

# Stepping India in the Right Direction

*Innovations Case Discussion:*  
iDiscoveri

When I was asked to comment on this educational innovation in India, I was thrilled to learn about a student-centered reform that has had clear, sustainable outcomes. Indeed, this market-driven school “franchise” has achieved stunning results in some schools by cracking a code and addressing social issues, which India’s massive public education system has not been able to do.

I have firsthand experience of the dire need to provide India’s children access to the high-quality education they need to compete in the global marketplace. In January 2010, I returned to the U.S. after a month of teaching medical professionals in India how to teach. I also had visited the public schools in Chennai, Hyderabad, and Ahmedabad, where I observed how rote learning led to excellence in test-taking while leaving serious gaps in critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication. The iDiscoveri XSEED Living Knowledge System has clearly sought to address this gap. This educational franchise is designed to reform primary education in India so that children will first learn how to learn, and then to apply what they know in original ways.

I am a school reformer who works to educate minority populations. As I read the iDiscoveri case study authored by Harvard-trained, corporate businessmen, I asked myself how viable this private business model of Western education could be within the social and cultural context of Delhi’s slums and the surrounding rural areas. In these areas, home to the bulk of India’s population that lives in poverty, schools without doors, without toilets, and without teachers who show up on a daily basis are the norm. Therefore, India’s massive goal of providing access to basic primary education is distinct from what this case described. The iDiscoveri XSEED innovation clearly has made important contributions in India and is potentially a beacon of reform, but questions still remain as to its broad applicability.

---

*Evangeline Harris Stefanakis, EdD, is an associate professor at Boston University, and a Faculty Fellow in the BU Provost’s Office.*

A RESOUNDING CALL FOR GLOBAL EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Clearly, the global educational race is on, and innovations in countries such as South Korea and Singapore give India the incentive to act quickly to keep up with its efforts to develop a 21<sup>st</sup>-century workforce. As Linda Darling-Hammond writes in her new book, *The Flat World and Global Education*:

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized by the availability of abundant information, advanced technology, a rapidly changing society, greater convenience in daily lives and keener international competition. In response to these changes, our education reform must be . . . focused . . . on developing the potential and personalities of students. This student-focused spirit underlies the education and curriculum reforms, improvement to the learning environment, and enhancement of teacher training.

In the space of one generation, South Korea moved from a nation that educated less than a quarter of its citizens through high school to one that now ranks third in college educated adults, with most young people now completing postsecondary education . . . Starting in the 1970's, Singapore began to transform itself from a collection of swampy fishing villages into an economic powerhouse by building an educational system that would ensure every student access to strong teaching, an inquiry curriculum, and cutting edge technology.<sup>1</sup>

Despite high levels of poverty and growing ethnic and linguistic diversity among their citizens, South Korea and Singapore have created high-level, equitable educational opportunities. This puts the pressure on other developing countries to respond to the global marketplace with serious educational reforms that will provide its students with 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills. In this aspect, the developers of iDiscoveri XSEED have hit the nail on the head in terms of creating a viable model for India's future educational system, one based on world-class standards. As they note:

iDiscoveri was conceived as a "social enterprise with a mission to renew education in India." Its founders chose a for-profit model that would go to scale and sustain itself.

If renewing India's education system was the goal, why did this group of social entrepreneurs choose a private model to drive their innovation? The founders explain:

Our work needed the best and brightest professionals and significant investments in research and advocacy. This could only be achieved through the means of a commercially viable model. India is littered with well-meaning initiatives that have dried up when the donor funds or nonpaying consumers dry up.

Other social entrepreneurs in India have focused on cell phone companies, which enable even the poor in rural settings to pay for and benefit from cutting-edge technology. This seemed to suggest a natural carryover to education.

THE IDISCOVERI XSEED CREATION

The XSEED case study explains how a diverse team of professionals, dedicated to improving the quality of teaching and learning for children in India, developed their Living Knowledge System over a ten-year period, a remarkable trajectory of marketable growth. So how did they grow from reaching three schools in 2007 to four hundred schools in 2009? The founders of XSEED explain that they addressed four critical challenges by doing the following:

- By altering what actually happens inside a classroom between a teacher and her students, replacing a process in which a teacher tells and the student listens with a more effective process that gets children to understand and apply what they learn
- By developing a practical tool kit that all teachers can use in the classroom, which includes daily teaching plans and other tools, and then training them to teach and assess children more effectively
- By ensuring that our solutions worked at scale, empowering schools with robust instructional processes, in-house master-trainers and year-round academic support
- By creating a viable, sustainable economic model for quality education, in which parents and schools pay an affordable price to improve educational quality, and using the revenues to create a thriving social enterprise

Today XSEED is being implemented in over 400 schools enrolling over 120,000 learners. The program's impact is clearly evident in these schools within three months, as students show improved understanding of core concepts, and better reasoning and communications skills.

However, as we look at the larger picture—educating a huge number of children throughout a country that has vast divisions between rich and poor—serious questions remain. For middle-class students who have the economic means to attend schools using the XSEED method, one question may be whether this successful elementary model will serve them equally well in secondary or higher educational settings, where the traditional British model of rote learning is still in place. Moreover, what happens to young people who attend government schools that do not have the benefit of the XSEED system? If XSEED is indeed the way of the future, will having participated in the program give students an “in” to secondary schooling in India's best schools? Will the Living Knowledge System in fact exacerbate the divide between the haves and have-nots?

Another question arises from the fact that India's current education system has produced a strong technical workforce that has successfully entered the global marketplace, particularly in the areas of engineering, science, and medicine. How has this been attained? Are there aspects of the current Indian education model that provide students with the skills and knowledge to compete internationally, including in English-speaking countries? Do students who negotiate India's education system from elementary school through higher education ultimately learn persistence and develop skills that translate into success in the global workplace?

And, finally, will the XSEED model work with children whose parents want them to experience more traditional forms of learning later on? How can this progressive educational model be adapted to the bulk of India's successful sites of higher education?

REACTION TO THE IDISCOVERI XSEED SYSTEM  
AS IT GROWS IN SIZE AND POPULARITY

Reactions to XSEED were documented in the local press in Hyderabad and Chennai, and in *Educational World Magazine*.<sup>2</sup> As an education reformer, I have serious questions about the XSEED model, which are based on my own experience in India. My greatest question is this: How can this innovative educational enterprise take hold in its own country?

The reactions of local leaders and media are a key element in the development and growth of this innovative educational model. If local news outlets or other publications are chronicling this reform, then it would indeed appear that it is beginning to attract an important following that warrants attention. However, up to now the media reports clearly address both the assets of the model and the issues that remain:

**ReachoutHyderabad.com, February 2009**

iDiscoveri, a social enterprise with a vision to renew education in India, conducted an interactive seminar titled "Making your Good School Great" in their XSEED Learning Centers . . . for school correspondents and principals from across Andhra Pradesh. Mr. H. Joshi meets requirements of various school systems in India, including those promoted by state boards, CBSE and ICSE Council, as well as the IB and Cambridge curricula. iDiscoveri leaders note that the positive reception by these principals has prompted us to chart aggressive plans; seeing deeper penetration into schools in the state.

***Education World: The Human Development Magazine, March 2010***

The XSEED Revolution . . . Although our XSEED curriculum was introduced to K-VII schools as recently as 2007 and was accepted by only three in the first year, it is currently being taught in 303 primary schools in 22 states across the country. The growing acceptance of iDiscoveri's innovatively designed primary and middle school curriculum by leading private schools—government schools are not yet on the company's radar. . . .

Unsurprisingly, it has been most enthusiastically welcomed in private primary schools in Tamil Nadu (pop. 62 million), traditionally in the vanguard of education reform and development in the country. Currently 71 schools—almost one-fourth of all primaries countrywide which have signed up for XSEED study programme—are sited in this southern literate state. . . .

Although this new genre company has made . . . invaluable contributions to the development of innovative curriculum and teaching-learning systems to improve the quality and consistency of primary education, it is pertinent to note the iDiscoveri and its affiliates are for profit business enterprises, albeit driven by the highest principles of enlightened self-interest. . . .

By Indian standards the XSEED program is not cheap. An alliance membership of Rs99,000.00 per year is payable by every XSEED affiliated school . . . Nevertheless, the phenomenon of new genre educational companies offering well designed, particularly ICT-driven curriculums and teaching-learning systems, is hardly novel . . . Several listed corporate ventures, including Everonn Education, Educomp Solutions and NIIT, and numerous unlisted companies are aggressively marketing new tech-driven pedagogies for longer periods throughout India.

With the revolutionary X SEED teaching-learning programme being welcomed in progressive schools across the country . . . the major challenging confronting Indian education is introducing contemporary curriculums into government schools. They may have made a beginning in the kingdom of Bhutan, where at the invitation of the government they are implementing XSEED and its programmes in 14 government schools.

It is evident that XSEED has a quality product that is gaining acceptance among leaders of the private schools that serve the middle-class parents who are able to pay for a world-class education.

Clearly, in a global marketplace where educational credentials can determine future schooling and career opportunities, the middle class in a developing country like India is hungry for what appears to be high-quality, Western, 21<sup>st</sup>-century education model that is engaging for young children who respond favorably to active learning, as opposed to the passive learning their parents were accustomed to. It remains to be seen how XSEED will take on the ultimate task of providing all India's children with a world-class education.

#### XSEED AT A CROSSROADS

Can the XSEED program be adapted to India's 140,357,454 primary school students?<sup>3</sup> That is the country's foremost need and greatest challenge. As a scholar of school reform and proponent of education for minority populations, I applaud iDiscoveri's excellent efforts, but I have to wonder if they will be able to rise to the serious challenge of offering all India's children a chance to learn and to grow into creative critical thinkers.

In sum, I would say that the iDiscoveri XSEED Living Knowledge System appears to be a strong model, one rooted in Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory and Eleanor Duckworth's Piaget-based learning-by-doing

model. As an educational reformer focused on Multiple Intelligences and differentiated instruction and assessment, my personal view is that the iDiscovery XSEED Living Knowledge System has moved Indian education a step forward, primarily due to several key elements:

- An educational reform model and franchise with 21<sup>st</sup>-century design
- A school-based model of leadership and learning
- A business model that provides creativity, critical thinking, original problem-solving
- A replicable set of resources—a tool kit, teacher training, institutes, and content

As I reflect on how these social entrepreneurs moved from problem to possibility, I offer them a few questions to ponder as they continue their excellent work:

- How will they address the most critical educational needs of India's poor?
- How will they create sustainable, long-term, quality educational training for students, teachers, and parents in both economically sound and poverty plagued urban and rural areas?
- How will they differentiate the curriculum, assessment, and training for various minority groups, and for the handicapped?
- What is their plan for providing a public-private partnership approach and the necessary policy to support the growth of 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning for all children of India?

A pressing national need and challenge is to reform India's educational system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century by providing modern curriculum, trained teachers, and better facilities in both urban and rural areas. My wish is that these talented social entrepreneurs, who have conceived and nurtured this very admirable educational product, may help India and other developing countries meet the ultimate challenge of serving the world's most short-changed child populations—and the sooner the better.

Bravo, iDiscoveri, for offering a 21<sup>st</sup>-century, world-class education to a critical segment of India's children.

- 
1. L. Darling-Hammond. *The flat world and education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2010.
  2. These releases are available on the web at the following: [www.chennaivision.com](http://www.chennaivision.com); [www.education-worldonline.net](http://www.education-worldonline.net); [www.hyderabad.com](http://www.hyderabad.com).
  3. World Bank EdStats site available at: <http://econ.worldbank.org/>