting data through interviews and observations with students, teachers, education officials, parents and community members. A special issue of *The European Journal of Development Research* provided extensive engagement with the research and practice around aspirations for young people (Huijsmans *et al.*, 2021). This work makes the case for taking aspirations of young people seriously by conceptualising those aspirations as socially produced, recognising the political and economic environment where they emerge as well as the role of cross-cutting issues, which include gender and class. As such, the importance of aspirations for young people's current and future lives is noted especially in adverse and rapidly changing circumstances.

Another output from the project, an ethnographic study by Ansell *et al.* (2020), questions the value of schooling in these contexts, which is encouraged by globalisation and donors. The process of schooling encourages the development of aspirations and capital of young people, who subsequently cannot be absorbed in the labour market, and thus the end result is that despite their education, many of these young people are un-employed or under-employed, as they would be with the absence of education. Rural populations are hence being rendered surplus by the economy: where the economy offers no opportunities, schooling itself cannot deliver on the aspirations that it encourages. Whilst the authors argue that schooling introduces a routine into young people's lives, the fact that their teachers are often come from backgrounds and geographies different from those experienced by their student populations creates aspirations through educational promises that many rural children from these settings cannot achieve, such as access to careers in teaching or nursing, or as soldiers or police officers (see the 'Effective Teaching' paper where the concept of social distance between the teacher and the taught has been discussed). This type of education also fails to connect in meaningful ways with the realities of children's rural lives and fails to prepare them for rural livelihoods.

Ethnographic research under the same project (Dost & Froerer, 2021) was carried out in rural Chhattisgarh, central India, and also focuses on how young people and their parents navigate the tension between attachment to education as necessitating progress ('aage badhna') and the reality of it often being unattainable. The study indicates that whilst there may be examples of rural people who had completed secondary education and a handful of those who had gone to college, there were very few examples where this education has resulted in employment, due mainly to structural

disadvantages compounded by a lack of job opportunities to match rising educational levels. This effect was particularly common in disadvantaged groups, which resulted in high levels of so-called 'educated unemployment' (see Jeffrey, 2010). The authors (Dost & Froerer, 2021) noted that education in its current form in these contexts cannot lead to forward movement for everyone, since, when everyone moves forward, no one can be differentiated from the others. However, in another study within this project (Dungey & Ansell, 2020a), the importance of education was understood by the other benefits it provides beyond employment. In rural Lesotho, the concept of 'survival' (moral, economic and physical) is often used by parents, teachers and children when discussing the importance of schooling as a reflection of the challenges experienced by the national population over the recent decades, including high unemployment, high HIV prevalence and environmental crises. In this RLO research, the authors noted the perceived (rather than actual) benefits of education in providing different modes of survival: economic survival in terms of income and the ability to achieve better-paying jobs in the future, moral survival in terms of raising law-abiding young people, and physical survival in that schools can counter the threats to young people's physical safety and health.

Additional research outputs from the Lesotho context also commented on how the formal curriculum could impede or encourage aspiration development. The country introduced a radical new curriculum focusing on skills and attitudes for entrepreneurship, but evidence from Dungey and Ansell (2020b) questions how this new curriculum is being delivered and the extent to which it is engaging with young people's aspirations. The authors note that while lessons were intended to prepare young people for livelihoods in the informal economy, the way in which schools are delivering entrepreneurship education fails to 'displace longstanding doxic aspirations to professional careers and fails to engage with young people's habituated expectations of rural livelihoods' (p. 1). The authors have noted that both young people and teachers delivering and implementing this new curriculum have shown resistance and a lack of support for it and have therefore failed to relate with it.

One other RLO-funded research programme (Wills & Hofmeyr, 2018) engages directly with aspirations in challenging contexts and looks at non-cognitive outcomes for both urban and remote rural populations. In the broader body of research, socio-emotional skills such as perseverance, aspirations, attitudes to schooling, resilience and other such factors have been shown to determine people's life outcomes (Erberber *et al.*, 2015). The interplay between cognitive, social and emotional competencies as facilitators of academic learning and success in later life, which goes beyond a child's IQ and first-order skills, has been demonstrated across several studies (see, for example, prior research from Gutman & Schoon, 2013; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Singh *et al.*, 2018). As such, the Wills and Hofmeyr (2018) work investigates the role of another non-cognitive outcome, specifically resilience, within a high-functioning township and rural primary schools in South Africa. There, the researchers were interested in the apparent conundrum wherein it appears that some students consistently achieve high academic results despite residing in high poverty contexts. This research finds that after accounting for socio-economic status and other home background characteristics, resilient students differ from their lower achieving peers along a range of dimensions. This academic resilience is found to be particularly strongly correlated with student's socio-emotional skills, and, according to the authors, is influenced by both individual and classroom level factors. The study also finds that resilience matters: after controlling for socio-economic status and other background factors, resilient students are found to differ significantly from their lower-achieving counterparts along various dimensions. In particular, their socio-emotional skills are strong correlates with their academic resilience and, whilst individual-level protective factors emerge as the strongest determinants of academic resilience, factors such as time-on-task and the availability of learning materials (as classroom factors) are also found to be important. This study fills an important gap in bettering understanding of what matters for academic success in two of the three challenging contexts.

3.2 Multilingual learners

Across contexts, linguistic diversity can create additional challenges for imparting a quality education amongst pupils who are already socially disadvantaged. Whilst bilingualism and multilingualism have been shown to have cognitive and learning advantages in western societies, the opposite has been found amongst multilingual children in India. The evidence exploring the issue of multilingualism and multiliteracy within RLO-funded research has emerged mainly from one project: 'Multilingualism and multiliteracy: raising learning outcomes in challenging contexts in primary schools across India'. This project aims to find out why multilingual children in three geographical areas in India (urban slums in Delhi and Hyderabad and remote rural areas near Patna, in the state of Bihar) do not always experience the cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism in other contexts. The Indian context provides an excellent background for this discussion; there, large cohorts of children with comparable language repertoires are found in the same classroom, unlike other contexts where it is less common to encounter relatively large, homogenous groups of bilinguals within one school. Additionally, with the role of multilingual education in this context, the RLO research provided opportunities for garnering evidence on good practice for supporting multilingual learners. Despite the importance of home language or mother tongue in both legislation and curricular frameworks, there are concerns about the implementation of these policies in schools, which is further exacerbated by other challenges, such as large class sizes, poor resource availability and teacher-centred pedagogies (Rao *et al.*, 2013).

One of the key contributions (Tsimpli *et al.*, 2019) within the RLO-funded research on multilingualism identifies the methodological challenges of implementing and interpreting classroom observation data from multilingual classrooms. In particular, the work focuses on bettering understanding of how switching between languages can impact pupil learning outcomes. Evidence on these aspects, the authors note, is needed to inform policy aimed at improving learning outcomes particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in challenging contexts. Lightfoot *et al.* (2021), using evidence from this same project, find that despite one official language acting as the medium of instruction in primary schools, there was an overwhelming presence of language mixing in schools in Delhi and Hyderabad. This 'inevitable' language mixing is likely to have an impact on children's learning in terms of the link between the use of language and classroom teaching practices. This finding is of particular relevance when it comes to developing linguistic resources in English or in any other language.

In a further study in Delhi and Hyderabad, Tsimpli *et al.* (2020) filled an important evidence gap by examining the link between multilingualism and cognitive outcomes. The study found that though bilingual children outperformed their monolingual peers in terms of cognitive achievement, linguistically diverse environments can also enhance the cognitive performance of children who are not multilingual themselves. The study also noted other demographic factors (such as medium of instruction or residence in a city) were associated with performance on cognitive tasks which provides further evidence of the importance of contextual factors in determining children's learning outcomes.

Box 1: Advancing children's comprehension – examples from India & South Africa

Reading with comprehension is a critical factor underpinning learning and determining academic success. RLO research funded within this call has also provided evidence on comprehension and the factors that determine levels of comprehension experienced by students learning in multilingual settings, which is especially important given that the development of comprehension skills is a critical foundation of learning. In India, this area is examined by Mukhopadhyay *et al.* (2020), where learners are assessed in oral and print modes to examine individual differences in comprehension. There, Hindi functions as the medium of instruction and additional, novel approaches to learning are used to assess and develop comprehension skills. A valuable finding of this paper is the critical role of the teacher in encouraging and supporting student comprehension through the use of situational models and differentiated teaching to meet differences in learner needs. In another RLO study in the South African context, Spaul *et al.* (2020) probe the comprehension nexus to better understand how different components of reading (alphabet knowledge, accuracy and speed) promote or hinder reading in three different African languages. They found that all three components mattered for all three languages and that, unsurprisingly, learners who demonstrated the highest levels of comprehension also read more quickly and accurately than their peers. The authors then discuss the implications for streamlining the benchmarking process and suggest that separate intermediate benchmarks for language should be established.

3.3 Capability approach and epistemic justice

Capability approach, built from Amartya Sen's initial work on poverty reduction, is gaining popularity in recent decades for re-imagining the lens through which development and education are conceived. The approach primarily aims to advance democracy at the community, local and national levels through promotion of genuine possibilities of agency that enable all to actively participate in shaping policy (Otto *et al.*, p. 1). Epistemic justice, as closely related, refers to forms of fair treatment relating to knowledge, understanding and participation in communicative practices. It seeks to address those who are subjected to epistemic injustice, namely those who occupy a socially disadvantaged position, are unable to influence discourse and have reduced epistemic agency (Fricker 2015). Within the RLO portfolio, one project, entitled 'Inclusive higher education learning outcomes for rural and township youth: developing a multi-dimensional capabilities-based higher education index', has produced the research which clearly links with this sub-theme. Conducted in South Africa, the research follows higher education students from low-income households that attend five universities (two in rural settings and three in urban) over four years of study. Several outputs emerging from this project deliberate on the use of the 'capabilities' approach in investigating access to higher education for youth coming from challenging contexts, specifically those from rural areas. Capabilities approach provides a normative framework which here is applied to higher education and its ability to support well-being and fulfilment (McLean 2018).

This project is one of the few that focuses on higher education and, therefore, provides important insights into this level of education, particularly given that there are inadequate opportunities in terms of availability and accessibility to higher education in this context. Availability and access are especially important given that higher education can play an important role in enabling social mobility for some; however, in the South African context (and, indeed, many others), higher education also reproduces social privilege and intergenerational inequality across income groups (Walker, 2018b). This type of research is also important because it can enable the development of

new approaches from policy to practice (Otto *et al.*, 2017). In particular, Walker (2019) indicates why epistemic justice matters in education and why education systems need reforms to ensure the achievement of justice for all students.

Once in university, research by Walker (2020) shows that students do not leave behind socio-economic inequalities and that this, in turn, affects their learning whilst in university. She suggests that whilst higher education can be a pathway to more equality, this connection is not guaranteed. It is important to be clear on where capability deprivation is a result of the lack of income resources and where it is located in other dimensions, such as access to learning, that may or may not be materially shaped (p. 68). She makes a case for addressing economic capabilities to allow higher education to be an engine of development and social mobility. This argument reiterates the discussion in Walker (2018a), calling for a multi-dimensional approach to fair access to higher education given the strong correlation between socio-economic status and educational outcomes that underpin inadequate opportunities for many to shape their futures. In a highly unequal country like South Africa, who can access university education and who can thus enjoy the furthering of social mobility, therefore, remain critical research areas. McLean (2018) adds to this conversation by discussing how the capability approach sheds light on how university education can transform the lives of individuals and of society on the whole in South Africa. Given the historical legacy of apartheid and the small body of evidence about university access and the lives of graduates from poor backgrounds (both rural and urban), these papers produced under the RLO Call 2 initiative discuss the framework under which further research can be conducted and highlight how RLO-research has played a role in defining an agenda.

Higher education has used the concept of historical disadvantage to address inequities and inequalities; however, Gore and Walker (2020) argue that from this work, disadvantage is better understood in terms of students' capabilities, functioning and agency and there is a need to go beyond race to investigate other forms of oppression such as class, gender and related individual factors. Given that disadvantage is complex and multi-dimensional, they argue that the capability approach provides for considerations of additional dimensions such as affiliation, economic stability, autonomy and participation, intellectual growth and socio-psychological and mental health, all of which cannot be captured sufficiently when only using race to design interventions. Their study finds that personal characteristics (e.g., talent and academic skills), social arrangements (such as gender and support from peers) and other institutional factors (such as language, racism etc.) intersect to either enable or prevent individuals from realising their functionings (p. 59). As such, the researchers put forward a capabilitarian conceptualization of learning outcomes and a set of dimensions and indicators which might serve as a framework and a tool for change.

Finally, using data on students from low-income rural backgrounds, Walker and Mathebula (2020) find that coming from a rural background is not necessarily a disadvantage in and of itself; that background becomes a disadvantage when it intersects with a person's low income and then it presents challenges to students' lives and their new urban university student identity. Mathebula (2019) also finds that higher education researchers and educators need to recognise the capital that students bring with them to university to facilitate mobilisation of such capital and to foster their epistemic contributions. More specifically, the author notes that through stereotypes and the abuse of social power, students who come from poor, black, rural communities are particularly vulnerable to epistemic injustice due to the fact that they are unappreciated and mistrusted. In their recommendations, Walker and Mathebula (2020) suggest that universities need to provide educational and social support to rural students even though they may exhibit resilience and ability to navigate university. This step needs to be taken to encourage learning and to prevent the perpetuation of inequalities.

3.4 The role of school leadership/management & governance

School leaders have a critical role in setting the direction and creating a positive school culture as well as supporting and enhancing staff motivation and commitment needed to promote success for schools, particularly in challenging circumstances (see Day & Sammons, 2016). While reforms to improve school governance and management have been implemented in numerous different contexts worldwide, there is limited evidence on the extent to which school management programmes can improve learning outcomes at scale.

Evidence for this final sub-theme on the role of school leadership and management (SLM) practices and governance appears within two RLO-funded research projects: 'Succeeding against the odds: understanding resilience and exceptionalism in high-functioning township and rural primary schools in South Africa' and 'Improving school governance and learning outcomes at scale: a randomised evaluation of the Madhya Pradesh School Quality Assessment programme' in South Africa and India. Researchers in the 'Succeeding against the odds' project used pairs of primary schools, wherein a high-performing school was matched with a more 'typical' school, across rural and township locations in South Africa. The purpose of the pairings is to identify the practices of the high performers, specifically with regards to SLM (see discussion in the next paragraph). Additionally, the 'Improving school governance and learning outcomes' project aims to improve school outcomes with a specific focus on leadership and governance through a combination of regular monitoring of schools, creation of school report cards and improvement plans, quarterly follow-ups on progress and leveraging of tools to collect and report real-time records. As an output of that project, Taylor *et al.* (2019) have indicated that across the existing literature, there is contradictory and mixed evidence (qualitative and quantitative) on the role of leadership and management and its ability to generate student achievement. In a similar vein to many other contributions under RLO-funded research across all three calls, this study highlights the difficulties in developing a scalable instrument to measure school leadership and management particularly in challenging contexts. The authors also call for particular attention to be paid to aspects such as sampling and fieldworker expertise in collecting high quality data in order to best address these challenges.

Quantifying SLM practices and processes were also developed and trialled under RLO-funded research within this call (Wills, 2019; Wills & van der Berg, 2021). This research's initial objective was to quantify the availability, use and deployment of these resources by school leaders, and the second was to assess the reliability and validity of derived 'leadership for literacy' resource indices in South Africa. The research focused on 30 of the best performing and 30 low performing schools in 60 townships and rural primary schools and looked particularly at grades 3 and 6. The study observed randomness in how better leadership and management practices were distributed amongst better and worse performing schools and their analysis confirmed weak and inconsistent linkages between measured leadership and management decisions and on literacy outcomes. This research is particularly useful as it contributes to a growing and undeveloped evidence base on educational leadership and the challenges of measuring in Africa.

The relationship between leadership and academic achievement was also investigated in RLO research in South Africa by Zuze and Juan (2020), who investigated varying types of secondary schools which had different forms of socio-economic status present amongst their students. The findings revealed that the most influential leadership factors for academic achievement of pupils were instructional leadership and promoting a safe and orderly environment. The authors also found that access to a particular SLM environment depended highly on the type of school the learner attended. In terms of school instructional leadership, fee-paying independent schools displayed the most similar alignment across different types of schools. Instructional leadership, as measured by teacher preparation and parental commitment, were highest in independent schools

and were the two aspects where schools differed the most. Independent schools also had principals with higher levels of tenure. Therefore, the type of school a student attends – in terms of the leadership and management practices to which they are exposed – matters for student learning.

The existing gaps in the literature around school governance and its role in improving learning outcomes at scale have been foundational in research for the project 'Improving school governance and learning outcomes at scale' programme in India. Muralidharan and Singh (2020) use evidence from a large-scale experimental evaluation aimed at improving management quality in Indian primary schools and evaluate a programme that has been rolled out to 600,000 schools and is expected to eventually cover 1.6 million schools. The sobering findings from this research show no evidence of the programme being able to improve school functioning or student learning. Further, there was no evidence of improvements to pedagogy, teacher or student attendance, or teacher effort (as measured by instructional time, use of textbooks or likelihood of checking homework). The main reason identified for the lack of observed gains was attributed to the programme interventions being relegated to a mere tick-box process of 'administrative compliance' involving conducting school assessment and creating school improvement plans. There were also no formal incentives for senior officials to monitor the programme's performance. Staffing was also identified as a critical factor whereby the programme added to the responsibilities of an already overburdened and understaffed workforce. The broader lesson from this research is the importance of evaluating such interventions based on the extent of their impacts on outcomes of interest (such as improved attendance) in order to improve the cost-effectiveness and service delivery of such programmes.

4 Policy lessons and achieving impact

Research funded under Call 2 has provided several contributions to under-researched areas particularly for learners in challenging contexts. Unlike other themes funded under the RLO umbrella, this call covered fewer contexts and has generated fewer differentiated outputs; thus, the lessons and impact outlines here are less cross-sectional and may instead speak directly to separate project outputs. Further, as demonstrated in the review, there was little engagement with border cities and with the cross-cutting themes of gender and disability, indicating spaces for additional research (see also the engagements with gender and disability in synthesis reports on 'Effective Teaching' and 'Accountability'). Nevertheless, there have been important advancements which allow some critical lessons to emerge for policy and impact:

- The evidence synthesis in this paper suggests that in order for education to be meaningful for youth, it needs to align with their lived realities. Education is often presented as the essential route for entering the labour market, but as seen in the RLO research here, it provides wider benefits over and beyond employment. However, the task of realising the aspirations of young people, including the aspirations created through education, is a challenging one. Particularly for children in rural and other challenging contexts, even the local school staff – especially when they are not indigenous members of those local communities – may fail to recognise what aspirations exist amongst their student populations. Donors and policy makers, therefore, need to be mindful of these aspects when designing and encouraging the use of specific education interventions. Initial research, ongoing feedback loops, and revision cycles can ensure that interventions better reflect learner lives.
- Education delivery, already an ongoing difficulty in challenging contexts, becomes further complicated when those contexts include multilingual learners. A key contribution of RLO research is in demonstrating that even when official policy calls for monolingual classrooms, language mixing occurs amongst multilingual student populations. Thus, teachers, especially when they do not share linguistic backgrounds with their students, need support in understanding, identifying, and addressing the differentiated needs within their classrooms.
- Research under this call has noted the importance of recognising that for students who come from marginalised rural and remote areas, the disadvantages that they experience can 'follow' them even as they enter university studies in urban higher education settings, limiting the opportunities that they can access. Social dynamics and stereotypes can perpetuate inequalities if policies are not in place to address the multidimensional aspects of disadvantage.
- RLO-funded research under this theme has also contributed to the mixed evidence base pertaining to school leadership and governance, highlighting critical policy lessons. In particular, as indicated from studies highlighted in the report, even well-meaning and tested interventions, when implemented at scale, can fall foul of being effective. The reasons for their failure can be many and are often context-bound, related to political economy and systemic factors which can determine incentives, motives and power dynamics, and ultimately influence the actions of those implementing these policies.

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Annex A Overview of RLO Challenging Contexts projects

Project title	Contexts covered	Intended objectives	Number of outputs covered in synthesis
Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote settings	India, Laos, and Lesotho	This research aims to provide insight into how education systems can develop effective policies and interventions that work with young people's aspirations to enhance learning outcomes and address structural disadvantage in remote rural places. It seeks to develop a robust understanding of the mechanisms that connect schooling, aspirations, and learning outcomes, as well as to develop methods suitable for capturing and understanding these mechanisms.	5
Improving school governance and learning outcomes at scale: a randomised evaluation of the Madhya Pradesh School Quality Assessment programme	India	The Madhya Pradesh School Quality Assessment intervention is a comprehensive program that aims to improve school governance and outcomes through a combination of (a) regular monitoring of schools, (b) creation of school report cards, and improvement plans, (c) quarterly follow-ups on progress and (d) leveraging of tools to collect and report real-time records. This project's evaluation will assess the effects of the program on key process metrics (e.g., teacher absence, effort, and pedagogy) and student academic outcomes for two years.	1
Inclusive higher education learning outcomes for rural and township youth: developing a multi-dimensional capabilities-based higher education index	South Africa	South African higher education is characterised by inequalities of access, participation, and success, yet it is also seen as central to economic development and social mobility. The aim of the research, captured in the production of an innovative Higher Education Index, is to develop an integrated, policy-oriented theorisation of pathways to learning outcomes that foregrounds equality and quality for young people from rural areas and townships when they are preparing for university, their experiences at university, and their graduate outcomes, and to understand what enables the	9

Project title	Contexts covered	Intended objectives	Number of outputs covered in synthesis
		realization of the transformative potential of HE for them.	
Multilingualism and multiliteracy: raising learning outcomes in challenging contexts in primary schools across India	India	This project examines the causes of low educational outcomes in schools in India where many children fail to achieve basic literacy and numeracy levels, while dropout rates, affecting girls more than boys, are very high. The project builds on Tsimpli's large scale EU-funded THALES bilingualism project which assessed cognitive and language abilities of 700+ children in five different countries, expanding this project into numeracy, critical thinking and problem solving in multilingual children which are key elements in the Indian context.	4
Succeeding against the odds: understanding resilience and exceptionalism in high-functioning township and rural primary schools in South Africa	South Africa	The aim of the present study is to understand resilience and exceptionalism in high-functioning township and rural primary schools in South Africa. It uses 30 matched pairs (matching 30 exceptional schools and 30 typical schools) to identify which practices are driving the difference between the high performing schools and the average/low-performing schools in rural areas and townships in South Africa. Specifically, researchers focus on the effect of school leadership and management practices in these matched pairs.	6

Annex B Overview of RLO Challenging Contexts projects yet to produce outputs (at the time of writing)⁵

Project title	Contexts covered	Intended objectives
Assessment for Learning in Africa (AFLA): improving pedagogy and assessment for numeracy in foundation years	South Africa, Tanzania	This project focuses on improving the numeracy skills of poor and marginalised students through developing teachers' and teacher trainers' pedagogical and assessment skills in extremely deprived urban areas in South Africa and Tanzania. Eighteen schools and three training colleges will be involved. The approach of the research team is to develop classroom materials for primary school numeracy and use these as the basis for workshops and for the development of teacher learning communities in each area. The workshops will focus on how formative assessment ('Assessment for Learning') can be used to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning of numeracy. The aim is to improve teachers' own numeracy skills and their understanding of how numeracy can be more effectively communicated to their students.
Facilitating innovative growth of low-cost private schools: experimental evidence from Pakistan	Pakistan	This research involves the study of education markets instead of the inputs to the production of learning, applying theories from studying Small and Medium Enterprises to private schools. Instead of going to schools and telling them which inputs they should focus on, the researchers on this project tend to ask them what prevents them from expanding in quality and quantity. This project is a randomised control trial that seeks to explain how alleviating the lack of financing (a financial market failure) and access to affordable educational support services (an input market failure) one at a time or simultaneously would affect learning outcomes, enrolment and school profitability. The randomized component means that schools are randomly allocated to either receiving offers of a loan product or an equity product to alleviate financial constraints, and/or receive access to buying educational support services such as teacher training, improved curricula or student testing services. The controlled component of the trial means that some - randomly chosen - schools do not get any of these treatments, which allows researchers to compare the treatment outcomes with the counterfactual.
Investing in our future: the early childhood intervention and parental	Bangladesh	This project will use a randomized controlled trial to evaluate the efficacy of four interventions designed to improve child outcomes in Bangladesh. In collaboration with the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, researchers will develop the Bangladesh rural early

⁵ Please see the comment on inclusion of outputs in the Methodology section of the paper.

Project title	Contexts covered	Intended objectives
<p>involvement in Bangladesh</p>		<p>childhood centre. The first intervention will establish a pre-school program that aims to prepare pre-primary students for formal school and provide them with the skills needed to succeed in life. The second intervention will also set up a 'Parent Academy' which will consist of a series of interactive workshops designed to assist parents in supplementing their child's school learning. The third intervention will provide them with monthly cash transfers in order to reduce the stress that these families face in dealing with unforeseen events and allow them to focus more on investing in their children. The fourth intervention will combine all three interventions to understand the role, relative efficacy and cost-effectiveness of each of the interventions. These interventions will be designed so researchers can measure their impacts on a wide variety of outcomes including child health, cognitive development and non-cognitive skills (e.g., personality).</p>

Annex C Challenging Contexts outputs categorised by project

Title of output	Author(s)	Date published	Contexts covered	Type of publication	Methodology
Project: Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote settings					
Educating 'surplus population': Uses and abuses of aspiration in the rural peripheries of a globalising world	Ansell, N., Froerer, P., Huijsmans, R., Dungey, C., Dost, A., & Piti.	2020	Lesotho, India, and Laos	Journal article	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 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 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.
Education, aspiration and aage badhna: The role of schooling in facilitating 'forward movement' in rural Chhattisgarh, India	Dost, A. C., & Froerer, P.	2021	India	Journal article	The study involved nine months of ethnographic research in rural Chhattisgarh in 2016–2017. Using participant observation, conversations, and interviews, the first author visited primary schools in two villages and chatted with locals about education and their aspirations for the future. She also interviewed young people—school leavers and attendees—from neighbouring villages and the block, along with parents and teachers. Further understanding of aage badhna was gleaned from conversations with local carpenters, craftsmen, tailors, shopkeepers, and small businessmen. The first author also interviewed youth attending vocational training courses and male students from elsewhere in rural Chhattisgarh.

Title of output	Author(s)	Date published	Contexts covered	Type of publication	Methodology
'I go to school to survive': Facing physical, moral and economic uncertainties in rural Lesotho	Dungey, C. E., & Ansell, N.	2020	Lesotho	Journal article	The fieldwork reported in this paper was conducted in two villages, and the analysis presented here draws upon multiple methods. Participant observation was conducted in classrooms and in everyday practices such as harvesting. Researchers 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 policymakers (116 interviews in total). Most were conducted in Sesotho. Additional data was produced through (video-recorded) roleplays focused on problems that young people might encounter in the villages.
Introduction: Development, young people, and the social production of aspiration	Huijsmans, R., Ansell, N., & Froerer, P.	2021	Global	Journal article	The authors highlight definitions of 'aspiration' and 'orientation' as their guide in this article. They say aspiration refers to an orientation towards a desired future. Such futures may be individual or collective projects, may refer to more immediate or longer-term futures and include both the work of imaginations and affect as well as material practices. On the other hand, an orientation towards the future is an active engagement with it, including imagining possibilities, doubting trajectories, and navigating the relations through which futures unfold.
'Not all of us can be nurses': Proposing and resisting entrepreneurship	Dungey, C., & Ansell, N.	2020	Lesotho	Journal article	Empirical research took place in Lesotho between January and September 2017, with a short return visit in February 2018. The fieldwork focussed on two villages and their local primary schools, one in the Maluti Mountains in central Lesotho and the other in the Senqu Valley, closer to the South African border. Household surveys gathered data concerning educational backgrounds, occupations, and

Title of output	Author(s)	Date published	Contexts covered	Type of publication	Methodology
education in rural Lesotho					household conditions. The bulk of the research involved participant observation within and outside school with children and young people, teachers, and parents. In addition, young people were encouraged to draw and engage in drama. 118 recordings were made, mostly of in-depth interviews.
Project: Improving school governance and learning outcomes at scale: a randomised evaluation of the Madhya Pradesh School Quality Assessment programme					
Improving public sector management at scale? Experimental evidence on school governance India	Muralidharan, K., & Singh, A.	2020	India	Working paper	This project evaluated a program that had been implemented in Madhya Pradesh, India. The programme had 3 parts: Developing a school rating scorecard, school improvement plans, and follow-up visits from the Cluster Resource Coordinators. Researchers worked to conduct an experimental evaluation of this programme by randomising the assignment of schools to the programme using a clustered design. They collected primary data in a subset of 302 elementary schools. Their primary metric for school level governance is teacher absence, and this data was collected over a set of three visits in each elementary school in their sample. In two grades per elementary school in the sample, enumerators observed one classroom period of teaching in Hindi and Mathematics, collecting information on the time-use of the teacher, whether they were using various instruction materials and/or changing other elements of classroom practice.

Title of output	Author(s)	Date published	Contexts covered	Type of publication	Methodology
Project: Inclusive higher education learning outcomes for rural and township youth: developing a multi- dimensional capabilities-based higher education index					
A multi-dimensional approach to fair access	Walker, M.	2018	South Africa	Book chapter	The goal in this chapter is to sketch the access terrain to understand what may be missing in relation to equity and work towards university access opportunities and outcomes which are more just. In South Africa's case, access is understood in this chapter as getting into university across four key stages which are not necessarily sequential: 1) Grade 12 marks and subjects; 2) choosing a university, including getting information from family, friends, schools, teachers, the media; 3) being accepted into a programme; and 4) registration, with access to funding. These moments may be agentic, secure or unstable, and more or less equitable. Understanding how these moments work is helped by McCowan's three dimensions of equity: availability (number of places), accessibility (can the student take up a place, are they selected and admitted and do they have funding), and horizontality (to which university does a student get access, high status, low status, rural, or urban).
Capability-promoting policies: Enhancing individual and social development	Otto, H. U., Walker, M., & Ziegler, H.	2017	South Africa, India, Buenos Aires, and New York City	Book	The book considers how the capability approach has been conceptualised and operationalised into practice in different parts of the world, including India, Buenos Aires, South Africa, England, and New York City. The authors examine how a human development approach has been conceptualised and operationalised into practice, and how far implementations of human development and capabilities expansion have been successful in contributing to human

Title of output	Author(s)	Date published	Contexts covered	Type of publication	Methodology
					flourishing and enhancing people's individual and collective opportunities.
Conceptualising (dis) advantage in South African higher education: A capability approach perspective	Gore, O. T., & Walker, M.	2020	South Africa	Journal article	This paper combines capability-inspired dimensions of (dis)advantage-based top-down on the capability literature in the field of South African higher education and bottom-up on empirical data. The empirical data were obtained from a case study of the University of the Free State (UFS). The UFS is a middle-ranked and historically white, Afrikaans-language university that presently enrolls students from diverse backgrounds. The authors conducted 26 semi-structured interviews with volunteer students from four departments – Political Sciences, Psychology, Education Studies, and Business Studies and Agricultural Economics – purposively selected to ensure diversity.
Dimensions of higher education and the public good in South Africa	Walker, M.	2018	South Africa	Journal article	An alternative higher education logic would require a vision that promotes the capabilities and functionings of all students, debating which capabilities are of most importance and should be prioritized and attending to conversion factors. Drawing on resources from decoloniality and epistemic injustice, the author takes a stand on what these capabilities ought to be as a contribution to the debate.
How higher education research using the capability approach illuminates possibilities for	McLean, M.	2018	South Africa	Book chapter	The capability approach offers a normative framework for thinking how higher education can support human well-being and fulfilment. This chapter's discussion is presented in two parts. The first part shows how the central concepts of the capability approach focus on reducing poverty, conceptualised as depriving people of life's opportunities and freedoms. The second part considers two strands of

Title of output	Author(s)	Date published	Contexts covered	Type of publication	Methodology
the transformation of individuals and society in South Africa					higher education research based in South Africa and informed by what Ingrid Robeyns calls 'capabilitarian' theory or analysis. The first strand is about those students who have accessed university against the odds because they are black and come from poor rural and township areas; the second is about how higher education can shape graduates oriented towards contributing to social transformation, whatever their background.
Low-income rural youth migrating to urban universities in South Africa: Opportunities and inequalities	Walker, M., & Mathebula, M.	2020	South Africa	Journal article	The authors' analysis draws on the first two waves of in-depth qualitative interviews with 30 out of the sample of 65 students from the Miratho project, conducted with young people from low-income rural homes attending three different urban universities in two cities. Of the 30, 13 are female; 14 are the first in their immediate or extended family to go to university; and all speak an African language in the home. Using capabilities, monetary resources, and navigational capital the authors use this interview data to tease out low income and rurality to understand both the inequalities experienced by individual students and to reflect on the opportunities that transitions to university and the city (potentially) open.
Recognising poor black youth from rural communities in South Africa as epistemic contributors	Mathebula, M.	2019	South Africa		The paper uses the capabilities approach as an interpretive framework for the qualitative data and theorises that students' linguistic capital and narrative capital are epistemic materials that can be mobilised into the 'capability for epistemic contribution'. Working with the youth-led NGO Thusanani Foundation, the four-year (2016-2020) mixed methods research project investigates the multi-dimensional factors and dynamics that shape low-income rural and

Title of output	Author(s)	Date published	Contexts covered	Type of publication	Methodology
					<p>township students' effective opportunities to access universities, participate and flourish in them, and move from higher education to employment. Complex data sets consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data are being gathered in the project, which will enable a macro view of the educational pathways of the selected student population (64 students) but also fine-grained micro accounts of their lives. The data sets include life history interviews, photovoice data in the form of photo-stories on exclusion and inclusion at university, a capabilities-based 'achieved learning outcomes' survey, and data from the Higher Education Management Information System.</p>
<p>The well-being of South African university students from low-income households</p>	<p>Walker, M.</p>	<p>2020</p>	<p>South Africa</p>	<p>Journal article</p>	<p>This paper relies on data from the qualitative research strand in the 'Inclusive higher education learning outcomes' project (2016–2020), a multi-method, longitudinal study that includes 65 individual life history interviews over four years, with students from low-income households studying in five universities. Thus far, all interviews have been conducted face to face, at or near the university at which students are studying, with each lasting on average 90 minutes. The interviews are recorded and transcribed in full, with the permission of the student, and students and the universities have all been anonymised. Two of the universities in the study (Rural and Country), are historically disadvantaged; they were originally established for black students in the 1960s and are in far flung rural towns.</p>

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Why epistemic justice matters in and for education	Walker, M.	2019	Global	Journal article	Epistemic in/justice offers resources to think about conditions of possibility (what Amartya Sen calls 'conversion factors'), given that societies train our sensibilities in ways which are flawed and prejudiced. It is proposed further that Amartya Sen's emphasis on public reasoning is central to epistemic justice. Using the space of education to make the argument, core ideas in the capability approach are first outlined. Epistemic justice is described, and the claim is then advanced that Miranda Fricker's 'epistemic contribution capability' is generative in education settings for developing democratic and public reasoning capabilities. The paper then considers the challenge of free speech and what this may demand of us educationally.
Project: Multilingualism and multiliteracy: raising learning outcomes in challenging contexts in primary schools across India					
Linguistic diversity, multilingualism, and cognitive skills: A study of disadvantaged children in India	Tsimpli, I. M., Vogelzang, M., Balasubramanian, A., Marinis, T., Alladi, S., Reddy, A., & Panda, M.	2020	India	Journal article	<p>The authors present a questionnaire estimating sociolinguistic diversity and show that this measure assesses a distinct construct, as compared to a child's multilingualism. Children were classified as growing up monolingually or bilingually, depending on whether they grew up with one or more languages in the home. 694 children from the Indian cities of Delhi and Hyderabad participated in the study during school hours. All children attended Year 4 (Standard 4) in Government primary schools.</p> <p>The children completed several experimental cognitive tasks and questionnaires. The cognitive tasks consisted of the Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices as a measure of</p>

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					general intelligence, and a 2-back task as a measure of working memory. The questionnaires consisted of questions about linguistic diversity, bilingualism, and socioeconomic status.
Measuring the multilingual reality: Lessons from classrooms in Delhi and Hyderabad	Lightfoot, A., Balasubramanian, A., Tsimpli, I., Mukhopadhyay, L., & Treffers-Daller, J.	2021	India	Journal article	<p>A classroom observation tool was designed as a part of the MultiLila project to observe the classroom environment during lessons, using scales with indicators. The results presented in this paper focus on observation of teacher activity and child response of the observation tool which documents what languages the teacher and students are using along with the activities undertaken. Both were recorded at five-minute intervals during each 30-minute observation.</p> <p>The data was collected from a total of 27 government schools across two sites – New Delhi and Hyderabad. The children were from underprivileged backgrounds and from low-SES families residing in urban slum and non-slum areas and were attending government schools with relatively low funding and resources. A total of 66 teachers completed a language questionnaire. Samples of 104 classroom observations were conducted in language and mathematics classes in Grades 4 and 5 in a total of 27 government schools distributed across the two cities.</p>
What guides inference generation? A study of young Hindi learners	Mukhopadhyay, L., Salim Tamboli, V., Das, K.,	2020	India	Journal article	The study reported here is part of the four-year MultiLila project. Here the authors report on the comprehension of 30 Hindi speaking learners studying in four primary schools in Patna, the capital of Bihar, India. In the study, they used a child questionnaire with subsections on child bilingualism

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studying in challenging contexts in India	Balasubramanian, A., & Tsimpli, I.				and on socio economic details and got the information that the learners are from lower socio-economic background families. Researchers used a narrative comprehension task and an Annual Status of Education Report literacy task to garner data. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis were utilised to analyse results.
Multilingualism and multiliteracy in primary education in India: A discussion of some methodological challenges of an interdisciplinary research project	Tsimpli, I., Mukhopadhyay, L., Treffers-Daller, J., Alladi, S., Marinis, T., Panda, M., Balasubramanian, A., & Sinha, P.	2019	India	Journal article	In this longitudinal project, participant recruitment was based on four variables: (a) geographical region; (b) gender; (c) SES; and (d) medium of instruction. A total of 1200 multilingual primary school children attending government schools take part at two points in time: once when they are in Grade 4 and one year later when they are in Grade 5. Approximately 400 children were recruited from each of three geographical areas: two key metropolitan areas, Delhi and Hyderabad. All tools are based on a battery of tasks that are widely used in empirical studies of multilingualism and include: the Raven's Progressive Matrices, a narrative retelling task, a semantic fluency task, literacy and numeracy tasks, a Flanker task, an Updating (2-back) task and a maths anxiety task. In addition, the authors developed a project-specific questionnaire about the participants' background, a questionnaire for head teachers and teachers and an observation tool that allowed them to obtain further information about the languages used in the classroom.

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Project: Succeeding against the odds: understanding resilience and exceptionalism in high-functioning township and rural primary schools in South Africa					
Academic resilience in challenging contexts: Evidence from township and rural primary schools in South Africa	Wills, G., & Hofmeyr, H.	2018	South Africa	Working paper	In 2017, literacy tests scores were gathered from over 2600 Grade 6 students in 60 rural and township primary schools. This data has a longitudinal dimension, which offers a unique opportunity to identify consistently higher achievers. A silent reading comprehension test and vocabulary test were administered at the beginning of the 2017 school year and again towards the end of the same school year to an entire class of grade 6 students in each school. In addition to the comprehension tests, the research team also administered surveys to principals, teachers, and students. Information from these were used to derive the individual, home, and school variables that the authors include in their analysis.
Addressing the 'leadership conundrum' through a mixed methods study of school leadership for literacy	Taylor, N., Wills, G., & Hoadley, U.	2019	South Africa	Journal article	The study used a mixed method design. The authors considered a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches appropriate to detailed explorations of leadership at the micro level that could then potentially be converted into quantifiable factors for survey use. The qualitative case studies notably fed into the development of the survey instruments. The study was concurrent (or parallel) in the collection and analysis of data, in that quantitative and qualitative strands functioned separately at these phases of the research. This allowed researchers to verify findings by utilising both qualitative and quantitative strands. Further, results (and non- results) from the survey were clarified with contextually specific and detailed cases and an attempt was made to synthesise results from both

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					strands to understand better the research problem and issues of measurement.
Investigating the comprehension iceberg: Developing empirical benchmarks for early grade reading in agglutinating African languages	Spaull, N., Pretorius, E., & Mohohlwane, N.	2020	South Africa	Journal article	In February 2017, Grade 3 reading data were collected and analysed from 61 schools across three provinces in South Africa. The schools selected for the study come from three South African provinces – Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. Of the 61 schools in the study, 56 are from the poorest 60% of schools in the country (quintile 1–3) which are no-fee schools, and 5 are from Quintile 4 where some charge relatively low fees (<R3000/year; €190/year). A matched-pair design was used where the (allegedly) highest performing schools, as reported by government officials and non-governmental organisations, were matched with socio-economically-similar schools in the area. The reading tests were administered one-on-one by trained fieldworkers, with information captured electronically on tablets using an early-grade reading assessment-specific software (Tangerine). In all, 785 Grade 3 learners were assessed: 514 in isiZulu, 143 in Northern Sotho and 128 in Xitsonga.
Measuring school leadership and management and linkages with literacy: Evidence from rural and township primary schools in South Africa	Wills, G., & van der Berg, S.	2021	South Africa	Journal article	The data for this process were gathered from 60 township and rural public schools in three South African provinces. In addition to SLM data, researchers collected reading and literacy scores for grade 3 and 6 students to establish whether the 'leadership for literacy' indices are predictive of literacy levels and gains using multivariate regression modelling. The qualitative case-study component of the wider mixed-methods study drilled further into the generative mechanisms underlying the quantitative findings. This paper

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					aims to give specific treatment to the quantitative research process, analytical strategy and quantitative results.
School leadership and local learning contexts in South Africa	Zuze, T. L., & Juan, A.	2020	South Africa	Journal article	The authors use data from the 2015 wave of TIMSS to investigate whether the nature of leadership depends on learners' and schools' socio-economic contexts, and if indicators of better SLM characteristics (as described in the conceptual framework) are associated with narrower achievement gaps in South African schools. The sampling procedure followed a two-stage stratified cluster sample design to ensure that the sample was representative of the population of Grade 9 learners in South Africa. The 2015 sample consisted of 12,514 learners, 334 mathematics teachers and 292 principals in 292 schools. Each learner completed a mathematics assessment test and a contextual questionnaire. Teachers and principals completed contextual questionnaires only. The authors measured leadership quality based on TIMSS-derived and author-calculated indicators of a) instructional leadership, b) promoting an orderly and supportive environment, and c) the principal's experience and training.
School leadership and management: Identifying linkages with learning and structural inequalities	Wills, G.	2019	South Africa	Book chapter	The chapter identifies empirical studies that either directly or indirectly bring evidence to bear on school leadership and management through applying econometric or descriptive analyses to schooling data in South Africa. While the chapter largely reviews previous studies, primary analyses are also conducted on national payroll data to describe recent patterns in School Management Team post-provisioning and updating statistics from earlier studies with more recent data. The chapter highlights findings that are applicable to poorer

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					<p>schooling contexts and exposes critical inequalities in relation to SLM. As a qualification, these findings are best interpreted in relation to more in-depth descriptions in the qualitative literature on SLM but combining the two literatures would lend itself to a much larger discussion than is possible here.</p>