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Redefining Education in the Developing World

By Mark J. Epstein & Kristi Yuthas

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Redefining Education in the Developing World

A new approach that builds relevant marketplace, entrepreneurship, and health care skills is needed **BY MARC J. EPSTEIN & KRISTI YUTHAS**

IN MOST DEVELOPING COUNTRIES, few children graduate from secondary school and many don't even finish primary school. In Ghana, for example, only 50 percent of children complete grade 5, and of those, less than half can comprehend a simple paragraph. The UNESCO program Education for All, which as part of the Millennium Development Goals aims to provide free, universal access to primary schooling, has been successful in dramatically increasing enrollment. But, according to annual Education for All reports, many kids drop out before finishing school. Why don't they stay?

There are numerous reasons, including the difficulty of getting to school and the cost of schooling. Even when tuition is free, there are often expenses for lunch, uniforms, and examination fees. And because the quality of education is often poor, parents are forced to pay for additional tutoring to enable their children to pass tests. Opportunity costs may be even larger—while they are in school, children forgo opportunities to produce income working on the family farm or selling in the marketplace. It is not surprising that when education investments do not result in adequate learning, or even basic literacy and numeracy, parents do not keep their children in school.

Even when learning outcomes are adequate, very few students continue on to secondary school. Job prospects for most people in the developing world are poor, and staying in school past grade 5, or even through grade 10, does not improve them significantly. In impoverished regions, the vast majority will not secure formal employment and will be supported primarily through subsistence-level agriculture and trading. Health outcomes in these regions are also dire. Millions of children die every year from controllable diseases such as diarrhea, respiratory infections, and malaria.

Educational programs typically adopt traditional Western models of education, with an emphasis on math, science, language, and social studies. These programs allocate scarce resources to topics like Greek mythology, prime numbers, or tectonic plate movement—topics that may provide intellectual stimulation, but have little relevance in the lives of impoverished children. High-performing students in less developed regions face a much different future from their counterparts' in wealthier areas. There are no higher levels of schooling or professional job opportunities awaiting most of these children; they will likely end up working on family or neighborhood farms or starting their own small enterprises.

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Schooling provides neither the financial literacy students will need to manage the meager resources under their control, nor the guidance needed to create opportunities for securing a livelihood or building wealth. In addition, schooling provides little assistance to promote the physical health needed for economic stability and quality of life. Life expectancy is low in impoverished regions, and not just because of lack of quality medical care. The devastation preventable disease wreaks on well-being and financial stability in poor regions can be dramatically mitigated through instruction on basic health behaviors, such as hand washing.

We fervently believe that what students in impoverished regions need are not more academic skills, but rather life skills that enable them to improve their financial prospects and well-being. These include financial literacy and entrepreneurial skills; health maintenance and management skills; and administrative capabilities, such as teamwork, problem solving, and project management.

Over the last five years, we have done extensive work on the

state of education in developing countries. We have visited many government, nongovernment, and private schools and teacher training programs in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, and we have talked extensively with teachers, students, headmasters, school owners, and government officials. We have visited innovative educational programs that are among the world's largest and most successful, including BRAC, an NGO in Bangladesh that owns and operates 32,000 primary schools; Pratham, which provides literacy and other educational support programs, teaching 33 million children in India; and Escuela Nueva, the Colombian program of mono- and multi-grade teaching that has grown to 20,000 schools. We have implemented training for illiterate adults in developing countries and have tested that training effectively over the last few years, applying the best of our experience to improving organizations like Opportunity International, a large microfinance institution.

These experiences have convinced us that the time is right to redefine quality education in the developing world.

A NEW EDUCATIONAL MODEL

We have developed a robust educational model that combines traditional content with critically important financial, health, and administrative skills, which can be delivered via existing school systems and teachers.

Our model, which we call “school for life,” shifts the goal of schooling away from the achievement of standardized learning outcomes toward making a positive impact on the economic and social well-being of students and their communities. The model requires significant changes in both content and pedagogy. First, entrepreneurship and health modules are mandatory curriculum components for all primary grade students. Second, student-centered learning methods are used that require students to work in groups to solve complex problems and manage projects on their own.

This approach is inspired by models of adult education in developing countries that focus on self-efficacy as a critical foundation of positive livelihood and health-seeking behaviors, along with active-learning pedagogies used in progressive schools throughout the world. The health curriculum draws on the work of the World Health Organization and focuses on preventing disease, caring for sick children, and obtaining medical care. The entrepreneurship curriculum is informed by our work with adult entrepreneurs in developing countries, and it draws ideas from a broad range of financial and entrepreneurial programs developed by organizations like the International Labour Organization, Junior Achievement, and Aflatoun.

Conceptual knowledge is put into practice at school through activities that empower children to use what they have learned. For example, students practice routine health behaviors, such as hand washing and wearing shoes near latrines—and, to the extent feasible, gain exposure to other important behaviors, such as boiling drinking water and using malaria nets. They practice routine market-like transactions by earning points for schoolwork and budgeting those points to obtain valuable prizes, such as sitting in a favorite chair or being first in line.

Students also develop higher order skills as they work in committees to develop and execute complex projects. Health-related projects can range from planning and carrying out an athletic

activity to be played during recess, to practicing diagnostic skills when classmates are ill—helping to decide, for example, when a cold has turned into a respiratory infection that requires antibiotics. Entrepreneurship projects include identifying and exploiting market opportunities through business ideas like school gardens or community recycling that create real value. Students learn and practice workplace skills and attitudes like delegation, negotiation, collaboration, and planning—opportunities that are rarely available to them outside their families.

Some school systems, especially at the secondary level, have begun to include entrepreneurship and health topics in their curricular requirements. But including information in basic lectures is not enough. Schools must simultaneously adopt action-oriented pedagogical approaches that hone critical thinking skills and enable children to identify problems, seek out and evaluate relevant information and resources, and design and carry out plans for solving these problems. This involves tackling real problems that require and empower students to take the initiative and responsibility for their own learning.

A full implementation of this new school for life approach has not yet been adopted by any major organization, but a pilot is currently being developed by Escuela Nueva in Colombia. Escuela Nueva was the pioneer in adapting student-centered approaches for use in impoverished rural environments, which often use multigrade classrooms. Escuela Nueva develops classroom materials and pedagogical approaches in which students work in self-directed teams to learn, discuss, and actively practice, using the basic content included in standard governmental curricula.

Through this unique combination of relevant content, practical implementation, and student empowerment, children develop a body of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable them to succeed and thrive when they leave school, whether they are headed toward college or remain in their communities.

DRAMATIC CHANGES ARE NEEDED

The traditional definition of school quality in the developing world is based on content mastery. But using traditional schooling approaches during the few precious years most children will spend in school leads to wasted resources and forgone opportunities for individuals and communities. Governmental agencies and organizations that support and promote quality education for all children must move beyond traditional models to help children develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are relevant to their lives and that can lift them out of poverty.

For too long, governments and organizations investing in developing-world education have operated under the unquestioned assumption that improved test scores were clear evidence that their investments have paid off. But if, as we argue here, mastery of the basic primary school curriculum is not the best means for improving life chances and alleviating poverty in developing countries, that model is broken. Investing in interventions that produce the highest test scores is no longer a valid approach for allocating scarce educational dollars or the scarce time available for the development of young minds. It is time to seek out the interventions that lead to the greatest social and economic impact for the poor. ■