Redefining Education in the Developing World

Marc J. Epstein  
Rice University

Kristi Jane Yuthas  
Portland State University

Citation Details
Redefining Education in the Developing World
By Mark J. Epstein & Kristi Yuthas

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Winter 2012

Copyright © 2012 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved
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.

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
Ideas  First Person

state of education in developing countries. We have visited many
government, nongovernment, and private schools and teacher train-
ning 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 imple-
mented 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
rededicate quality education in the developing world.

A NEW EDUCATIONAL MODEL

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

Our model, which we call “school for life,” shifts the goal of
schooling away from the achievement of standardized learning out-
comes 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, entrepre-
neurship and health modules are mandatory curriculum compo-
nents 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 devel-
oping 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 curricu-
lim is informed by our work with adult entrepreneurs in developing
countries, and it draws ideas from a broad range of financial and entre-
preneurial programs developed by organizations like the Interna-
tional 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 boil-
ing 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 com-
mittees 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 antibiot-
ics. 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 cur-
ricular 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 informa-
tion 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 cur-
rently 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 mul-
tigrade 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 con-
tent 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 organi-
izations 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 improv-
ing life chances and alleviating poverty in developing countries, that
model is broken. Investing in interventions that produce the high-
est 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. „