

Building Entrepreneurial Organizations to Make Learning in School Relevant

Innovations Case Discussion:
iDiscoveri

The chronicle of the journey of the iDiscoveri team as they developed the XSEED Living Knowledge System, an approach to improving the quality of education in India, demonstrates that there is room for entrepreneurs to innovate in education and to help fill the gap in the quality of education. This quality gap affects the vast majority of the world's children, who have gained access to school as the result of the reforms and innovations of the last four centuries, which made basic education accessible to most around the world.

The achievement of universal schooling was the result of a series of innovations introduced by policy and social entrepreneurs who built the global architecture that sustains compulsory access to basic education. The first among those innovators was Jon Amos Comenius, a Moravian minister who, upon reflection on the sources of violence and conflict, concluded in the seventeenth century that the foundation of peace rested in educating all people. This novel idea formed the foundation of national public education systems, a social innovation that would expand to a number of countries in Europe over the next two centuries. Central to the development of public education systems were technological innovations that made it possible to educate large numbers of children, with a limited number of skilled teachers, at low cost. Chief among them was the monitorial system of education, developed by Joseph Lancaster in the early nineteenth century, which allowed teachers to be assisted by students in a system of peer education in which a narrow, well-defined curriculum could be taught by more advanced students, or

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monitors, to students with homogeneous levels of ability and knowledge. This basic architecture of education institutions as centers where learning is structured around a prescribed curriculum, sliced in sufficiently narrow bits so they could be managed by instructors of limited knowledge and skills, to students grouped by age and levels of knowledge—that is, grades—is still the dominant form of school organization two centuries after it was designed.

A third innovation in the expansion of universal schooling extended access to the vast majority of the world's children, including those born in the developing world. The innovation, a short text containing 30 articles, was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a global compact designed to underwrite global peace and stability. Article 26 in the compact affirmed that every person has a right to education. That simple sentence in this powerful document, accompanied by

the institutions built to advanced those rights, would transform humanity. A world in which the majority of children did not have the opportunity to set foot in a school has become one in which most children enroll in school and complete at least several years of schooling.

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entrepreneurs with established government systems to give each child the opportunity to be schooled, it is now time to identify a new set of challenges and to deal with deeper discontent.

The chief challenge confronting educators today is that while many children indeed spend a number of years in school, many appear to learn little during those years. Perhaps more importantly, they learn little that will serve to expand their ability to achieve success in the world outside of school. This challenge calls for a second generation of reforms that will enhance the effectiveness of schools and make sure that what they teach indeed alters the life chances of their graduates. As with the first generation of reforms, this second generation will benefit from entrepreneurs who promote innovative ideas, technologies, and creative partnerships with governments, which regulate, control, and finance much of the education architecture around the globe.

There is growing consensus in the education community that teachers' knowledge and capabilities are central to addressing this second generation of educational challenges. There are alternative, and to some extent competing, strands in the current debate about how to produce good teachers. One strand focuses on the importance of attracting highly qualified individuals into the teaching profession,

another on the importance of high-quality early education, and the third stresses the importance of effective, ongoing professional development throughout teachers' careers. Approaches to professional development range from facilitating effective pedagogical practices with curriculum and instructional materials and scripted instructional guides, to emphasizing the development of teachers' professional knowledge and informed judgment to help them determine the most suitable pedagogical practices for particular contexts and students.

Building a knowledge base that can inform the debate on how to provide each student with a good teacher, one who is capable of offering effective and relevant education, is a complex undertaking that requires systematic study and action. Much of the research on instructional quality has been generated in quasi-laboratory conditions or in studies involving a small number of classrooms, which limits the generalizability of the findings to entire school systems. Moreover, much of that research focuses on effective pedagogies or teacher practices, not on how to produce teachers who are effective in institutional settings. Therefore, a central question in the enterprise of teacher professional development is not what approaches can best equip teachers with the necessary skills and understanding, but what approaches to professional development can scale-up and sustain teachers' effectiveness in the institutions where they work. It is that ability to scale-up that distinguishes the first generation of reforms, which brought each child in the world to a school, from budding second-generation reforms, which have yet to ensure that those children learn something of value once they get to school.

iDiscoveri's journey in developing the XSEED Living Knowledge System began with an initial focus on professional development that helped teachers develop skills and capabilities, primarily through workshops based on reflection on past experience. That focus has now shifted to professional development that supports teacher practice with scripted lesson plans and instructional resources for students, as well as training for teachers and principals. According to Anustup Nayak, the latter approach has proved to be more scalable than the training workshops as an approach to support changes in instructional practice. Preliminary evidence reported in XSEED article suggests that students whose teachers receive such support perform better in a number of domains on standardized tests.

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The system used to support teacher professional development is multifaceted. It includes a clear instructional approach involving a five-step sequence: aim, action, analyze, apply, assess. The implementation of these steps is supported by an academic plan, a series of curriculum manuals with lesson plans specifying how to teach each concept, workbooks and content books for students, practice-based training for teachers and principals, and a program that frequently assesses students' skills and shares the results with students, teachers, and parents.

As reported in the article, this system provides scaffolding that ensures that every teacher performs more effectively, in contrast to the effects of the training workshops, which seem to have a lasting impact only for the best teachers.

The main contribution of this article is not in settling the question of how best to provide all students with good teachers, even though the preliminary results are encouraging in this respect. The most important contribution of this case is that it demonstrates the positive role social entrepreneurs can play in stimulating education innovation in a way that is disciplined, results oriented, sensitive to the needs of customers, and able to learn from experience and research. iDiscoveri was established to achieve quality education at scale, and that focus on scale is what has driven a critical examination of their work and results to produce significant organizational learning. Their search for innovation was fueled by a desire to find a market for high-quality teacher professional development. The entrepreneurs leading this journey in innovation did not seek the shelter of grants or donations from foundations or angel investors, but instead designed a product that could be sold at a competitive price, building a business model that increased the likelihood of scalability and sustainability. Because these entrepreneurs viewed the beneficiaries of their services as their clients—the people for whom their service proposition was most valuable—they strived to understand their clients' needs and constantly sought feedback from those they aimed to serve. What they learned through this process led to a fundamental redesign of their product to make it more scalable, and thus better suited to the teachers working in the communities they serve.

The exponential growth in the number of schools using XSEED in the last five years, a direct result of this redesign, speaks well not only for the potential of this innovation to scale-up, but also about the virtues of building mechanisms and processes that allow an entrepreneurial organization to innovate continuously in the search for improvement. In this practice, iDiscoveri makes a most important contribution—teaching by example—to the teachers and students it seeks to serve, and modeling a way that education can remain effective and relevant.

Social entrepreneurs like those who led iDiscoveri clearly have much to offer in the ongoing struggle to make sure that what children learn in school has practical value. Societies and governments that create a welcoming, supportive climate for energetic, disciplined, and capable leaders to build social enterprises that can address this challenge will lead the world in extending Comenius' dream, from offering equal access to school to providing true opportunity to develop talent—perhaps even to achieve peace.