The successes and failures of the campaign for Universal Primary Education

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Why Education for All?

In his classic, *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith wrote:

> *The more (ordinary people) are instructed the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders. An instructed and intelligent people, besides, are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant and stupid one… They are more disposed to examine, and more capable of seeing through, the interested complaints of faction and sedition, and they are, upon that account, less apt to be misled into any wanton or unnecessary opposition to the measures of government.*

For Adam Smith, educating everyone was important to the underpinning of peace, order and good government. Two centuries later, education became a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Then, in the latter part of the 20th century, education was justified on economic grounds. The World Bank promoted what it called 'human capital development' and much research was devoted to trying to prove cause and effect between education and economic growth.

The most convincing justification for education has been given by Amartya Sen (1999). For Sen, the aim of development is to increase the freedoms that people can enjoy, and education is important because it promotes freedom in many ways.

The campaign for Education for All

At the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, 155 governments and a bevy of international organisations and NGOs committed themselves to a set of targets covering education at various levels. However, on the primary indicator of children in school, Jomtien was a failure because a decade later the number of children out of school had grown to 125 million. The international community determined to hit the nail harder by convening another World Forum on Education for All in Dakar in 2000. The forum again came up with a set of targets, but this time put more effective mechanisms in place to support countries that wanted to make progress.

As a result of these mechanisms, much faster progress was made towards UPE in the first decade of this century. The goal has not been achieved but large countries like India and Bangladesh are making big strides, although Nigeria and Pakistan still face great challenges.

What are the consequences of the success and the failure of the campaign for UPE? The success is that enrolment rates have increased significantly. The average net enrolment rate rose from 54% to 70% between 1999 and 2006 in Sub-Saharan Africa, and from 75% to 86% in South and West Asia. The result was that numbers in school increased by 40 million between 1999 and 2007, representing a tremendous input of resources and effort by developing countries.

The flip side is the failure. Many children (currently some 70 million) are still not in primary school. Earlier, this was projected to drop to 30 million by the target date of 2015 but recent UNESCO figures are more pessimistic, suggesting that 50 million children will still be out of school by then. The difference reflects a concern that the global economic downturn will reduce the funds dedicated to education (UNESCO, 2010).

The challenge of success is the tidal surge of children towards secondary schooling whereas the challenge of failure is the need to recruit and train millions more teachers.

Expanding secondary education

The numbers of children needing secondary schooling are considerable. Some 400 million children from 12 to 17 are not in school (Binder, 2006).

Secondary education and climate change

One of the most crucial arguments for the importance of secondary education is that it is the best medium-term weapon against climate change. The most powerful driver of climate change is increasing population. Since the Industrial Revolution, the world's population has grown by a factor of seven and the demands that each human makes on the earth's resources have also increased by a factor of seven. That represents a fifty-fold increase in the impact of humankind on the planet in two centuries.

Slowing population growth is one way of limiting that impact. Women with secondary education have, on average, 1.5 fewer children than those without. A difference of one child per woman means 3 billion more or fewer people on the planet by 2050. Secondary education for girls must be a priority (Cohen, 2008).

Expanding secondary education is now – or soon will be – the key priority for many developing countries. Yet in many of these countries, secondary education is very inefficient and cannot be expanded far with the resources available.

Alternative approaches needed

It will not be possible to accommodate the secondary surge through the conventional provision of secondary schooling, skills training and adult education in classrooms in public institutions.

Governments must encourage alternative approaches, particularly providers that can deliver quality learning at scale with low costs.

As well as extending conventional public school systems, governments should encourage the expansion of private schooling for the poor (Tooley, 2009; Umar, 2008), draw lessons from projects involving information and communications technologies (ICTs), and give special priority to expanding open schooling, which is the adaptation of open and distance learning at pre-university level.

Developing open schooling is a particularly promising alternative that can also be integrated with other approaches to make them more cost-effective and cost-efficient. An integrated approach also holds the promise of providing education that is better adapted to the needs of the 21st century. It can blur the unhelpful distinction between formal and non-formal education; build a bridge between knowledge acquisition and skills development; and has the potential to reduce the inequalities of access that blight conventional provision in most countries.

The cost factor

Most importantly, open schooling is less expensive than conventional schooling and that differential is increasing. The expansion of conventional public schooling at the secondary level faces major challenges of both cost and effectiveness in developing countries.

Research shows that if unit costs at secondary level are more than twice those at primary level, a country will never achieve universal secondary education (Lewin, 2008). In most developing countries, the difference is far greater than that, ranging from factors of three to six and beyond in most African countries. Moreover, despite this expenditure, in some countries public-sector schooling is losing credibility – and often pupils – as parents choose alternatives to schools plagued by decrepit facilities, uncommitted or absent teachers, and a general lack of accountability.

Can ICTs help?

Many assume that ICTs can help to expand quality education cost-effectively.

Three major ICT initiatives in the developing world are of particular interest: One Laptop per Child; the Hole in the Wall; and the NEPAD eSchools demonstration project. These initiatives showed that computers do enrich and enhance learning, but that they need to be embedded within a wider framework if they are to make a systemic contribution to achieving EFA. Open schools could help to provide that framework.

The essential challenge is to develop learning systems that:

a) can be conducted at scale;

b) are inexpensive;

c) deliver acceptable quality consistently; and

d) can be adapted to diverse needs.

Open schools: a satisfactory alternative?

Given the considerable dissatisfaction with conventional secondary school curricula in many countries, open schools present the opportunity to provide something different. Too often the regular curriculum is geared towards preparing a minority of pupils for access to tertiary education, rather than giving the majority a basis for lives and livelihoods in the 21st century. Because open schools usually reach out to those who do not have ready access to a conventional school, they may serve them better by offering something different from the conventional curriculum.

The collaborative creation of learning materials

Open schools have to produce learning materials, usually in a variety of formats. These materials have always been useful to the conventional schools. Two developments have made the learning materials produced by open schools potentially even more useful to the wider school system.

First, most learning materials are now developed in digital formats, even though they may eventually reach students in the form of printed materials. Holding materials electronically has three advantages: they are easy to move around; they can readily be adapted and revised; and they can be converted to eLearning formats when online learning becomes a possibility.

Second, there is growing movement, inspired by the ideal that knowledge is the common wealth of humankind, to create a global intellectual commons in which learning materials are shared. This movement involves many thousands of teachers, at all levels, creating open educational resources (OERs).

Computers for children: can open schools help?

Open schools could also act as organising elements for the expansion of ICTs in secondary schools generally, and could help whole school systems implement computing more effectively. Collaborative projects in OER curriculum development can help to create locally adapted eLearning materials of quality that are always in short supply. Moreover, since open schools have to be technologically savvy to take advantage of new developments for their own students, they are a natural source of expertise for wider use.

Expanding teacher numbers

As a consequence of the failures of the campaign for Universal Primary Education, there is an urgent need to expand teacher recruitment and education in order to complete the drive to UPE and to expand secondary. While the expansion of schooling is primarily a challenge for developing countries, recruiting and educating large numbers of teachers is a necessity for rich and poor countries alike. In the last decade, for example, California was employing 30,000 untrained teachers in its schools.

The worldwide shortage of teachers has several causes. First, completing the drive to UPE and beginning to expand secondary education will require large numbers of new teachers. Second, many countries – both developing and industrialised – will see a significant proportion of their teaching force retire between 2010 and 2020. Finally, the ravages of AIDS have been particularly severe for teachers in Africa. At times in the early years of this century, in both Kenya and Zambia, the annual deaths of teachers from AIDS were greater than the output of the teacher training colleges.

In aggregate, UNESCO estimates that at least 10 million additional teachers will be needed worldwide by 2015 if UPE is to be achieved and a serious start made on expanding secondary education (UNESCO, 2008, p. 22).

Two related aspects of teacher education must be addressed. First, how can we recruit and train more teachers more rapidly? Second, what kind of training is best suited to the needs of the second decade of the 21st century?

Teacher recruitment

In teacher recruitment there is a three-way correlation between the status of the teaching profession in a country, the performance of its schools and children, and the ease of recruiting able people as teachers. In countries like Austria, Canada, Finland, France, Germany and Ireland, teacher recruitment and retention is not a major issue, as teaching is a high status profession.

Sadly, however, the status of teaching is declining in most countries and the blame for this lies with both teachers and governments. Where teacher absenteeism is a constant problem, the public cannot be expected to admire teachers. Where governments have eroded teachers' salaries and the deployment of teachers is infested with corruption, good people will not be attracted to the profession.

The combination of the low status of the profession and the attractiveness of teachers' skills in the wider labour market no doubt explains why 50% of teachers in the US leave the profession within five years of completing their training (UNESCO, 2007, p. 130).

Faced with the problem of teacher shortage and the necessity of putting an adult in front of each class of children, at least in primary school, many governments have had to resort to employing untrained teachers.

However, sending people into the classroom with minimal initial training can be a very good strategy for our times if they are then provided with appropriate on-the-job training.

Combining the strategy of putting unqualified teachers straight into the classroom in developing countries and doing the same with good graduates in developed countries suggests that the concept of teacher education needs radical revision.

Distance learning in teacher education

ICTs – and the possibility of OERs that they have created – have significantly increased the power of distance learning in teacher education. One of the great contributions of ICTs to in-service programmes has been to make it possible to gather the teacher learners into a community of practice through computer conferencing (Leach, 2002). This virtual environment provides a secure setting in which novices can gain experience through contact with veteran practitioners.

For many countries, distance learning provides the only way of addressing the two central requirements of teacher education: the emphasis on continuing professional development and the focus

on the teacher in the classroom. Any form of continuous professional development that involves bringing teachers regularly to institutions in the towns is inherently expensive and inconvenient. More importantly, evidence has shown that it seems to have little impact on their performance as teachers (DFID, 1999).

The locus of continuous professional learning must be the school, and its focus must be the classroom. This has always been the strength of distance learning systems for teacher education.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the successes and failures of the campaign to achieve Universal Primary Education. The success of that campaign has generated the imperative of a massive expansion of secondary education. All effective approaches must be used. Open schools are a particularly promising option because they can operate at scale with low cost.

It is also apparent that teacher education needs radical rethinking to meet the challenges of the expansion of secondary education. Henceforward, the most effective policy will be to put teachers into schools with the minimum training necessary for them to function, and then to concentrate most of the resources of teacher education on recurrent in-service programmes of professional learning that are resolutely based on school practice and the classroom experience.

Once that paradigm shift is made, all teacher education institutions will have to give themselves the capability to offer distance learning programmes in order to reach teachers in their schools. Today, ICT can make distance learning a richer experience than learning in a university classroom. Evidence suggests that this approach of classroom-based in-service education is successful where it most counts: that is to say in the learning and performance of the children.

In short, by combining the development of open schooling with a shift to educating teachers in-service through distance learning, opportunities for much greater synergy among ministries of education, schools, communities, open schools and teacher education institutions would be provided.

Endnote

[1] For more information on Sir John Daniel, please see the COL website: http://www.col.org/about/staff/pages/jdaniel.aspx

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