Learning from the Extremes

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Meeting Hope

In the next few decades hundreds of millions of young, poor families will migrate to cities in the developing world in search of work and opportunity. Education provides them with a shared sense of hope. Many will be the first generation in their family to go to school. It is vital the hopes they invest are not disappointed.

Ingrained Failure

Yet even in the developed world, education systems that were established more than a century ago still under-perform, mainly because they fail to reach and motivate large portions of the population. These ingrained problems of low aspiration and achievement among the most disinvested communities in the developed world are proving resistant to traditional treatment.

The Four Strategies

This report outlines four basic strategies governments in the developing and developed world can pursue to meet these challenges: improve, reinvent, supplement, and transform.

1   Improve School: Essential but not Enough

The most obvious strategy is to spread and **improve** schools. By 2015 most eligible children will have a place at a primary school. The lesson from high-performing school systems like Finland is that to get good results you have to attract, train, and motivate good teachers and provide them with good facilities to work in.

Today, though, too much schooling in the developing world delivers too little learning. There are high rates of teacher absence, high drop-out rates among poorer children, pupils repeating years in large numbers, high failure rates in final exams, and low progression to further education and training. More children are going to school for longer but too many are not learning enough. Even in parts of the developed world sustained investment in schools and teachers has not led to expected improvements in educational outcomes.

School improvement on its own will not be enough to meet the need for learning. Relying solely on this route will take too long. Governments must turn to more innovative strategies that will come from outside the traditional school system.

2   Reinventing School: Cracking the Code

Different kinds of schools are needed to teach new skills in new ways. Around the world innovators such as the Lumiar Institute in Brazil, charter schools in the United States, and independent schools in Sweden are **reinventing** school. They use technology more creatively and provide more personalized, collaborative, creative, and problem-focused learning, in schools that have as many informal spaces for learning as they have classrooms.

3   Supplement School: Invest in Families and Communities

Even reinvented schools, however, may not be enough to change cultures in communities where formal learning is not valued. Families and communities have a huge bearing on whether children are ready to learn at school.

That is why innovation beyond the classroom is vital to **supplement** schools. The Harlem Children's Zone and the preschool play groups run by Pratham in India are prime examples of social innovation to promote learning in communities, outside schools, and often without formal teachers.

4 Transformational Innovation: a New Logic to Learning

However, to get learning to the hundreds of millions who want it in the developing world, **transformational** innovation will be needed. Transformational innovation will create new ways to learn, new skills, in new ways, outside formal school.

Transformational innovation is being pioneered by social entrepreneurs such as Sugata Mitra's Hole in the Wall and the Barefoot College in India, the Sistema in Venezuela, the Center for Digital Inclusion in Brazil, and many others.

These programmes: pull families and children to learning by making it attractive, productive, and relevant; often rely on peer-to-peer learning rather than formal teachers; create spaces for learning where they are needed rather than using schools; and start learning from challenges that people face rather than from a formal curriculum. The test of these approaches is whether they get useful knowledge into the hands of people who need it rather than exam pass rates.

From Improvement to Innovation

To make learning effective in the future, to teach the skills children will need, on the scale they will be needed (especially in the developing world), will require disruptive innovation to create new low-cost, mass models for learning. Even relying on good schools will not be enough.

This means there will have to be a wholesale shift of emphasis in education policies.

School improvement is still a vital goal. But more emphasis will need to be put on innovation that supplements school, reinvents it, and transforms learning by making it available in new ways, often using technology.

The chief policy aim in the 20th century was to spread access to and improve the quality of schooling. In the future it will be vital to encourage entrepreneurship and disruptive innovation in education, to find new and more effective approaches to learning.

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That kind of disruptive innovation may well not come from the best schools. It is much more likely to come from social entrepreneurs often seeking to meet huge need but without the resources for traditional solutions: teachers, text books, and schools. Disruptive innovation invariably starts in the margins rather than the mainstream.

Governments should continue to look to the very best school systems to guide improvement strategies. But increasingly they should also look to social entrepreneurs working at the extremes who may well create the low-cost, mass, participatory models of learning that will be needed in the future.

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